

# MULTIETHNICITY IN KYRGYZSTAN'S MULTICOLOURED REVOLUTION

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## Introduction

The recent events in Kyrgyzstan of the February-March 2005<sup>1</sup> protests that forced the first president of the newly independent ex-Soviet republic, Askar Akaev, out of the office on the allegations of authoritarianism, and all the socio-political developments that have been accompanying this change produce contentious debates along various dimensions. Ambivalence concerns the nature of the events, its causes, the changes it brought, as well as the reasons underlying the manner in which the whole shift of power occurred. Thus, scholars, regional experts, politicians, media and lay people disagree whether to call these events people's revolution or anticonstitutional coup d'état, whether the roots of it lie in the authoritarian practices and poverty or in the political struggle of the Northern and Southern political elites; whether events were in the line with democratization process or they rather spurred instability intensifying authoritarian practices by the new government; whether it was the outburst of the "Kyrgyz nationalists" or it was an ethnically inclusive movement.

This work seeks to contribute to the debate on the February-March 2005 events in the Kyrgyz Republic by looking at a rather specific issue of ethnicity and the role it came to play during and in the early aftermath of the "Tulip revolution." The focus is inspired by the increased concern over the interethnic conflict and ethnic violence allegedly unleashed by the drastic political change, expressed by the people, media and early scholarly works.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the immediate report by the International Crisis Group was quoted saying that "ethnic minorities in

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the work, I will refer to March 24 protest with change of power in the Kyrgyz Republic as "Tulip revolution" or "revolution"

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Justine Burke, "Kyrgyzstan's Revolution: Be Careful What You Wish For," *EurasiaNet Commentray*, March 25, 2005; Alisher Soipov, "*V Kyrgyzstane mogut proizoiti mezhnatsionalnye stolknoveniya*," [Interethnic Clashes are Possible in Kyrgyzstan], *Ferghana.ru*, March 6, 2005; Yuri Pushaev, "*Posle Martovskih Pogromov v Zhizni Russkikh v Kirgizii Nastupil Novy, Ne Samy Luchshi Etap*," [After March Events in Kyrgyzstan Russians Face New, not the Best Times in Their Lives], *Ferghana.ru*, July 15, 2005; Graeme Herd, "Colorful Revolutions and the CIS: Manufactured versus Managed Democracy?" *Problems of Post-Communism*, 52:2 (2005)

the capital felt threatened”<sup>3</sup> during the events, the High Commissioner on National Minorities paid a visit recommending that country’s ethnic diversity should be secured and represented at all state levels,<sup>4</sup> Russian Ambassador to the Kyrgyz Republic, Evgeni Shmagin warned on the alarming increase of those wanting to leave Kyrgyzstan for Russia, which was seven times higher after the March events, and appealed to the Kyrgyz government to curb panic and Russians’ exodus,<sup>5</sup> representatives of the Uzbek community in Kyrgyzstan addressed President Bakiev drawing on the increased nationalistic tendencies, social and economic oppression of national minorities.<sup>6</sup>

Drawing on secondary literature analysis, media and field reports on the “revolution,” this work will analyze why ethnicity became an issue, in what ways ethnicization of political confrontation happened and what are the possible consequences of it. Here I will neither revisit the event trying to trace its roots, nor will I get involved in the debate on the nature of ethnicity in general. Instead, I will argue that political struggle between the incumbents and opposition during March 24 events took an ethnic tone through the patterns of political mobilization, intra-ethnic struggle and “securitization” of multiethnicity by the media, political entrepreneurs and civic organizations. The latter was manifested in increased concerns over the violent ethnic conflict, confronting titular ethnic Kyrgyz against the other national minority groups, as well as portrayal of the “Tulip revolution” in the media as a struggle between Uzbekified more conservative South against Russified more cosmopolitan North.<sup>7</sup> This ethnicization, that has

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<sup>3</sup> International Crisis Group, “Kyrgyzstan: After the Revolution,” *ICG Asia Report*, 97 (2005): 16

<sup>4</sup> “OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Calls for Increased Attention to Inter-ethnic Relations in Kyrgyzstan,” OSCE, April 19, 2005

<sup>5</sup> Alexei Sukhov, “*Russkie v Kyrgyzstane: uezhat ili ostavatsya?*” [Russians in Kyrgyzstan: to Leave or to Stay?], *Navigator.kz*, June 10, 2005

<sup>6</sup> “Ethnic Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan Voice Complaints Over Discrimination, Corruption,” *Eurasianet*, January 25, 2006; “Obrashenie Uzbekiskoi obshchestvennosti uga Kyrgyzstana k prezidentu strany Kurmanbeku Bakievu, Protiv Preseledovani po Natsionalnomu priznaku,” [Appeal by the Uzbek Community of the Southern Kyrgyzstan to the President Kurmanbek Bakiev, Against Ethnic Persecution], *Ferghana.ru*, January 8, 2006;

<sup>7</sup> Zaynidin Kurmanoc, “The 2005 Parliamentary Elections in Kyrgyzstan and Collapse of the Akaev Regime,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 3:33 (2005): 7-14; Zurab Todua, “Kyrgyzstan after Akaev: What Happened and Why, What Next?” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 3:2 (2005): 14-23

been intensifying during and after the “Tulip revolution,” together with the very fact of political instability seemed to have a rigidifying effect on ethnic belongingness making it not only the “foreground” identity,<sup>8</sup> but also conflicting identity in relation to other ethnic communities. Among the indirect consequences of the ethnic “groupness”<sup>9</sup> reification after the March 2005 events has been the increased out-migration among non-titulars, some objective instances of violence on the ethnic basis,<sup>10</sup> and fears of prosecution and oppression expressed by some national minority groups.<sup>11</sup>

With the ousting of Askar Akaev, the idea of Kyrgyzstan as a “common home” promoted by his presidency in attempt to accommodate country’s multiethnicity seemed to be staggered, putting the issue of future interethnic relationships and fate of national minorities into question. Represented by over eighty different ethnic groups, with Uzbeks and Russians being the biggest national minority communities, multiethnicity in the region has been generally seen as problematic and conflict-prone.<sup>12</sup> Political changes and economic stagnation after the fall of the Soviet Union apparently exacerbated the potential for ethnic conflict, especially in the overpopulated areas like Ferghana Valley in the South of Kyrgyzstan, which witnessed violent

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<sup>8</sup> Abdujalil Abdurasulov, “Titular Group and Ethnic Minorities after the Kyrgyz Revolution: The Changed Interaction” (paper presented at the roundtable on ‘Understanding the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan One Year On: Dynamics and Implications,’ London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom, February 28, 2006, 1)

<sup>9</sup> The term is suggested by Rogers Brubaker in *Ethnicity without Groups*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2004), and refers to eventful and fluid nature of mobilization and solidarity along ethnic lines. A more detailed discussion of the term will follow in Chapter II

<sup>10</sup> See “*Besporyadki v Sele Iskra vspyhnuli s novoi siloi*,” [Disturbances in Iskra Intensified], *Akipress*, February 06, 2006; Gulnura Toralieva, “Russkie Begut iz Kyrgyzstana,” [Russians are Fleeing Kyrgyzstan], *Gazeta.kg*, February 14, 2006

<sup>11</sup> “*Uzbeki Kyrgyzstana Prosyat Presidenta Zashitit Ih ot Proyavleni Natsionalizma*,” [Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan Appeal to President for Protection Against Nationalistic Tendencies], *Gazeta.kg*, November 1, 2005

<sup>12</sup> Ajay Patnaik, *Nations, Minorities and States in Central Asia*, (Kolkata: Anamika Publishers and Distributors Ltd, 2003); Yuri Kulchik, Andrei Fadin and Viktor Sergeev, *Central Asia after the Empire*, (UK: Pluto Press, 1996); Anara Tabyshalieva, *The Challenge of Regional Cooperation in Central Asia. Preventing Ethnic Conflicts in the Ferghana Valley*, (Washington: USIP, 1999); Randa Slim, ‘The Ferghana Valley: in the Midst of a Host of Crises’, in Monique Mekenkamp, Paul van Tongeren and Hans van de Veen, eds, *Searching for Peace in Central and South Asia: An Overview of Conflict Prevention and Peace-Building Activities*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002)

armed clashes between Uzbek and Kyrgyz population in June 1990. As a result, instability following the fierce takeover the government headquarters on the March 24 was said to be unleashing “long-standing” ethnic antagonisms.<sup>13</sup> However, approaching ethnicity from “long-standing” hostilities obscures analytical vision on the events, implying that any political instability will be almost automatically followed by interethnic confrontation. Therefore, the second concern of this work is whether socio-political turbulence after March 24 accompanied by illegal land seizures, dissemination of anti-Russian leaflets, series of MPs’ murders, redistribution of property, prolonged lawlessness, rather than “long-standing” antagonisms, affects ethnic mobilization similar to the times following the Soviet collapse.

The way country’s multiethnicity received social salience early after the “Tulip revolution,” with the reports on increased instances of interethnic clash by media and civil society organizations and appeals of discontent with ethnic situation on behalf of national minority groups, not only “securitizes” ethnicity but somewhat contributes to reification of ethnic identities, putting them to the “foreground.”<sup>14</sup> Once politicized and mobilized, ethnic “groupness” can lead to dismal outcomes, for it is hard to be demobilized and de-politicized.

The work is divided into four main chapters. The first chapter provides for the relevant background on the country and on the March 24 events. The second chapter is a set up of the theoretical framework. In the first section of this chapter I will employ theories addressing ethnicity and interethnic conflict during socio-political changes in the semi-authoritarian societies. Here I will look at how different theories explain high probability of ethnic conflict during the rapid transition process in the semi-democracies (or semi-autocracies), why ethnicity very often comes to be a dividing line, i.e. what exactly makes multiethnicity conflict-prone in such societies. This section will argue that nonetheless transitional theories do explain to a

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<sup>13</sup> Justine Burke, “Kyrgyzstan’s Revolution: Be Careful What You Wish For,” *EurasiaNet Commentray*, March 25, 2005; Yuri Pushaev, July 15, 2005;

<sup>14</sup> Abdurasulov, 2006

certain extent the patterns leading to the “deadly ethnic riot”<sup>15</sup> in semi-authoritarian societies, they do not answer to what extent saliency of ethnicity is important in order for it to become a dividing social cleavage, they also provide little account on the objective and perceived ethnic cleavage and take ethnic collectivities as unitary actors.

The second section in the theoretical chapter addresses theories on nation-building in order to understand how certain, mostly exclusionary nation-building practices allow for emergence of ethnic cleavage, and how deliberate ethnic politicization can contribute to its social saliency. Using Brubaker’s theory on “ethnicity without groups,” I will argue that multiethnicity even if becomes conflict-prone after the “Tulip revolution,” is not due to the “long-standing” ethnic cleavages, but is rather a result of ethnic “groupness” reification under rapid political change and instability, instances of electoral mobilization, media discourse and intra-ethnic competition.

The third chapter will discuss how certain developments under the Soviet nationality policy and in the post-independence period were reflected in the mode of ethnic interaction during “Tulip revolution.” This chapter will examine whether Kyrgyzstan could be called a society with “deep ethnic cleavages”<sup>16</sup> and whether theories on nation-building and transition in semi-autocracies can help to answer this question convincingly. Political struggle was easily framed in ethnic terms because there have been preconditions to that, which stem from both post-independence nation-building policies in the republic and legacies of the Soviet nationality policy. In particular, the policies of *korenizatsiia* (indigenization), *sblizhenie* (coming together) and urbanization under the Soviet government, which contributed to “ethnic ranking,”<sup>17</sup> as well

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<sup>15</sup> Donald Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, (Berkeley : University of California Press, 2001)

<sup>16</sup> Donald Horowitz, “Democracy in Divided Societies,” in Larry Diamond et al eds, *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Democracy*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994)

<sup>17</sup> Airat Aklaev, *Democratization and Ethnic Peace: Patterns of Ethnopolitical Crisis Management in Post-Soviet Settings*, (England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 1999)

as nationalizing policies after independence have been relevant in creation of “groupness” along ethnic lines that was easily revoked during the times of political upheaval in 2005.

In the last chapter I will be looking at the patterns of ethnic “groupness” formation during and early after the “Tulip revolution” and potential consequences of such development. Here, while agreeing with instrumentalist approach that politicization and manipulation of ethnicity by elites during the “revolution” allowed for reification of ethnic “groupness,”<sup>18</sup> I would account for some specific factors, such as regionalism, type of political mobilization by the oppositional forces, memory of the Osh 1990 events, political instability and lawlessness that allowed for such reification during and after the “Tulip revolution.”

Prior to proceeding to the theoretical discussions of ethnicity in semi-authoritarian societies and analysis of February-March 2005 events as related to ethnic interaction in the country, I will first introduce some necessary background aspects of the event with specific emphasis on ethnicity during the “Tulip revolution.”

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<sup>18</sup> Brubaker, 2004; Madeleine Reeves, “We're with the people!" The Eventfulness of Identity in Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution,” (paper presented at the roundtable on ‘Understanding the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan One Year On: Dynamics and Implications,’ London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom, February 28, 2006)

## I. Background on the March 24 events in Kyrgyzstan

On the March 24 the Kyrgyz Republic experienced a change of political power, as the first president of the country, Askar Akaev who ruled for 14 years, was forced into exile due to massive protests that culminated into seizure of the government headquarters in capital Bishkek and establishment of the interim government led by an opposition leader Kurmanbek Bakiev.

“Multicoloured,” or as it was later called “Tulip revolution” was put by many scholars and analysts in the same chain of regimes changes in post-communist space, along with the Serbian Bulldozer, Georgian Rose revolution, Orange revolution in Ukraine,<sup>19</sup> as all of them came about after flawed elections.

Demonstrations in Kyrgyzstan were provoked by rigged parliamentary elections in February 2005. Lost candidates were mobilizing supporters from their constituencies throughout the country to object to the fraudulent results and call for Akaev’s resignation, who was accused of authoritarianism, corruption and attempts to create “Family Parliament.”<sup>20</sup> Failure to start constructive dialogue with the opposition resulted in seizure by protesters of the administrative buildings in the regions. Although demonstrations were carried out throughout the country, the common opinion was that the south of Kyrgyzstan was a “greenhouse”<sup>21</sup> of the revolution, as most of the prominent oppositionists were coming from southern oblasts.

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<sup>19</sup> See for example, Graeme Herd, “Colorful Revolutions and the CIS: Manufactured versus Managed Democracy?” *Problems of Post-Communism*, 52:2 (2005); Mark Beissinger, “Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena: the Diffusion of Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip Revolutions,” (paper presented to the LSE Shapiro Seminar Series, London, United Kingdom, 2005); Valerie Bunce, “Promoting Democracy in Divided Societies,” (paper presented at the joint conference of the Peace Studies Program (Cornell University) and the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, 2005)

<sup>20</sup> “Family Parliament” refers to attempts by the Akaev’s administration to let only those loyal to him and his family getting into the Parliament. Also, the fact that some of Akaev’s close family members, such as his daughter Bermet Akaeva, his son Aidar Akaev, and sister-in-law ran and won in the respective constituencies, triggered massive discontent and accusations of making-up “Family Parliament.”

<sup>21</sup> See Burke, *EurasiaNet Commentray*, March 25, 2005;

The beginning of March 2005 was marked by seizure by oppositional forces of local administration, airport and mass media centers in the big southern cities of Jalalabad and Osh. The biggest rally was organized on March 24 in Bishkek. Despite attempts of the opposition to emphasize peacefulness of the event the fight broke out between protesters and a group of people with blue bandages and white caps in the middle of the demonstration, who allegedly belonged to pro-governmental forces.<sup>22</sup> After several unsuccessful attempts by the “White House”<sup>23</sup> guards to disperse the rally, the protesting crowd surged into the government headquarters, celebrating victory and marking the beginning of looting frenzy.

The immediate collapse of the regime and absence of law enforcement elements allowed for raiding of shops, offices and buildings on the first night after the revolution. Bishkek entrepreneurs suffered huge and for many irrecoverable losses. Both regional and international media reported on deteriorating interethnic atmosphere and possibility of north-south socio-political confrontation:

Many in Bishkek are blaming the March 24 looting frenzy on people from outside the capital, specifically on southerners who arrived to participate in the anti-government protest. This assumption, regardless of whether it has a basis in fact or not, is greatly exacerbating pre-existing North-South tension. A continuation of disorder would raise the odds that newly formed Bishkek self-defense groups could take justice into their own hands, venting their anger on anyone in the capital identified as a southerner<sup>24</sup>

Ambivalence about the course of the new government and anti-Russian leaflets spread in Bishkek was said to spur a new exodus of the Russian-speaking population.<sup>25</sup> According to

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<sup>22</sup> Elnura Osmonalieva, “A Very Unexpected Revolution,” *Index on Censorship*, 2 (2005): 6-12

<sup>23</sup> Kyrgyz government headquarters

<sup>24</sup> Burke, *Eurasianet Commentary*, 25 March 2005

<sup>25</sup> The degree of the Russian exit from the former USSR has been in academic focus since the time of the Soviet collapse. Among the reasons mentioned for high migration outflow from Central Asia has been relegated status of Russians, nationalizing policies and unequal economic competition. Michele Commercio in a comparative study on the Russian minority in Latvia and Kyrgyzstan claims that presence of independent minority business community helps to withstand any nationalistic tendencies. She concludes that when national minorities find their economic niche, they tend to stay even if the state is harshly nationalizing (Latvia), and tend to leave if this niche is absent, regardless of minority-inclusive policies (Kyrgyzstan). See Michele Commercio, “Exit in the Near Abroad: The Russian Minorities in Latvia and Kyrgyzstan,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, 51:6 (2004): 23-32

Shmagin, Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Kyrgyzstan, the number of ethnic Russians lining up for citizenship and permanent departure to Russia tripled after the revolution.<sup>26</sup>

Apparently, there was a problem of ethnic inclusiveness of the anti-government movement. Some civic organizations, like International Crisis Group reported on unsuccessful attempts of the opposition to attract the biggest national minority communities of Uzbeks and Russians. March 24 looting night and land seizures on the outskirts of Bishkek was said to bring unease among city dwellers, and ethnic minorities primarily: “In the days after Akaev's overthrow, ethnic minorities in the capital felt threatened. Koreans, Uighurs and Turks suffered disproportionately from the looting and land seizures. Russian-speakers and ethnic minorities were often faced with ethnic Kyrgyz squatters.”<sup>27</sup>

Several post-revolutionary developments, such as illegal land seizure in Bishkek area, discussion of the Russian language status, continuous protests, re-distribution of property and weakening of the rule of law had specific impact on interethnic discourse, which I will discuss in the subsequent chapters.

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<sup>26</sup> *Kabar*, March 19, 2005

<sup>27</sup> International Crisis Group, “Kyrgyzstan: After the Revolution,” *ICG Asia Report*, 97 (2005):19

## II. Theoretical framework

### Ethnicity and political change in semi-authoritarian societies

Ethnic and nationalist violence received large scholarly attention in the last two decades, as most of the contemporary world conflicts have been occurring between the different groups *within* states rather than *between* different states.<sup>28</sup> In this chapter, I will restrict my attention to the theories and empirical works that have been dealing with the issues of ethnicity during transitional period in semi-authoritarian regimes. This rather focused theoretical framework seems to possess the necessary normative power for the specific case we are dealing with in this work.

It has been widely suggested that “revolutionary” and rapid attempts to introduce political changes in semi-authoritarian societies have danger of producing violent conflicts and aggravate already existing social and ethnic cleavages.<sup>29</sup> Transitologists give different accounts on why ethnic heterogeneity is conflict-prone in semi-democracies. Thus, Snyder argues that the early stages of democratization tend to spark ethnic conflict not because nations are being awakened by liberal institutions, but because elites use nationalist appeals to gain popular support. Success of this type of elitist exclusionary nationalism depends on the character of political institutions— if democratic institutions are weak but bureaucratic machine is strong, elites have more chances to manipulate with nationalistic appeals.<sup>30</sup>

Nodia goes further in the debate arguing for normalcy of ethnicization of political change in transitional semi-authoritarian societies as the “demands of democracy-building provide

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<sup>28</sup> Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War,” *International Security*, 20:1 (1995): 5-38

<sup>29</sup> Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict*, (London: W.W. Norton and Company Ltd, 2000); Ghia Nodia, “Nationalism and Democracy,” in Larry Diamond and Mark F. Plattner eds, *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Democracy*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Tanja Ellingsen, “Colorful Community or Ethnic Witches’ Brew? Multiethnicity and Domestic Conflict during and after the Cold War,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 44:2 (April 2000): 228-249

<sup>30</sup> Snyder, 2000

incentives for molding nations out of preexistent ethnic material”<sup>31</sup> since any democratization movement needs to determine the substance of “We the People.” Consequently, emergence of exclusive nationalist feeling, which is inevitable to Nodia in this process, can lead to politicized and conflicting ethnicity. Nodia continues, contentiously arguing that in the end this is not the exclusionary ethnicity-based nationalism that presents dangers of interethnic conflict but “general weakness of democracy in post-communist lands”:

The demands of transition create a real need for strong executive power, which in turn rouses fears of authoritarianism. The lack of a strong hand at the helm, however, can lead to anarchy and disarray, which in turn may trigger a bloody and repressive backlash. Since the best available “working” ideology is nationalism, it is only natural that authoritarian tendencies should take on a nationalist cast. Almost all post-communist countries with sizable ethnic minorities which is to say, most post-communist countries - must face painful problems that put unstable and insecure majorities against even less secure minorities.<sup>32</sup>

Horowitz in his extensive research of the *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*<sup>33</sup> criticizes elitist approach to ethnic violence in transitional societies, suggesting instead more focus on psychological power of ethnic identification, and search by ethnic communities for “group worth” and group legitimacy in certain polity, which possesses much stronger explanatory power to ethnic conflict than do materialists and elitist approaches. According to Horowitz, this is not simply self-interested elites who manipulate blind masses for ethnic hostility. This symbolic zest for “group worth” represents *real* and not phony consciousness for both elites and wider population.

Rothschild has somewhat similar to Horowitz’s view on the power of ethnicity and its salient place in politics and conflict. He suggests that politicization of ethnicity is possible under the two key circumstances – modernizing societies in transition and prevalence of ethnic cultural self-identification over any other, owing to its fulfillment capacity of psychological quest for

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<sup>31</sup> Nodia, 1994, 9

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 20

<sup>33</sup> Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, (Berkeley, London : University of California Press, 2000)

belonging.<sup>34</sup> The first helps to make wide range of persons aware of their unique cultural heritage and “group worth,” on the basis of which demands for power and group-respect are made and justified. The second, i.e. “revival” of ethnicity in political, symbolic, cultural and historical terms has been manifesting that “modern man has failed to find an equally satisfactory alternative to it [ethnicity].”<sup>35</sup>

Gurr and Ottaway<sup>36</sup> are going deeply in analyzing regime-type in the interdependent set of political change – regime – ethnicity. Gurr attributes high levels of ethnic conflict to the unstable nature of the semi-authoritarian regimes and says that in case of political upheaval intensity of ethnic conflict will be there no matter the direction of political change – towards greater democracy or autocracy.<sup>37</sup>

Regime type is viewed as a dimension of ethnopolitical environment that shapes the course and modes of ethnic political mobilization.<sup>38</sup> Aklaev, for instance, suggests that in the post-Soviet period, during the ethnopolitical crises leaders referred to authoritarian methods of dealing with various competing groups. Ottaway would explain it with the semi-authoritarian nature of most of the former Soviet states,<sup>39</sup> which she singles out as a separate regime type. Ottaway defines semi-authoritarianism as a system which manages to have some form of democratic institutions and liberal governance, civil society, and free media to a certain controlled extent, but these liberties and institutions are being kept at a very shallow and immature level of development. Therefore, such regimes should not be treated as “transitional” from authoritarian to democratic because they have developed into an alternative system with maintained appearance of democracy and absence of real political competition. Ottaway in her

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<sup>34</sup> Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Framework*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981)

<sup>35</sup> Rothschild, 1981, 6

<sup>36</sup> Marina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: the Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003)

<sup>37</sup> Rober Gurr, “Peoples Against States: Ethnopolitical Conflict and the Changing World System,” *International Studies Quarterly*, 38:3 (September 1994) : 347-377

<sup>38</sup> Airat Aklaev, 1999

<sup>39</sup> The similar view was expressed in Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War,” *International Security*, 20:1 (1995): 5-38

study of various types of semi-authoritarian states argues that these regimes challenge the very concept or the traditional three-step model of democratization (liberalization, transition proper, and consolidation), because free elections are being the final rather than initial stage in such societies. Therefore, because semi-authoritarianism is not institutionalized by its own institutions it lacks any political space for diverse groups to engage in the debate on power generation, transferring and sharing.

As rightly noted, life of the semi-authoritarian regimes is maintained not only by constant imposition and manipulation of the democratic institutions from above but from substantial support from the bottom: “In countries where formal democracy is accompanied by high levels of poverty, or where ethnic or religious conflict divides and mobilizes the population, for example, semi-authoritarian governments play on the public’s grievances and fears and get support by promising solutions.”<sup>40</sup> In this respect Diamond gives the examples of Asian and African countries in transition (Kenya, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia) where the nation-building claims and the efforts to hold together multiethnic societies has been employed for authoritarian policies and military oppression.<sup>41</sup>

Ottaway’s typology is very useful in understanding why semi-authoritarian regimes possess little institutional framework for legitimate change of political elites. It also explains that once rapid transformation is in place in such societies, the rules of the game change completely creating uneasy allegiances and instability. However, neither Ottaway nor Gurr account in what ways country’s heterogeneity becomes an effective tool of authoritarian oppression in the hands of incumbents and why tension occurs along ethnic lines and not along lines of various interest groups.

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<sup>40</sup> Ottaway, 2003,17

<sup>41</sup> Larry Diamond and Mark F. Plattner, 1994

## Nation-building and ethnicity

Another strand of literature has been focusing on unfinished and exclusionary nation-building projects that contribute to politicization of ethnic belonging and intensifying ethnic cleavages.<sup>42</sup> On the one hand, this is due to tendency of the radical voices to prevail among different competing ethnic communities during transitional nation-building process, which further polarizes divisions.<sup>43</sup> Pesic, for example, saw the rise of nationalism in Eastern Europe as often ethnocentric, “even neofascist, in its expansionist tendencies and its subordination of individual rights to collective ‘national’ rights.”<sup>44</sup> Continuous domination of the titular ethnic majorities has a potential of evolving into the worst types of tyranny, which is usually challenged by other underprivileged groups, especially in the times of transition.<sup>45</sup> Horowitz, drawing on the example of African and South Asian transitional societies, argues that any attempts to shut out minorities from the political participation is dangerous with various forms of violence.<sup>46</sup> He attributes it to the perpetual policy of exclusion in the deeply divided societies which comes from the fixed character of ethnic allegiances.

On the other hand, nation-building in semi-democracies very often is about “nationalizing”<sup>47</sup> state policies, which attempt to identify legitimate “owner,” ethnocultural leader and “indigenous” group. Such policies tend to divide citizenry on more legitimate “owners” and partially legitimate ones. The process of such psycho-political legitimating is

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<sup>42</sup> See for example, Annette Bohr, “Central Asian States as Nationalizing Regimes,” in Graham Smith ed, *Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: the Politics of National Identities*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Anatoly Khazanov, *After the USSR: Ethnicity, Nationalism and Politics in the Commonwealth of Independent States*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); Pal Kolsto, *Political Construction Sites: Nation Building in Russia and the post-Soviet States*, (USA: Westview Press, 2000); Valery Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union: the Mind Aflame*, (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1997); Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and National Question in the New Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Andreas Wimmer, *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Shadows of Modernity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

<sup>43</sup> Pesic, 1994; Algis Prazauskas, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Context of Democratizing Political Systems: Theses,” *Theory and Society*, 20:5 (1991):581-602

<sup>44</sup> Pesic, 1994

<sup>45</sup> Snyder, 2000; Diamond, 1994; Donald Horowitz, “Democracy in divided societies,” in Larry Diamond et al eds, *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Democracy*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994)

<sup>46</sup> Donald Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, (Berkeley : University of California Press, 2001)

<sup>47</sup> Brubaker, 1996

based primarily on ethnicity as it allows instigating historical and cultural claims. Once “core” ethnic group is identified, it sets up the grounds for ethnopolitical structural domination.

Sammy Smootha, elaborating on the issue, suggests that despite political domination of the majority ethnic group in transitional societies, some countries managed to have democratic type of governance, which he calls ethnic democracy.<sup>48</sup> Smootha argues that this is not the structural domination of the majority ethnic group in such societies that makes them democracies, but attempts of the ethno-cultural majority to accommodate ethnic minorities successfully. However, it is rather hard to find equilibrium so that favored status to ethnic majority and simultaneous minority protection policies would allow a state to qualify for ethnic democracy. To use Bohr’s standpoint on the issue, nevertheless some of the Central Asian states made valuable steps in protecting ethnic minorities and introducing democratic institutions their “nationalizing” policies transcended the former efforts impeding their democratization process.<sup>49</sup> Most of the ex-communist countries have been involved in rather exclusionary nation-building practices, exacerbating interethnic tensions.<sup>50</sup> In this respect, ethnically polarized societies are more difficult to consolidate for a common nation-building project which is said to be one of the pre-requisites for a peaceful transitional process.<sup>51</sup> Central Asian states have been yet unsuccessful in fulfilling the requirement since the nation-building efforts have been carried out in a very exclusionary manner with perpetual negligence towards multi-ethnicity.<sup>52</sup> This crisis of nationhood is what Aklaev called as one of the common crises in democratizing ethnopolitics.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Sammy Smootha, “The Model of Ethnic Democracy,” Flensburg: European Centre for Minority Issues, 2001

<sup>49</sup> Bohr, 1998

<sup>50</sup> Brubaker, 1996; Bohr, 1998; Mark Saroyan, “Majority-Minority Relations in the Soviet Republics” in Mark Saroyan ed, *Minorities, Mullahs and Modernity: Reshaping Community in the Former Soviet Union*, (California: University of California at Berkeley, 1997)

<sup>51</sup> Aklaev, 1999; Snyder, 2000; Patnaik, 2003; Horowitz, 1994; Diamond, 1994

<sup>52</sup> Patnaik, 2003; Bohr, 1998; Khazanov, 1995; Kolsto, 2000; Kulchik, 2004; Saroyan, 1997

<sup>53</sup> Aklaev, 1999

The common critique of the outlined theories is disproportional analytical value of a state and its institutions as a key-determinant of ethnic interaction during rapid transitional process.<sup>54</sup> Thus, these theories tend to overproblematize multiethnicity. Moreover, while speaking about political transition in semi-authoritarian societies and predisposition of such regimes to conflict, transitologists emphasize the importance of ethnic cleavages along which the conflict is likely to occur, with often little regard to other objectively existing cleavages and divisionary power they possess.<sup>55</sup> Another point of critique is that most of the discussed theories take ethnic groups as fixed, bounded and conflict-prone. It has been unclear what qualifies for a “deep ethnic cleavage”<sup>56</sup> and whether it necessarily there before political upheaval, rather than after it. Thus, there has been little attention to the saliency of cleavage and accounts of differentiate between perceived and objectively existing cleavages, which makes big difference in analysis of inter and intra-group interaction during political upheavals. However, many works on nation-building and ethnicity help to understand why ethnic belongingness is revoked in the times of instability and how does it follow the pre-existing patterns of ethnic division, which was created earlier through certain exclusionary nation-building policies. I will use some parts of these theories in order to demonstrate the effect of nation-building practices under the Soviet Union and in the post-independence period on the saliency of ethnicity.

### **“Eventful” ethnic identity**

A rather different approach to ethnicity and “ethnic conflict” was introduced by Brubaker, who, first, suggests to avoid treating ethnic groups as “putative things-in-the-world... but rather in

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<sup>54</sup> James Hughes and Gwendolyn Sasse, “Comparing Regional and Ethnic Conflicts in the Post-Soviet Transition States,” in James Hughes and Gwendolyn Sasse ed, *Ethnicity and Territory in the Former Soviet Union: Regions in conflict*, (New York, NY: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001)

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Horowitz, 1994

relational, processual, dynamic, eventful, and disaggregated terms,”<sup>57</sup> which can help to analyze how ethnic “groupness” is being formed as a result of deliberate group-making projects, coding and naming by politicians, media, and governments. Brubaker suggests that the reason why many recent world conflicts have been labeled “ethnic” conflicts is because in the post-Cold War setting, mobilization of resources for political struggle is not anymore done on the grand ideological antagonism of the left and right. Nowadays there are many more actors that are interested in “ethnicizing” political violence, such as incumbents, kin states, organizations, politicians and the actors of political struggle themselves. Brubaker notices that in such cases “ethnicity” as such is not a source of conflict, rather conflicts or violence for specific political interests are being deliberately framed in ethnic terms, reifying ethnic “groupness”:

When an ethnic fame is established, we “see” conflict and violence not only in ethnic, but in groupist terms. Although such perceived groupness does not necessarily reflect what is felt and experienced by participants in an event, a compelling ex post framing can exercise a powerful feedback effect, shaping subsequent experience and increasing levels of groupness.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, “groupness” implies certain degree of solidarity provoked by an event, be it deliberate mobilization by elites or media, violent incidents, socio-political instability. In other times, when such triggering events are absent ethnic identity is not salient, the level of ethnic “groupness” is very low.

Reeves in her accounts of identity during the “Tulip revolution”<sup>59</sup> rightly suggests that this is precisely the “groupist” approach that predominates nowadays and hinders cohesive analysis of the events, producing ethnic discourse of danger, which has potentials to materialize:

I would say that in the last year there has been an objective increase in the instance of inter-ethnic antagonism, precisely not because of some inherent animosity or ontological essence to those identities, but rather because this ever-

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<sup>57</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2004), 11

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 16

<sup>59</sup> Madeleine Reeves, “We’re with the People!” The Eventfulness of Identity in Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip Revolution,” (paper presented at the roundtable on ‘Understanding the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan One Year On: Dynamics and Implications,’ London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom, February 28, 2006), 2

present discourse means that people are “waiting” for such regional and ethnically based conflict to occur<sup>60</sup>

Among the most valuable advantages of eventful approach to ethnicity is possibility to see *why* and *how* intra-ethnic struggles, political entrepreneurship, media superficiality and agendas of certain institutions, rather than ordinary people, allow for problematization of ethnic heterogeneity, mischaracterization of whole regions as ethnic crises zones, and interpretation of social and political upheavals in ethnic terms. Further on, I will employ this theory in analyzing events, narratives and activities that were either aimed or contributive to rather conflicting ethnic “groupness” formation.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 2

### **III. Saliency of ethnicity through Soviet and post-Soviet nation-building**

Political change does not occur outside of historical and social context. Thus, some patterns of interethnic relationships during the February-March 2005 events in Kyrgyzstan could be explained with the reference to both pre-independence and post-independence developments. This chapter will analyze whether certain Soviet and post-Soviet nation-building policies contributed to creating of ethnic cleavages, and if yes, how deep they have been and to what extent above discussed theories on ethnicity in deeply divided semi-authoritarian societies are applicable to our case. Here I will argue that the way Soviet nationality policy was dealing with ethnicity and the way some of its flawed practices (such as ethnic ranking, privileged language status, ideological discrepancies, institutionalization of ethnic homelands) have been repeated during post-independence nation-building process contributed to politicization of ethnicity, gradual creating of self-conscious ethnic communities. Among the consequences of such politicization was the violent confrontation of Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities in the southern cities of Osh and Uzgen on the verge of the Soviet collapse. This dreadful event and subsequent Akaev's policy of "Kyrgyzstan is Our Common Home," which aimed to address and include numerous national minorities, was manifesting that *heterogeneity*, and not structural causes, economic hardships and institutionalized political ethnicity, was perceived as problematic and potential for conflict. In consequence, political instability in 2005, similarly to the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse, showed prevalence of the same pattern – overproblematization of *ethnicity* and failure to identify and tackle structural causes of ethnic differentiation.

## From *sblizhenie* to *razmezhivanie*<sup>61</sup>

Consolidation and creation of unity and solidarity among citizens of a multinational unit is probably one of the most arduous tasks. For the founders of the Soviet state the obstacle to solidarity among citizens was personified in national and ethnic attachments, which are, according to Marx, byproducts of capitalist societies, doomed to “wither away” together with capitalism as soon as the socialist revolution establishes proletarian dictatorship world-wide.<sup>62</sup> Lenin was convinced that destructive nationalism was due to imperial oppression under the Tsarist Russia.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, he reasoned that strict national equality would break down this imbalance, pacifying nationalist aspirations and making them useless. However, what was envisaged as a strict national equality was no more than ideological lip-service. Gleason, for instance, pointed out that the necessity for keeping power by the early Bolshevik government had to be compromised with the official endorsement of national statehood.<sup>64</sup> Thus, with the “Lenin’s compromise,”<sup>65</sup> which was considered rather unfortunate but unavoidable, the Soviet nationality policy took an ethnic and ethnocultural direction.<sup>66</sup> Ethnic territories were used as maps for Soviet nation-building, which inevitably politicized ethnicity, making it a dangerous weapon for the system in the long run, as ethnic collectivism is said to be one of the most authoritarian forms of nationalism.<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, Lenin’s formula on eliminating national heterogeneity for the sake of state consolidation envisaged policy of *sblizhenie*, or coming together, that had to go together with

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<sup>61</sup> *Razmezhivanie* stands for delimitation or in this case coming apart, as opposed to coming together (*sblizhenie*)

<sup>62</sup> Alexander Motyl, *The Post-Soviet Nations: Perspectives on the Demise of the USSR*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992)

<sup>63</sup> Connor, W. “Soviet Policies towards non-Russian Peoples in Theoretic and Historic Perspective: What Gorbachev Inherited,” in Alexander Motyl ed, *The Post-Soviet Nations: Perspectives on the Demise of the USSR*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Liber, G. “Korenizatsiia: Restructuring Soviet Nationality Policy in the 1920s,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 14 :1 (1991):15-23;

<sup>64</sup> Gregory Gleason, “The ‘National Factor’ and the Logic of Sovietology,” in Alexander Motyl ed, *The Post-Soviet Nations: Perspectives on the Demise of the USSR*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992)

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Tishkov, 1996; Brubaker; 1996, 8

<sup>67</sup> Khazanov, 1997; Tishkov, 1996

modernization, industrialization and urbanization. The latter proved to be rather contradictory as modernization and urbanization went hand-in-hand with the “civilizing” mission carried out with the help of the ethnic Russian population.<sup>68</sup> Ethnic Russians were encouraged to leave for Central Asia to develop agriculture and help to settle some nomadic Central Asian populations. Ranking of ethnicity on “civilizers” and the ones “civilized” provided for second-class citizenship treatment, broadly experienced by those who were once outside their national republics. Eventually, *sblizhenie* evolved into *razmezhivanie* throughout the whole state, creating ethnic cleavages along the lines between Russified urban centers and rural areas. Lenin’s condoning of non-coercive assimilation as a way to achieve *sblizhenie* meant approval for assimilation to one ethnic nation. As Connor aptly puts:

The important point is that Lenin’s dialectical scheme – unaccompanied as it was by specific policy recommendations and a timetable for its completion - although described as a formula for solving the national question proved to be no formula at all. Those who were in favor of vastly accelerating the assimilation process, those who favored the indefinite perpetuation of national flourishing, and those who held one of the myriad positions between these two extremes were able to quote Leninist scripture.<sup>69</sup>

The policy of double-assimilation was introduced in all the republics of Central Asia, or as it was called then, in Turkistan, in order to bring the various tribal and clan communities and ethnies in the region the idea of nation and further on – the idea of a socialist state.<sup>70</sup> The Soviet leadership believed that before incorporating Turkistan into the Soviet state one must create separate nations in the first place. Thus, double-assimilation meant, first, assimilation of the populations into a nation (Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik, ect.)<sup>71</sup> and second, assimilation into a socialist state.<sup>72</sup> This is

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<sup>68</sup> Motyl, 1992; Khazanov, 1995; Kolsto, 2000

<sup>69</sup> Connor, 1992, 33

<sup>70</sup> Olivier Roy, “The Sovietisation of Central Asia,” in Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations*, (London: I.B. Taurus, 2000), 50-84

<sup>71</sup> There is no agreement among scholars whether the creation of nations in Turkistan by the Bolshevik government was a “divide-and-rule” strategy with very arbitrary division of the indigenous populations, or

how the Bolshevik government attempted to eliminate what they believed were “primordial” tribal and clan attachments. The project was only partially successful.<sup>73</sup> Divisions within the titular Kyrgyz ethnic group into nomadic tribes did not ‘wither away’ during the seventy years of communism, as some scholars would argue.<sup>74</sup> Allegedly they thrived under the policy of *korenizatsya* (indigenization), which had good intentions of bringing local personnel into the higher echelons of power, but which had unfortunate backlashes, as very often important administrative posts were given on the kin-based “merit.”<sup>75</sup> This explains why after a nationalities-friendly policy of *korenizatsiya*, that allowed local elites in republics to gain access to political circles, and was generally seeking to legitimize Russian urban and industrial revolution, was abruptly replaced by Stalin’s centralized governance and widespread assimilationist practices. The latter was obviously justified with the failure of *korenizatsiya* to integrate population, which purportedly increased ethnic assertiveness in non-Russian republics.<sup>76</sup>

### **Inequality among equals**

The cornerstone of the Lenin’s nationality policy was the granting of *national equality* to bring nations together into one socialist state. However, “there was a wide discrepancy between official declarations concerning the attainment of national equality within the Soviet Union and the degree to which economic, cultural, and political equality were in fact achieved, or even pursued.”<sup>77</sup> Equality was attempted by the founders of the Soviet state on all the levels. Lenin was particularly worried for Sovietization not to be taken by non-Russian communities as

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whether religious, linguistic, and cultural differences were in fact taken into consideration for a bigger project of nations’ creation

<sup>72</sup> Bohr, 1998

<sup>73</sup> The recent years research (Melvin, 2002; Smith, 1998) has been demonstrating the high level of tribal attachment among ethnic Kyrgyz population

<sup>74</sup> Neil Melvin, “Authoritarian Pathways in Central Asia: a Comparison of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan,” unpublished paper, 2002

<sup>75</sup> Kolsto, 2000; Patnaik, 2003

<sup>76</sup> Liber, 1991

<sup>77</sup> Connor, 1992, 34

extension of the Russian chauvinism.<sup>78</sup> For that reason, the status of indigenous languages was the pivot point of cultural equality which allowed development of national languages and cultures, especially right after the Bolshevik revolution. However, development of the local languages came to be on a much lower level than development of the Russian language and culture which eventually leveled discontent among indigenous populations.<sup>79</sup> Introduction of compulsory Russian education at schools in 1930s and establishing of the hierarchy of languages with the Russian on the top, union republics' languages in the middle and minority peoples' vernaculars at the bottom, clearly marked assimilationist policies and fortified inequalities producing "reactive nationalism":

Firstly, Sovietization, often equated with Russification, led to reactive nationalism as people strove to accentuate their cultural uniqueness in order to prevent the erosion of their national identity...Nationalities became more conscious of their uniqueness because they were constantly treated as if they were different and in many cases second class.<sup>80</sup>

The Soviet unofficial policy of distribution of power among different ethnic groups substantially influenced creation of rather conflicting ethnic "groupness." USSR demographic policy was conducive to the emergence of distinction between the urban Russians and the rural Kyrgyz.<sup>81</sup> Up until Brezhnev years, the ethnic Russians used to occupy the top governmental and the party positions, were largely employed in engineering, schooling, managerial jobs and represented a predominantly urban class. Some scholars believed that this privileged economic position of "Europeans" and Uzbeks in south Kyrgyzstan was "a source of power and, in a sense, protection of malevolent action from above."<sup>82</sup> In fact, although ethnic patterns of city and village dwelling never were clear-cut, certain demographic predominance of one ethnic community in urban or

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<sup>78</sup> Liber, 1991

<sup>79</sup> Proctor, C, "Soviet Language Planning and the Linguistic Assimilation of Non-Russian Ethnic Groups in the USSR," *Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education*, 1:1 (1988): 41-54

<sup>80</sup> Walter Kemp, *Nationalism and communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: A basic contradiction?* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 189

<sup>81</sup> Tishkov, 1997; Melvin, 2001

<sup>82</sup> Kubicek, 1998, 40

rural setting was suggestive of some tacit divisions. Here again, in the times of political instability and attempts by community leaders to mobilize their ethnic fellows, which was the case during the “Tulip revolution,”<sup>83</sup> the seemingly unimportant city/village ethnic components became salient, serving as one of strongest factors for ethnic “groupness” crystallization.

Consequently, a policy of evident favoritism to a certain ethnic group under the USSR had its repercussions during the “Tulip revolution.” The “urban privileged” and “rural neglected” dichotomy came to be a sound justifications for ethnic exclusion.<sup>84</sup> As Aklaev explains, “In the case of *ranked* ethnic groups, when social cleavages are reinforcing rather than overlapping, the potential for conflict is more acute.”<sup>85</sup>

Economic inequality between the nations was also incongruent to the communist ideological blueprint. Logically enough, members that were brought together into a union could hardly ever be equal considering their different historical patterns of development, population, geographical position and natural resources. Moreover, attempts to achieve equality were done at the expense of unequal contributions on the part of single union republics to the common pie, which created animosities and resentment impelling “reactive nationalism.”<sup>86</sup>

### **Ethnic homelands**

The growing number of scholars claims that separation of civic and ethnic type of nationalism constitutes a flawed analytical framework and has no practical use.<sup>87</sup> However, some of the scholars would still argue that this is precisely due to ethnic collectivism that ethnic nationalism turned rapidly from “mild to wild” during the time of transition.<sup>88</sup> Creation of

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<sup>83</sup> I will discuss this particular aspect in greater detail in Chapter IV

<sup>85</sup> Aklaev, 1999, 32, emphasis added

<sup>86</sup> Kemp, 1999

<sup>87</sup> Brubaker, 2004

<sup>88</sup> Valery Tishkov, “Post-Soviet Nationalism,” in R. Caplan and J. Feffer eds, *Europe’s New Nationalism: States and Minorities in Conflict*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)

‘ethnic homelands’, inspired by the Stalinist cultural-territorial understanding of a nation, gave a rise to one of the most authoritarian types of nationalism characterized by universal ethnic mobilization and increasing number of separatist movements.<sup>89</sup>

Stalin’s understanding of a nation, defined as “an historic entity of people with its territory, economic ties, literary language, and specific culture and character comprising the whole of a nation’s features”<sup>90</sup> was conducive to creation of ethnic homelands and ethnic political identities. What it came to mean in the end, was that the peoples who received the status of union or autonomous republics come to feel secure and dominant, those who found themselves on the wrong side of the border or were not granted any status were left behind. It is notable how initially Bolsheviks gained support from minorities promising them liberation and self-determination and how afterwards communist leaders turned it into a political support of the majority ethnic in the republics.<sup>91</sup> Appellation to the historical memory of a dominant ethnic group was at considerable odds with the official policy of equality of peoples and socialist internationalism, allowing political elites of the union republics to speak about Uzbekistan for Uzbeks or Ukraine for Ukrainians:

Ethnicity was thus a factor in intra- as well as inter-republican politics. More autonomy for the republics usually meant more control for the majority ethnic group. As in the Soviet Union, political leaders defending local and economic interests were regarded (and increasingly saw themselves) as national leaders defending vital national interests.<sup>92</sup>

It was prohibited to express nationalist views but national and ethnic background was used in all the levels of society and polity, starting from the nationality column in passport, finishing with national representatives in the Party from each republic.

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<sup>89</sup> Vitaly Zaslavski, “Nationalism and Democratic Transition in Postcommunist Societies,” *Daedalus*, 121:2 (Spring, 1992): 97-121

<sup>90</sup> see Tishkov, 1996, 24

<sup>91</sup> Schopflin, G, “Nationalism and Ethnicity in Europe, East and West,” in Charles Kupchan ed., *Nationalism and Nationalities in the New Europe*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Connor, 1992; Kemp, 1999

<sup>92</sup> Kemp, 1999, 184

Territorilization and institutionalization of ethnicity on the state level and endorsing of “titular” ethnic groups as legitimate “owners” of both land and polity had dreadful consequences during the dissolution of the Soviet Union. One of such consequences was violent confrontation between Uzbek and Kyrgyz population in Osh and Uzgen in the summer 1990. In the developments prior to the conflict, there was an appeal allegedly on the part of the Uzbek community in the southern Kyrgyzstan to the USSR Supreme Soviet articulating a call for the Osh oblast autonomy on the basis of indigenusness and numerical domination of Uzbeks in that area.<sup>93</sup> A copy of the appeal was disseminated among the population triggering rumors and sparking speculations on authenticity of indigenusness, the right to be called “titular” and claim ultimate historical ownership over land. This was carried on and severely exacerbated by two organizations “Adolat” and “Osh-Aimygy,” which were civic and cultural centers for Uzbek and Kyrgyz ethnic communities respectively, but which became heavily involved in unprofessional distribution of land slots. Due to the low level of cooperation on the part of these organizations with state agencies and their lack of necessary expertise in land and housing issues, their actions of promising and allocating land to individuals of ethnically targeted communities was perceived as a threat on the part of community leaders, prompting mobilization, open street confrontations, fights and killings. Rumors and lack of credible information only fed mass paranoia and additional draft along ethnic lines. Some people were recorded saying, “there is not a single Kyrgyz person left, all the Kyrgyz population of Osh is exterminated under genocide,”<sup>94</sup> “Kyrgyz are raping our women, cutting off the heads of victims with hammers...”<sup>95</sup> Such words,

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<sup>93</sup> Talant Razakov, *Oshskie Sobytiya: na materialah KGB* [Osh Events: From KGB Files], Bishkek, Renessans, 1993

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p.52

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p.53

uttered by persons who often had no clue of the real state of events had powerful mobilizing effect on the population.<sup>96</sup>

Remarkably, these were not the whole ethnic groups that instigated and were involved in conflict, but organizations, individuals and community leaders that claimed representation on behalf of the whole communities of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. To recollect Brubaker's argument, "groupness" on the part of the two communities in Osh and Uzgen was called into being by deliberate provocations and violence of few individuals, backed by ethnically distinct organizations, rather than whole communities of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz.

Nevertheless, Osh events in 1990 were taken as ethnic conflict, as demonstrated by academic and journalistic writings.<sup>97</sup> This dreadful precedent, together with states' and enclaves border disputes, economic hardships, presence of numerous small ethnic communities in the region and overcrowding in the Ferghana Valley allowed characterizing the area as "hot spot," "flashpoint", "host of crises" zone.<sup>98</sup> Again, such approach obscures analysis as well as identification of key factors of Osh violence, which were mainly structural and political, and consequently averts targeting the roots of the problem rather than the causes. As Reeves suggests, nowadays very often the condition of ethnicity, territory and citizenship in Ferghana Valley is seen as problematic initiating reactive measures on the part of governments, organizations, mass media, calling for conflict prevention activities among ethnic minority

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<sup>96</sup> Valery Tishkov, " 'Don't Kill Me, I'm a Kyrgyz!': An Anthropological Analysis of Violence in the Osh Ethnic Conflict," *Journal Of Peace Research*, 32:2 (1995): 133-149

<sup>97</sup> Anara Tabyshalieva, Atyrkul Alisheva, Emil Shukurov, *Sotsialnye realii Uzhnogo Kyrgyzstana: Po materialam sotsiologicheskikh issledovani* [Social Realities of the Southern Kyrgyzstan: Drawing on Sociological Research Data], Bishkek: Institute for Regional Research, 1999; Lubin, Nancy and Rubin, Barnett, *Calming the Ferghana Valley. Development and Dialogue in the Heart of Central Asia*, (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 1999)

<sup>98</sup> Anara Tabyshalieva, *The Challenge of Regional Cooperation in Central Asia. Preventing Ethnic Conflicts in the Ferghana Valley*, (Washington: USIP, 1999); Randa Slim, "The Ferghana Valley: in the Midst of a Host of Crises," in Monique Mekenkamp, Paul van Tongeren and Hans van de Veen, eds, *Searching for Peace in Central and South Asia: An Overview of Conflict Prevention and Peace-Building Activities*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002)

populations, clear demarcation of contested border areas, while it is often the latter actions and persistent ‘discourse of danger’ that serves as a dividing force:

Rather than identifying the demarcation and delimitation of borders in these areas to be a civilizing, clarifying and peace-fostering force, as accounts of the region typically suggest, local narratives argue that it is precisely attempts to impose citizenship regimes, with their associated regalia of border controls, passport checks and barbed-wire fences, that are liable to heighten inter-ethnic tension in the region.<sup>99</sup>

In the post-independence period, Osh events together with the prevalent ethnic ‘discourse of danger’, seemed to have substantial influence on ideological policy of “Kyrgyzstan is Our Common Home” designed by Akaev’s administration. As it has been already mentioned, the policy seek to address country’s multiethnicity, to somehow overcome the idea of ethnic homeland and secure numerous ethnic minorities, reconciling “titulars” with “non-titulars.” Right now this precise policy is giving a credit for preserving relative ethnic peace in the country during the fourteen years of independence.<sup>100</sup> However, for many, “Kyrgyzstan is Our Common Home” remained a mere slogan, which did not transcend nationalizing developments in the republic and which was largely ignored by officials, some of them quoted saying, “Kyrgyzstan is our common house, but all non-Kyrgyz are lodgers in it.”<sup>101</sup>

Akaev’s nationality policies in the post-independence period could be called both national minority-friendly and “nationalizing” at the same time, with the Kyrgyz as the “core” nation. Hence, on the one hand, in the aftermath of Osh events, the only way for Akaev’s administration

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<sup>99</sup> Madeleine Reeves, “Locating danger: Konfliktologiya and the Search for Fixity in the Ferghana Valley Borderlands,” *Central Asian Survey*, 24:1 (2005): 67

<sup>100</sup> The policy of “Kyrgyzstan is Our Common Home,” was said to give Akaev support from the biggest national minorities Uzbeks (13%) and Russians (10-11%), which was reflected in low levels of participation by the representatives of these ethnic communities in oppositional protests in 2005. See for example, Alisher Khamidov, “Kyrgyzstan’s Uzbeks: A Safe Vote for the Government,” *Eurasianet*, September 9, 2004

<sup>101</sup> Adakhan Madumarov, the current First Vice Prime Minister, was quoted in “Obrashenie Uzbekskoi Obshchestvennosti uga Kyrgyzstana k prezidentu starny Kurmanbeku Bakievu: Protiv presledovaniya po natsionalnomu priznaku,” [Appeal by the Uzbek Community of the Southern Kyrgyzstan to the President Kurmanbek Bakiev, Against Ethnic Persecution], *Ferghana.ru*, January 8, 2006;

to gain legitimacy was to guarantee interethnic peace through national minority accommodation. On the other hand, the most important policies, such as the status of the Russian language and “Kyrgyzstan is Our Common Home” policy, were flawed by nationalizing tendencies. The section below discusses some relevant nation-building practices during independence, which are necessary to revisit for the better understanding of the role of ethnicity during the “Tulip revolution.”

### **Ethnic policies in post-independence period**

Our concern in this section is looking at how salient ethnicity has been as a result of post-Soviet nation-building practices. This inquiry is necessary to analyze why multiethnicity was problematized during the “Tulip revolution” and why did political struggle in the end take an ethnic hue, as it was reflected by the foreign and national media.

An intensive nation-building process, which started already in 1922 with an attempt of the Bolshevik government to eliminate regional and clan loyalties and through mass education, modernization, and double-assimilation, reached its new stage after independence in 1991. The new stage meant nationalizing policies endorsed in favour of titular ethnic groups and little attention, very often negligence, towards numerous national minorities.<sup>102</sup> The nationalizing nature of state-building in Kyrgyzstan came about not only as a result of pressure by indigenous intelligentsia, but also as a tool of unifying titular elites themselves.<sup>103</sup> The Soviet idea of ethnic homeland as intrinsically connected to nationality provided grounds for political actors in the newly independent Central Asia to establish firm connection between titular ethnic groups with state structures.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Khazanov, 1995; Patnaik, 2003

<sup>103</sup> Bohr, 1998

<sup>104</sup> Tishkov, 1997; Bohr, 1998; Patnaik, 2003; Khazanov, 1995

Exclusion of non-titulars from the echelons of power has been both direct and tacit.<sup>105</sup> In the early era of independence constitutional provisions of some Central Asian countries stated that president should belong to a titular ethnic group. Right now all of the constitutions say president must know the state language. In Kyrgyzstan knowledge of the language by the top authorities and officials became one of the tools for political strife. During the 2000 presidential elections a new body, that is the State Language Commission, started its operations by testing presidential candidates on the knowledge of the Kyrgyz language.<sup>106</sup> Thus, a group of philology academicians were given an unprecedented power of setting the norms for the proper knowledge of the language and using it in order to dismiss or to privilege certain candidates. Many observers claimed that Akaev endorsed the State Language Commission with one explicit goal – to eliminate rivals, primarily Russian-speaking Kyrgyz and non-Kyrgyz.

In order to get a high-ranking job in Kyrgyzstan, especially in the government, one has to have an excellent command of the state indigenous language,<sup>107</sup> which automatically excludes all Russophones and other national minorities. This ‘exclusion’ has been protracted as there has been lack of qualified teaching, production of textbooks necessary for promoting mass education in the indigenous languages.<sup>108</sup> The official proclamation of the Kyrgyz language as the only language of administration in 2004 has not been accompanied with adequate quality training in

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<sup>105</sup> Bohr, 1998

<sup>106</sup> Curtis, Matt. “Language Testing in the Run-up to Kyrgyzstan’s Elections.” *Eurasia Insight*, September 26, 2000

<sup>107</sup> James, while referring to this issue in Latvia and Estonia, explained a similar situation as follows: “Due to the history of invasion and domination, there is an understandable concern for the protection of the majority language and society. This is, for many countries, their first and real opportunity for many years to ensure the long-term survival of their ethnic group” in James, M. “Do as I say, not as I do: The European Union, Eastern Europe, and Minority Rights,” *East European Politics and Societies*, 17:4 (2003): 697

<sup>108</sup> Pinar Akcali, “Nation-state Building in Central Asia: A Lost Case?” *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, 2:3 (2003): 409-429; Matthias Koenig, “Social Conditions for the Implementation of Linguistic Human Rights through Multicultural Policies: The Case of the Kyrgyz Republic,” *Current Issues in Language and Society*, 6:1 (1999)

Kyrgyz. This immediately served as an obstacle for minorities with a poor command of the Kyrgyz language to excel in the governmental sector.<sup>109</sup>

Bohr elaborates on ethnicity in post-independence Central Asia, saying “although Russians and other non-titular groups have been granted an automatic right to membership of the citizen-policy, in contrast to non-titulars in Estonia and Latvia, the Central Asian states are not true civic states in that ethnicity can often be used to political and sometimes economic advantage.”<sup>110</sup> Thus, in February 1992 former president of the Kyrgyz Republic Askar Akaev issued a decree under which 50% of the country’s privatized land was to be distributed among ethnic Kyrgyz in order to encourage farming among this traditionally nomadic people.<sup>111</sup> There were many examples of such ‘ethnoprivatization’ throughout Central Asian republics.<sup>112</sup>

Thus, relatively high potential for interethnic strife could be partially explained by the Central Asian leaders’ reliance on some unacceptable elements of the Soviet nationality policy, such as proclamation of superiority of one particular ethnic group, which, according to Kemp (1999) and Khazanov (1995) blocks social mobility and produces “reactive nationalism.”

On the other hand, although there were many centrifugal forces in the newly independent Kyrgyzstan, Akaev’s administration managed to sustain ethnic peace by addressing minority issues and demonstrating loyalty to Russia through safeguarding Russophone population even at the expense of accusations on the part of communists and national democrats of his “betrayal of the Kyrgyz nation” after the decree on the official language and inauguration in of the Slavic University in Bishkek, which was to give access to higher education to Russian-speaking population of the republic.<sup>113</sup> The Kyrgyz Republic was the only one among the Central Asian

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<sup>109</sup> Patnaik, 2003; Chotaeva, Cholpon, “Language as a Nation-building Factor in Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 2 :22 (2004)

<sup>110</sup> Bohr, 1998, 142

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 143

<sup>112</sup> Khazanov, 1997; Kubicek, 1998

<sup>113</sup> Kubicek, 1998; Although most of the higher educational institutions in Kyrgyzstan offer courses in the Russian language, opening of the Slavonic University was a political move, manifesting primarily geopolitical

states to grant the Russian language the status of the official language<sup>114</sup> which could be used as a language of administration in the places of the large concentration of the Russian-speaking population.<sup>115</sup> In the same year, another decree was passed by the Kyrgyzstani Parliament ‘On Measures to Regulate Migrational Processes in the Kyrgyz Republic’ which highlighted the importance of addressing national minority issues as a proactive measure for decreasing the negative effect of out-migration among non-Kyrgyz, primarily Russian-speaking population. Among those measures was elimination of the article in the Constitution stating that the president of the Kyrgyz Republic has to be an ethnic Kyrgyz person fluently speaking the state language. Only fluency in the state (Kyrgyz) language was left a necessary qualification for presidency.<sup>116</sup>

Despite the efforts to accommodate Russophone population, the issue of the state and official languages has been continuously under heated debates, serving as a leverage of political struggle and instigating unease and insecurity on the part of the Russophones. In the almost immediate “revolutionary” aftermath the new government was being called by the various non-governmental and political organizations for dropping the Russian as an official language.<sup>117</sup> One of the representatives from the Center for State Language Protection was quoted saying: "When Russian was accepted as an official language, Kyrgyz was pushed even further back into the shadows. Russian has become the dominant language at all official levels."<sup>118</sup>

When language status is under continuous discussions, attacks, threats and uncertainty, it has a primary impact on those who consider themselves to be native speakers of that language. This impact is manifested in reinforcement of ethno-linguistic identification, setting a line

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preferences of Akaev’s administration. This move in itself caused wide reaction, both negative and positive, among population and politicians.

<sup>114</sup> The decree was signed by the Kyrgyzstani president Askar Akaev in June 1994 and specified that the Russian language was granted an official status on the “predominately Russian speaking areas as well as in “vital areas of the national economy” (Bohr, 1998)

<sup>115</sup> “Large concentration” of the population was not marked with special numerical threshold

<sup>116</sup> Right now none of the Central Asian constitutions say bluntly that a presidential candidate has to belong to a titular ethnic group. However, all of them state that fluency in the state language of the titular ethnic group is required.

<sup>117</sup> Erica Marat, “The Tulip Revolution: One Year After,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, (2006): 1-151

<sup>118</sup> November 11, 2005, United Press International

between speakers and non-speakers, “ours” not “ours,” native and not native. Ongoing political debates on the status of the Russian language in Kyrgyzstan not only contributed to interethnic distance, but also to intra-ethnic distance, as many ethnic Kyrgyz have poor command of the state language. Among considerations of the next chapter will be the way language debates, as dominated by nationalistic claims and calls for revoking of the official status of the Russian language, summoned ethnic “groupness.”

To conclude, the discussed policies under the Soviet and post-Soviet incumbents have had a considerable impact on ethnicity, interethnic and intra-ethnic relationships in the country. The results of the most important ones that came to play essential role during the “Tulip revolution,” were city and village tacit ethnic differentiation, center and periphery distinctiveness as a result of *korenizatsiia* policy, “core” nationality and ethnic minority communities, and Kyrgyz language speakers and non-speakers.

### **III. “Tulip revolution” in ethnic “groupness” reification**

So far, we have been trying to analyze the patterns of saliency of ethnicity as a result of Soviet and post-Soviet nation-building practices. This is important not only to one of the main concerns of the thesis, i.e. why multiethnicity came to be seen as problematic and inclined to conflict during and after the “Tulip revolution,” but also for understanding how deep this cleavage is and whether it has potentials of becoming openly conflicting dividing line as a result of ongoing securitization of ethnic heterogeneity in the country.

This chapter will examine dynamics, conditions, narratives and activities which lead to ethnicization of political struggle between the opposition and government in February-March 2005. Here I will argue that the reason why change of elites during the “Tulip revolution” increased instances of interethnic clash and exodus of non-titulars afterwards was not because of the deeply seated ethnic cleavage per se, but due to reification of ethnic groupness through intra-ethnic power struggle dynamics, patterns of political mobilization by the opposition, media conflict discourse, as well as by the very fact of instability. The first two factors, i.e. intra-ethnic power competition and oppositional mobilization dynamics, had their primary influence during the “revolution,” whereas the other two came about after the government in the Kyrgyz Republic was changed.

#### **Intra-ethnic power struggle in reification of ethnic “groupness”**

The growing number of scholars attributes regional divisions in Central Asia as the primary feature of political life since independence in 1991.<sup>119</sup> According to Melvin, the center-regional developments in post-independence Kyrgyz Republic have been marked with clear South-North

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<sup>119</sup> Neil Melvin, “Patterns of Centre–Regional Relations in Central Asia: The Cases of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan” in James Hughes and Gwendolyn Sasse eds, *Ethnicity and Territory in the Former Soviet Union: Regions in conflict*, (New York, NY: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001); Kadyrov Shokhrat, “Political Technologies in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Central Asia,” *Vestnik Evrazii*, 4:2 (2005): 202-235; Beissinger, 2005; Huskey, 1995; Kurmanov, 2005

political rivalry, which was intensified already under the perestroika policies. Interpretation of the causes of the “Tulip revolution,” both in the media and academic writings, have been following this pattern and seeing 24 March events as North-South political confrontation.<sup>120</sup> Whether clan rivalry has been political reality or constructed myth, the argument here suggests that the regional struggle substantially reified ethnic identities during the February-March events in Kyrgyzstan and was one of the contributing factors for emergence of the ethnic conflict narrative in the media.<sup>121</sup>

Concentration of power in the regional capitals after the collapse of the USSR produced fears on the part of non-titular populations who lost their Moscow patronage.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, the tight grips on power in the hands of the capital elites and their refusal to accommodate interests of the regions through confederal arrangements intensified rivalry between the clans, producing more ethnically conservative opposition in the regions.<sup>123</sup> However, because pre-independence order in Central Asia did not form exclusive regional identities, peripheral elites could not challenge centralized nation-building project launched by the northern elites:

The growing power of the central elites in Almaty, Bishkek, Tashkent, Dushanbe and Ashgabat posed a direct threat to the economic and political networks that had been built up elsewhere during the Soviet years. While most regional elites were in a weak position relative to the central elite, those that could utilize other political resources, such as Islam or ethnicity, were able to pose a challenge to the newly dominant groups.<sup>124</sup>

Kadyrov, a Central Asian scholar, attributes high ethnic conflict potential in Central Asia to attempts of superethnic groups to take power on the level of a centralized state. He suggests that

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<sup>120</sup>Zaynidin Kurmanov, “The 2005 Parliamentary Elections in Kyrgyzstan and Collapse of the Akaev Regime,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 3:33 (2005): 7-14; Alexander Knyazev, “Podmochennaya Revolyutsiya. ‘Novye Klany’ Rvutsya k Vlasti v Kirgizii,” [Damped Revolution. ‘New Clans’ are Striving for Power in Kyrgyzstan] *Liter.kz*, March 5, 2006; Pushev, 2005; Todua, 2005; Marat, 2006

<sup>121</sup> “Election-related Disturbances Hit Southern Kyrgyzstan,” *Eurasia Insight*, 4 March 2005; Alisher Soipov, “V Kyrgyzstane mogut proizoiti mezhnatsionalnye stolknoveniya,” [Interethnic Clashes are Possible in Kyrgyzstan] *Ferghana.ru*, March 06, 2005;

<sup>122</sup> Kadyrov, 2005

<sup>123</sup> Melvin, 2002

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 172

so-called titular nations in Central Asia are not nations in the classical definition of this word, but represent superethnies, regionally divided and hostile. Once any segment of the superethnie tires to establish its power, it leads to ethnocratic type of governance and creates fertile grounds for ethnic conflict:

... when hegemonic ambitions of an ethnic group start to realize beyond the local level on the basis of the central unitary statehood institutions they tend to abridge interests of other segments, intensify subethnic competition and destabilize ethnic community. This is why ethnic communities are internally weak for statehood formation in longer span of time. If statehood, however, is achieved, it takes the form of despotism, and after the fall of the latter societies find themselves in difficult situations to build democratic societies. The examples of this could be found Iraq, Afghanistan and to a large extent post-Soviet Central Asian states<sup>125</sup>

According to another view, however, strong regional divisions within the dominant cultural group in the “modular” revolutions throughout the post-communist block allowed for creation of democratic opposition power bases increasing success of the revolutionary movements.

In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, the north-south division of the country into rival clan groupings furnished the democratic opposition not only with a source of grievance due to Akaev’s favorable treatment of northern clans, but also with a geographically compact base from which to launch the Tulip Revolution in March 2005.<sup>126</sup>

The ousting of the Akaev’s administration by seizure of the “White House” in Bishkek was seen by many as a victory of the southern political elites over northern ones.<sup>127</sup> Omnipresent discourse on regional strife and presence of two potential presidential candidates from South (Bakiev) and North (Kulov) produced numerous speculations in the media on the possibility of civil war between the two regions, as though people really divide themselves into “southerners” and

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<sup>125</sup> Kadyrov, 2005, 205

<sup>126</sup> Beissinger, 2005, 39

<sup>127</sup> See “Dual Power Scenario Takes Hold of Kyrgyzstan,” *Eurasianet*, March 22, 2005; Knyazev, Alexander. “*Podmochennaya Revolutsiya. “Novye Klany” Rvutsya k Vlasti v Kirgizii.*” [Damped Revolution. ‘New Clans’ are Striving for Power in Kyrgyzstan]. *Liter.kz*, May 3, 2006

“northerners,” unless the two strongest leaders negotiate a joint form of governing.<sup>128</sup> Thus, the decision of the interim government to form tandem with a southerner, Kurmanbek Bakiev, as a President, and a northerner, Felix Kulov, as a Prime Minister was seen as a righteous political move:

The Bakiev-Kulov tandem is the best option for the country’s political future, yet because of their high political aspirations their union might prove short-lived... It is highly important for them to keep their personal political contradictions within limits in order to prevent armed clashes between their supporters. This cannot be excluded, however, because of their southern temperaments and the very special nature of clan relations in the country.<sup>129</sup>

Formation of tandem was said to be key factor for its massive support in the early organized presidential elections. “People did not vote for Bakiev, - said leader of the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, Edil Baisalov, - people voted for stability.”<sup>130</sup> Markedly, there was persistent discussion of the ethnic aspect of tandem. The local media expressed hopes for the new president to be minority-friendly due to his former education in Russia and, more importantly, his ethnically Russian spouse.<sup>131</sup> This factor seemed to be enormously powerful for the people in the atmosphere of ethnicized politics and fear of ethnic conflict, minority oppression. Due to the lack of empirical data it is hard to say with solid confidence whether it was the case or not. However, drawing on the media writings, ethnicity of Bakiev’s wife seemed to be an ethnic security card for the new president. For Felix Kulov this card appeared to be his low proficiency in the state language,<sup>132</sup> which for many was a proof of his high level of Russification pulling him out of the raw of “Kyrgyz nationalists.” A seemingly non-political aspect of language skills became almost a predictor of the future political course of Kulov

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<sup>128</sup> Vyacheslav Temirbaev, “V Chih Interesah Smuta?” [Who is Interested in Distemper?] *Moya Stolitsa Novosti*, April 19, 2005; Arcady Dubnov, “God Nazad iz Kirgizii Bezhal Prezident,” [One Year Ago the President Fled Kyrgyzstan] *Vremya Novostei*, March 24, 2006

<sup>129</sup> Kurmanov, 2005, 10

<sup>130</sup> Press Conference organized by the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, July 10, 2005

<sup>131</sup> “Bakiev also has a potential asset in his wife, who is Russian and could bolster his appeal among Kyrgyzstan's Russian-speaking voters,” in Gulnoza Saidazimova, “Kyrgyzstan: Will Opposition Leader Bakiev Be Kyrgyzstan’s Next President?” *Institute For War and Peace Reporting*, March 24, 2005; Timothy Jasek, “Russians Leaving, Despite Acceptance by Kyrgyz,” *Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe*, August 29, 2005

<sup>132</sup> “Language Politics in Kyrgyzstan,” *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, April 29, 2005

towards minorities. Obviously, high proficiency in the Russian language does not mean favorable treatment and protection of the Russophone population, but the contrary was emphasized by the national media.<sup>133</sup> Following the latter line of thought, Kulov would probably not be perceived as a minority-friendly politician had he been equally fluent in both languages.

The North-South divide might have been, indeed, a driving force of the political upheaval. However, it would be an exaggeration to say that southern regions were the “power base”<sup>134</sup> of the democratic forces, as anti-governmental protests took place throughout the country almost simultaneously. Besides that, the patterns of regional division and the way political mobilization was carried out by the opposition, including bringing the people from the southern region on the buses for protests,<sup>135</sup> apparently only further exacerbated the North-South cleavage failing to create democratic inclusion of all social segments in the movement. The evidence to this could be the wide-spread blaming of the non-Bishkek residence from the south in looting, which occurred after the March 24 protests.<sup>136</sup>

It is hard to say whether the regional divide has been more a product of politicization and media effect or it represents a real political and social cleavage. But the argument here suggests that the regional struggle (whether objectively existing or perceived) substantially reified ethnic identities during the February-March events in Kyrgyzstan and was one of the contributing factors for emergence of the ethnic conflict narrative. The latter happened due to several reasons. First, the victory of the southern opposition meant for many victory of the more ethnically conservative “Kyrgyz nationalists” over more Russified urban and “multicultural” northern Kyrgyz elite<sup>137</sup>:

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<sup>134</sup> Beissinger, 2005

<sup>135</sup> Elnura Osmonalieva. “A Very Unexpected Revolution,” *Index on Censorship*, 2 (2005): 6-12

<sup>136</sup> Burke, 2005; Komalskaya, 2005; Osmonalieva, 2005

<sup>137</sup> Melvin, 2002; Pushaev, 2006; Todua, 2005; Marat, 2006

At present, Uzbeks are wary of the growing influence of Kyrgyz nationalists in politics. Nationalist sentiment is arising out of the frustration generated by the country's stagnant economic conditions, some observers say. Among the more outspoken adherents are leading members of the opposition, including parliamentary deputy Adahan Madumarov and Omurbek Tekebayev, a former presidential candidate and leader of the opposition group Ata Meken (Fatherland). Both men have expressed distrust of Kyrgyzstan's Uzbek population.<sup>138</sup>

Second, the growing ethnic polarization within the Kyrgyz has had a tendency of scaring away national minority communities.<sup>139</sup> It produced sense of exclusion on the part of non-titulars from decision making process, as they were not allowed to get involved in the ethno-regional Kyrgyz strife.<sup>140</sup> Politically important Uzbek minority community, whose support was used by the early Akaev's administration, was growing increasingly isolated. Attempts by the opposition to include representatives of national minorities in their movement failed to encourage participation of the key non-titular groups, Uzbeks and Russians.<sup>141</sup> Therefore, increased polarization of internal divisions within Kyrgyz elites, as well as stratification between ethnic communities,<sup>142</sup> which stems from the Soviet organization of power relations in Central Asia - both enhanced reification of ethnic identity putting it on the "foreground."<sup>143</sup>

It will be problematic to establish clear cause-effect line between the growing regional struggle and reification of ethnic "groupness" during political upheaval. Often both are reinforcing each other with different degree, depending on the context and historical

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<sup>138</sup> Khamidov, *Eurasianet*, September 2004

<sup>139</sup> Melvin, 2002; Pushaev, 2006. The patterns of political non-interference or passiveness on the part of different national minority groups, the biggest of them Uzbeks and Russians, have been different. Political behaviour of the Uzbek community in Kyrgyzstan has been much influenced by the memory of the Osh events in 1990

<sup>140</sup> Alexei Sukhov, "Russkie v Kyrgyzstane: uezhat ili ostavatsya?" [Russians in Kyrgyzstan – To Leave or To Stay?] *Navigator.kz*, June 10, 2005

<sup>141</sup> ICG, 2005, 7 As it has been discussed earlier, failure of the opposition to bring representatives of two biggest national minority groups, Uzbeks and Russians, stems from inability of oppositional leaders to demonstrate their ethnic inclusiveness and adherence to the idea of "Kyrgyzstan is Our Common Home" supported by national minorities. Dynamics on the Parliamentary elections showed that national minorities' community leaders were not openly against Akaev, as his office seemed to guarantee relative ethnic peace.

<sup>142</sup> Esman, 1994, 20

<sup>143</sup> Abdurasulov, 2006

circumstances. Thus, Melvin mentions that the rise of ethno-nationalist sentiments right after the independence reinforced regional cleavage:

The principal impulse behind the rise of regional politics, however, was not always a reassertion of traditional power centers in Central Asia but the rise of ethno-nationalist politics. The growth of ethnic-based political movements in key regions within Central Asia had the effect of reinforcing the fragmentation of political life along regional lines.<sup>144</sup>

Nevertheless, in the times of the “Tulip revolution,” as I argued above, this is regional political elite struggle that seemed to summon ethnic “groupness,” and not because “revolution” was about empowerment of one ethnic group over another or because political strife was indeed about North-South cleavages, but because confrontation was evolved primarily around *titular* political elites and because this confrontation was portrayed as North-South struggle, while opposition voices came from all the regions.

One more factor, which closely related to the one just discussed and is essential for understanding of interethnic relations during the “Tulip revolution” was the way oppositional forces mobilized population.

### **Patterns of political mobilization by the opposition**

Another force that reinforced ethnic “groupness” is the very way political mobilization occurred for the “revolutionary” movement. Although patterns of political mobilization require a separate careful investigation, the compiled reports on the February-March 2005 events allow for some preliminary analysis and conclusion, even if not substantiated by objective empirical data. Thus, despite the attempts by the oppositional forces to incorporate politically important national minority groups, such as Uzbeks and Russians, the target group and the core of demonstrators was reportedly rural Kyrgyz population, predominantly from the south<sup>145</sup>.

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<sup>144</sup> Melvin, 2002, 171

<sup>145</sup> Beissinger, 2005; ICG, 2005; Osmonalieva, 2005; Sukhov, 2005

Elections probably in any country tend to create rivalry camps with political candidates appealing and thus, generating certain group of supporters. Parliamentary elections in 2005<sup>146</sup>, that were in a way catalysts of the “revolutionary” protest, were also a manifestation of blunt ethnopolitics. Ethnic background of a certain candidate came to be important because ethnic communities seek political representation, but also because political candidates themselves either directly or tacitly manipulating with ethnic identity to gain necessary support. What is dangerous in electoral ethnopolitics is that victory of a certain candidate is projected into a victory of the whole ethnic group a candidate appealed to and claimed to represent. On the one hand, representatives of the Uzbek communities were uneasy about possible victory of some ethnically Uzbek candidates fearing protests by the Kyrgyz,<sup>147</sup> but on the other hand, success of these candidates meant determination of the whole minority group social and political status. As one barber reasoned about political race and the place of the ethnically Uzbek candidate Batyrov, one of the influential figures in the southern Kyrgyzstan: “It [elections] will show the true status and power of the Uzbek people. Batyrov is the head of the [Uzbek] cultural centre. If he loses, then Uzbeks worth nothing.”<sup>148</sup>

Eventual victory of some ethnically Uzbek candidates in the elections that were called by international organizations as being far from international norms<sup>149</sup> and the protests by the lost candidates took easily an ethnic spin. Therefore, already growing sense of ethnic “groupness” as instigated by elections was carried on and intensified when protest to the fraudulent elections started in late February. Mobilization supporters for protests, especially in some cities in the

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<sup>146</sup> In the single-chamber Parliament elected in 2005, 9,3% of the seats are taken by ethnically Uzbek candidates, 4% by the ethnic Russians. According to the 1999 national census data, Uzbeks comprise 13% of the total population, Russians 12% (after March 24 Russian population out-migration, there are estimated 10% of the Russians left in the country). In total, representatives of various national minority communities currently take 12 seats in the Parliament out of 75.

<sup>147</sup> Abdurasulov, 2006

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p.2

<sup>149</sup> OSCE, Election Observation Mission documents

south, like Uzgen and Jalalabad was seen not so much as call for justice and resignation of the president, but more as a growing antagonism between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.<sup>150</sup>

Southern city of Jalalabad witnessed a fight between supporters of winning Uzbek candidate Batyrov and a lost, ethnically Kyrgyz candidate Jusupbek Bakiev. The fight was immediately reported to be an ethnic confrontation,<sup>151</sup> whereas there were only few persons initiating and getting involved in the brawl. To recollect Brubaker's argument, this is political institutions and empowered individuals they represent, not ethnic groups, who instigated street violence.

Protesters in support for Adakhan Madumarov<sup>152</sup> in the southern city of Uzgen, inhabited mostly by the Uzbek population, were predominantly ethnic Kyrgyz people from nearby villages. Not only protesters were seen as intruding into private life of city dwellers, they were seen as alien and aggressive Kyrgyz:

Uzbeks were irritated by the fact that Kyrgyz people were coming and disrupting their work, intervening in their life, forcing them to stay at home as they did not join the demonstrators. One Uzgen student said, "they were behaving as if it was their city."<sup>153</sup>

The patterns of mobilization by both lost and winning candidates, which was based almost solely on ethnicity laid dangerous foundation for crystallization of antagonistic ethnic "groupness." Moreover, such monoethnic group-making project reminded many the patterns of ethnic mobilization during Osh 1990 events.

There has been mentioning throughout the text of national minorities, meaning all the other ethnic communities that do not belong to the dominant cultural Kyrgyz nationality, it is important to note that due to the different historical background, political and social role of these

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<sup>150</sup> Alisher Soipov "V Kyrgyzstane mogut proizoiti mezhnatsionalnye stolknoveniya," [Interethnic Confrontations are Possible in Kyrgyzstan] *Ferghana.ru*, March 06, 2005

<sup>151</sup> Soipov, *Ferghana.ru*, 2005

<sup>152</sup> One of the opposition leaders who ran for a seat in the Parliament and lost the race. Madumarov became a Vice Prime Minister after the "revolution"

<sup>153</sup> Abdurasulov, 2006, 3

minority populations, each was affected differently by the political upheaval. If we take the numerically two biggest national minorities in the state, Uzbeks and Russians, the patterns of their non-involvement in the “revolutionary” movement, as well as the general reaction to instability was different.

The Russophone population has been generally passive in political life throughout Central Asian region and rather loyal to the Akaev’s government. Therefore, there have been little attempts on the part of the oppositional forces to target this particular group for their support. Inclusion of the Russophone population was also a matter of communication. Most of the protests that took place throughout the country were in Kyrgyz. One of the young Bishkek residents interviewed after the results of the rigged parliamentary elections came out said: “They had a bill board, long and yellow, and something was written there in Kyrgyz. Unfortunately, my Kyrgyz is rather poor to understand what was written there. As far as I heard from the media, they were protesting against Akaev and we thought this is something like this”<sup>154</sup> The nature of political struggle and dissociated opposition that lacked a clear nationality policy agenda, as it has been mentioned in the previous section, was also reflected in low levels of political participation among Russians.

The situation with Uzbek minority was rather different. Oppositional forces, together with the youth organizations, such as Kel-Kel movement,<sup>155</sup> tried to mobilize Uzbek population despite the fact that the majority of them seemed to be pro-Akaev.<sup>156</sup> The figure of Anvar Artykov, an ethnic Uzbek, who joined oppositional forces, was mentioned as a sign of the ethnic

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<sup>154</sup> See Elina Karakulova, “The Role of Mass Media in Political Knowledge and Political Participation among Citizens of Kyrgyzstan,” Thesis, American University – Central Asia, 2005

<sup>155</sup> Kel-Kel is a youth movement, which was attributed similar role in the “Tulip revolution” as Otpor in Serbia, Enough in the Georgian Rose revolution, and Pora in Orange revolution in Ukraine

<sup>156</sup> Alisher Khamidov, “Kyrgyzstan’s Uzbeks: A Safe Vote for the Government,” *Eurasianet*, September 9, 2004

inclusiveness of the anti-Akaev movement and its solidarity with other groups.<sup>157</sup> But despite all the attempts, Uzbek minority remained largely uninvolved due to distrust towards opposition and due to similarity of oppositional political mobilization, expressed in seizures of lands and administrative buildings, with Osh riots in 1990 when hundreds of Kyrgyz and Uzbeks got killed in brutal mutual violence.<sup>158</sup> Although mobilization was not deliberately along ethnic lines, as it was during Osh unrest, the pattern, i.e. predominance of ethnically Kyrgyz and rural population in protests had discernible resemblance with clashing mobs in 1990 Osh and Uzgen. Memories of the Osh events made participation in the “revolution” unattractive for the Uzbek population in the south. During the days of mass protests throughout the country many Uzbeks preferred to stay in *mahallahs* (traditional community of neighbors) fearing that the outrage towards the government can easily turn against them.<sup>159</sup> In addition to that, the leading opposition figures have been associated with the “Kyrgyz nationalists”: “The reason why Uzbeks play no role in Kyrgyzstan’s opposition movement can be explained by the fact that the opposition movement is dominated by Kyrgyz nationalists,” said the journalist, who requested anonymity. “The rhetoric of these politicians frightens many Uzbeks.”<sup>160</sup>

It was obvious that oppositional forces were weak in mobilizing urban population and were much distrusted by both Uzbek and Russian communities. Consequently, the unfolding pattern of village mobilization allowed seeing the March events through the prism of not only regional North-South struggle, but the fight between rural Kyrgyz and Russified urban population and as ethnic “nationalist” Kyrgyz group against other ethnic groups. Thus, political mobilization during the revolution, influenced by pre-revolutionary ethnic interplay and

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<sup>157</sup> Artykov, a former member of the Parliament, was an important symbolic figure in the “revolution” – manifestation of ethnic diversity of the oppositional movement. He was a chair of the Peoples’ Council early after the “revolution.” His dismissal as a governor of Osh region later in the year was seen as attempt to exclude sizable ethnic minorities from decision making structures, see for example Jalil Saparov and Leila Saralaeva, “Kyrgyzstan: Trouble Down South,” *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, January 23, 2006

<sup>158</sup> See Bruce Pannier, “Kyrgyzstan: Deputies Condemn Elections, Urge Early Presidential Poll,” *Eurasianet*, March 10, 2005.

<sup>159</sup> Abdurasulov, 2006

<sup>160</sup> *Eurasianet*, 9 September 2004

characteristics of individual oppositional leaders, was one of the conspicuous factors affecting ethnic “groupness.”

### **Political instability and its implications**

The post-revolutionary weakness of the rule of law, scandalous series of assassinations of the parliament deputies, alleged penetration of the criminal elements into the high echelons of power,<sup>161</sup> re-distribution of property, unwillingness of the tandem to conduct constitutional reforms, ongoing rallies have been prolonging political instability, inciting migration<sup>162</sup> and atmosphere of unease. I will not concentrate on each of the mentioned aspects of instability precisely, but rather focus on several the most relevant to our study of ethnicity in the “revolution,” such as March 24 night lootings in Bishkek, land seizures, anti-Russian leaflets, discussion over the Russian language status, and clash between the members of Dungan and Kyrgyz communities in Iskra village, seventy kilometers away from Bishkek.

Absence of the rule of the law on the first night of the “revolution” allowed for massive looting in the capital on the night of March 24. As discussed in the previous chapter, the demographics of the post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan possesses legacies of the Soviet modernization policies, which translates into large presence of the ethnically Russian population in the cities.<sup>163</sup> Visible non-involvement of the Slavic population in the protests and reports on the oppositional buses bringing people from the southern regions, set a stereotype that looting night was

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<sup>161</sup> “Political Showdown Brews in Kyrgyzstan,” *Eurasia Insight*, January 1, 2006; “Kyrgyzstan’s Revolution at Risk,” *Eurasia Insight*, September 26, 2005; Pannier, Bruce. “Kyrgyzstan: Lawmaker Murdered in Apparent Mafia-Related Shooting.” *Eurasia Insight*, September 22, 2005

<sup>162</sup> In 2005 the out-migration to the Russian Federation increased two times compared to 2004, comprising 25,000 people. In February 2006, 55,000 individuals were on the waiting list to leave Kyrgyzstan – See Gulnura Toralieva. “Russkie Begut iz Kyrgyzstana,” [Russians are Fleeing Kyrgyzstan] *Gazeta.kg*, February 14, 2006; “Emigration from Kyrgyzstan is Surging,” *Eurasianet*, March 21, 2006

<sup>163</sup> This does not mean, of course, that cities like Bishkek are Russian-dominated

organized by “hungry tanned marginals, who came from the south to direct revolution”<sup>164</sup>. Although this information was refuted several times in the media, it seemed to spread the panic on Kyrgyz “revenge” over other, primarily, Slavic minorities, who were reported to suffer disproportional financial losses after looting night.<sup>165</sup> This perception of the rural Kyrgyz versus urban Russian was further exacerbated by anti-Russian leaflets<sup>166</sup> and illegal seizure of the land lots on the outskirts of Bishkek. Few leaflets that were not confiscated by the police produced panic and rumors on the possible forceful expulsion of the Russians. Ethnically loaded rumors have an enormous power on ethnic “groupness” reification, as demonstrated by appalling Osh events. In the times of political instability, inadequate reporting and lack of prompt reaction from the state officials, such rumors force people for en masse actions, such as preventive protectionist measures, violence or mass migration, as the latter was the case with the Slavic population.<sup>167</sup>

Elemental land seizure after the “revolution” was accompanied with nationalistic statements<sup>168</sup> spreading fear among all city dwellers and among non-titulars especially,<sup>169</sup> making them again mentally cope with their “non-titularness.” Although the land fever is blamed for growing poverty in the country, which affects large percentage of the population regardless of

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<sup>164</sup> Natalya Mikhailova, “*Pochemu Rossiyan Volnujut Kirguzskie Revolutsii?*” [Why Citizens of Russian are Concerned about Kyrgyz Revolutions?] *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, July 2, 2005

<sup>165</sup> This fact was mentioned in the ICG report and voiced by Vyachelav Hamisov, Chair of the International Institute for Strategic Studies under President of the Kyrgyz Republic (see Alexei Sukhov, “*Russkie v Kyrgyzstane: uezhat ili ostavatsya?*” [Russians in Kyrgyzstan: to Leave or to Stay?] *Navigator.kz*, June 10, 2005

<sup>166</sup> Some parts of the leaflet text were quoted by journalist Sukhov,: “Kyrgyzstan is only for Kyrgyz people. This is our land and we have to build life on our own. Why most of our people are deprived of goods of civilization, such as hot water and communications? This is primarily because “aliens” consume them... Kyrgyz people! Don’t buy property from the Russians! Very soon they will run away from here and you will be able to obtain their apartments almost for free, for the price of two bred loafs...” in *Navigator.kz*, June 10, 2005

<sup>167</sup> The number of applications for out-migration in the first quarter of 2005 was four times higher than over the same period in 2004, see Mikhailova, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, July 2, 2005

<sup>168</sup> Hamid Toursunov, “Kyrgyzstan: Land Fever,” *Eurasianet*, August 15, 2005; Leila Saralava, “Land Rights and Wrongs in Kyrgyzstan,” *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, November 12, 2005

<sup>169</sup> Ainagul Abdrakhmanova and Sultan Jumagulov, “Bishkek Residents are Alarmed at Land Seizures,” *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, April 12, 2005

nationality, illegal captures of land slots<sup>170</sup> did not remain ethnically neutral as some of the squatters made claims on the alleged “Kyrgyzzness,” “titularity,” “indigenouslyness” and thus, apparent legitimacy over land.<sup>171</sup> The latter was the second striking similarity with Osh events in 1990, when land dichotomy triggered large intercommunal violence.

Once sense of ethnic “groupness” is formed and the boundaries become rigid any instance of even minor disagreement can lead to open confrontation. The example of it could be teenagers’ scuffle in the northern village of Iskra in February 2006, which eventually erupted into mass mutual insults, physical attacks and destruction of property by the Kyrgyz and Dungan<sup>172</sup> communities. In this case “anxiety flows from a diffuse danger of exaggerated dimensions; it limits and modifies perceptions producing extreme reactions to modest threats.”<sup>173</sup> Indeed, in Iskra a fight between teenagers over a seat at the computer club, which could be hardly called a ‘modest threat’, provoked extreme reaction and violence in formerly peaceful community. Notably, mobilization occurred primarily on the basis of rumors.<sup>174</sup> In both occasions with heightened Slavic out-migration and violent confrontation between representatives of Kyrgyz and Dungan communities in Iskra, this is ethnically provocative rumors started from small precedents of handful flyers and an adolescents’ scuffle, which caused mass reactions. This

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<sup>170</sup> According to different estimations, the number of land captors varied at approximately 30,000- 50,000 people. IWPR reported on 80,000 who submitted applications for land. The agency also reported that land captors are very well organized and experts fear that if their demands are not satisfied there is a high probability of open confrontations. See Ainagul Abdrakhmanova and Sultan Jumagulov, “Bishkek Residents are Alarmed at Land Seizures,” *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, April 12, 2005

<sup>171</sup> Nur Omarov, a political analyst from Kyrgyzstan commented on a post-revolutionary spate of uncontrolled land seizure: “The wave of land seizures began with the collapse of the Soviet Union.... Ever since then, throughout 15 years of independence, as soon as a crisis of power starts in Kyrgyzstan, people exploit the situation for their own ends,” in Leila Saralava, “Land Rights and Wrongs in Kyrgyzstan,” *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, November 12, 2005

<sup>172</sup> The Dughans, Muslims of Chinese origin, is one of the country’s ethnic minorities comprising around 40,000 and living primarily in Chui valley, northern Kyrgyzstan. They escaped to Central Asia in 1870s after increased prosecution in China.

<sup>173</sup> Horowitz, 179

<sup>174</sup> Elvira Temir and Yuri Kuzminyh, “Zaiskrilo...,” *Vecherni Bishkek*, February 7, 2006

suggests, for anxiety to flow in forms of rumors rapidly among people, a certain sense or level of “groupness” has to be there.

The crowd attacked Dungan houses after local village administration refused to move out certain Dungan families from the village.<sup>175</sup> Protesters said the outrage “was accumulating throughout many years” and accused Dungs of “becoming impudent” and taking out all the irrigation water without leaving anything for other villagers.<sup>176</sup> Despite the fact that the initial fight was started by few hooligans and despite the fact that water irrigation is mismanaged because of few persons, their nationality was enough for those discontented to say that the whole community was “becoming impudent,” namely abusing hospitality of the Kyrgyz people on allegedly Kyrgyz land. The very language implies that Dungan community has not been treated as “native” or somehow possessing the same right to live on the land, despite the fact that Dungs have been living in Central Asia for nine or ten generations. Thus, if maybe in the less rigidified setting those dissatisfied would deal with individuals rather than with whole ethnic neighborhoods, in the times of political instability, social insecurity and omnipresent ethnic conflict discourse, the disaffection spilled over into anyone identified as Dungan.

The conflict in Iskra seemed to involve also the economic resentment on the part of the Kyrgyz population against Dungan minority that has rather successful agricultural labor specialization. Horowitz would probably disagree with this conclusion, as according to his research, ethnic division of labor tends to diminish conflicts and not to fan them. He also adds that “middleman minorities,”<sup>177</sup> i.e. those that are somehow better off, tend to be attacked on the political, rather than economic grounds. Of course, economic and political grounds are

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<sup>175</sup> “*Tolpu, napravlyajushujusya k mecheti, ostanovili zhitelnitsy Iskra.*” [Women of Iskra Village Stopped Mob Moving Towards Mosque]. *Akipress*, February 06, 2006

<sup>176</sup> “*Besporjadki v Sele Iskra vspyhnuli s novoi siloi,*” [Disturbances in Iskra Flared Up with New Intensity], *Akipress*, February 6, 2006; Orozobekova, Cholpon. “Government Intervenes After Kyrgyz Village Violence,” *IWPR*, February 10, 2006

<sup>177</sup> Donald Horowitz. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. (Berkeley, London : University of California Press, 2000)

distinguishable but not separate. Very often when there is an economic resentment political one either follows or accompanies it. In Iskra the initial drive for conflict seemed to be political as representatives of the Kyrgyz community did not want certain Dungan families in their neighborhood, making sometimes claims on illegitimate presence of Dungan people on the “Kyrgyz land.”<sup>178</sup> Economic resentment claims were used as justification for such a harsh position.<sup>179</sup>

After the “revolution” there have been attempts by both elites and lay people to fulfill what Horowitz called psycho-political search for “the real owners of the country.”<sup>180</sup> Among the attempts to restore justice in “symbolic politics” have been ongoing discussions on the status of the Russian language.<sup>181</sup> Horowitz called language as one of the “quintessential entitlement issue[s].”<sup>182</sup> Discussions of the Russian language status, and suggestions by prominent political figures to revoke its official status due to its impeding influence on the Kyrgyz language development,<sup>183</sup> was creating additional spin to growing instability and insecurity, forcing many Russians to realize again that they are treated like ethnic Russians and not like Kyrgyzstani people.

Because revolutionary and post-revolutionary events were framed as something that was carried out by the Kyrgyz and as reestablishment of “justice” to the Kyrgyz people it allowed for

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<sup>178</sup> Viktor Murzov, “Iskra: Mesyats Spustya,” [Iskra: One Month On], *Vecherny Bishkek*, March 7, 2006

<sup>179</sup> Eventually, women living in Iskra village prevented men of Kyrgyz and Dungan communities from fighting by forming a live chain and stopping mobs. Local authorities and police were reported to be helpless in settling the conflict. (See “*Tolpu, napravlyajushujusya k mecheti, ostanovili zhitelnitsy Iskra.*” [Women of Iskra Village Stopped Mob Moving Towards Mosque]. *Akipress*, February 06, 2006). As a result of disturbances in Iskra, women and children of more than three hundred families had to leave the village (See Topilskaya, Tamara. “*Zhenshiny I Deti Pokinuli Doma.*” [Women and Children Left Houses] *Vecherni Bishkek*, February 10, 2006). According to the national media reports, none of the pogrom initiators was brought to justice (See Murzov, Viktor. “Iskra: Mesyats Spustya.” [Iskra: One Month On]. *Vecherny Bishkek*, March 7, 2006

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> See “*Yazyk Moi – Vrag Tvoi?*” [My Language – Your Enemy?]. *Vecherni Bishkek*, May 12 2006; Cherikov, Sadyrbek. “*Jihad Vsem, Kto ne Znaet Kyrgyzskogo Yazyka!*” [Jihad against Those Who Does not Speak Kyrgyz]. *Eurasiamedia.ru*, July 7, 2005; Viktoria Panfilova. “*Russki Yazyk kak Instrument Politiki.*” [Russian Language as a Political Tool]. *Nazavisimaya Gazeta*, December 12, 2005

<sup>182</sup> Horowitz, 2000, 220

<sup>183</sup> Viktoria Panfilova, “*Russki Yazyk kak Instrument Politiki.*” [Russian Language as Political Tool], *Nazavisimaya Gazeta*, December 12, 2005

many to blame “non-indigenous” population for economic hardships (lack of irrigation water in Iskra case) and unsatisfactorily development of the linguistic identity (status of the Russian language as a drawback for the Kyrgyz language growth).

To come back to our central theoretical account, it is plausible to say that ethnic “groupness” formation has been under way during and after the “Tulip revolution,” whether created deliberately or unintentionally, and is partially a result of certain *events* rather than intrinsic cleavages. This section presented some of those *events*, such as looting after the “revolution,” spread of anti-Slavic leaflets, illegal land seizures, renewed debates on the Russian language status. Obviously, it is almost impossible to measure the level of ethnic “groupness” or identify clear causality links. However, it is possible to judge on presence of heightened importance of ethnic self-identification judging by the mass reactions of people, precedents and simple conversations. Thus, one of the indicators that ethnic “groupness” has been keen since the “revolution” was demonstrated in the interview with a Dungan woman whose family suffered from pogrom in Iskra Village and had to leave: “It’s a pity that this all happened. We never quarreled with our neighbors before. It was just a boys’ scuffle over a seat at the computer, why to make a tragedy out of it? *In other times* no one would pay attention to this quarrel. Kids are quarreling today and making peace tomorrow...”<sup>184</sup> A woman said that “in other times” no one would bother with kids’ quarrels, implying probably that during these times any action from representatives of other communities can set up the whole neighborhood on alert, which manifests high sense of ethnic “groupness.”

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<sup>184</sup> Temir Elvira and Yuri Kuzminyh. “Zaiskrilo...” [It’s Sparkling]. *Vecherni Bishkek*, February 7, 2006, emphasis added

## Conclusion

The purpose of this work was to investigate and analyze the role of ethnicity in the “Tulip revolution.” More precisely, the work attempted to understand why political confrontation during February- March 2005 events in Kyrgyzstan increased concerns of country’s multiethnicity and what are the possible consequences of it. Thus, I argued that the “Tulip revolution” got an ethnic spin not because the sudden change of government unleashed long-standing ethnic groups’ antagonisms and competition for better opportunities. Instead, I argued that ethnicity was summoned, mobilized through various deliberate and unintended activities and narratives, such as intra-ethnic elite rivalry, patterns of political mobilization by the opposition, media “discourse of danger,” and specific issues of political instability which involved ethnicity.

In order to substantiate my argument I used combined conceptual framework that brings together some elements of transitional theories in semi-authoritarian societies and constructivist approach to ethnicity. The vast range of literature has been focusing on ethnicity in semi-democracies or semi-autocracies, trying to explain structural causes of high potential for ethnic conflict in such settings. Among normative suggestions have been the lack of institutional basis for peaceful power transfer, presence of deep cleavages along which political competition occurs, elites playing an ethnic card in order to get plurality of supporters, unfinished nation-building project. Most of transitologists refer to ethnic communities as fixed and unitary actors, whether involved in conflict under psychological quest for “group worth” or driven by opportunistic competition. This work attempted to combine some parts of the mentioned theories, such as the role of elites, nation-building legacies, with a rather new approach to “ethnicity without groups.”<sup>185</sup> The latter perspective on ethnicity as something fluid, ever-changing and eventful enabled to identify some factors and *events*, which are not directly connected to ethnicity but

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<sup>185</sup> Brubaker, 2004

which contributed to reification of ethnic “groupness,” i.e. certain degree of unity and solidarity on the ethnic basis.

Notably, I am not completely dismissing theories of transition and their understanding of ethnicity and ethnic conflict in changing semi-democracies. I am using elements of it with additions from constructivist point of view. Therefore, the argument does not imply that ethnic conflicts and ethnic groups are totally constructed. What is being constructed is not ethnic identity per se, but certain elements of ethnic of it (for instance, inability to live together, perception of other ethnic communities as intrinsically belligerent) and certain amount of often conflictual solidarity. This account is case specific – the work dealt with the issues of ethnicity in semi-authoritarian societies undergoing through a rapid political change.

Some of the findings suggest that extant Soviet nationality policies and post-Soviet nation-building practices, which involved assimilationist tendencies and which hardly averted ethnic ranking, ethnic status relegation - laid the foundation for discernible differences among ethnic communities. The latter does not necessarily translate into divisions. However, such apparent ethnic differences, such as compact concentration of ethnic communities in urban or rural areas, labor niche occupation have been made into divisions as a result of specific events during and after the “Tulip revolution.” One of the most conspicuous activities was electoral mobilization during and after the parliamentary race, which often evolved around ethnic candidates, who mobilized their ethnic electorate. Another important element that intervenes at this point is predominant places of habitation of different communities. Thus, mobilization for protests by lost ethnic Kyrgyz candidates meant in most cases bringing, on the one hand, ethnic Kyrgyz population, and on the other hand, predominantly rural population to a city or town where local administrations are located. Such pattern of political mobilization can be easily perceived as incursion by outsiders, especially if a very small proportion of the urban dwellers is involved in it, which was the case during “Tulip revolution.”

Thus, rather than attributing growing concern over multiethnicity and increased instances of interethnic clash to “long-standing” ethnic cleavages and antagonisms, the work considered the ways ethnicity becomes at stake in politics, as well as the way some factors that contribute to reification of ethnic belongingness, making it salient and conflicting. Importantly, by identifying and analyzing the ways ethnicity becomes politicized, one can also identify the ways to intervene, prevent such forces from making ethnicity the primary feature of every-day politics. Consequently, such inhibiting of ethnicity form politicization may help to avoid intercommunal confrontations with dreadful repercussions, similar to the ones in Iskra village in February 2006.

Among the questions that remained either partially answered or unanswered is whether regionalism constitutes an objectively salient feature of the Kyrgyzstani politics and serves as a dividing line among population, or it has been perceived as a salient feature, publicized and carried on in the analyses of scholarly and journalistic writings. The reason why it is important, as it has been demonstrated by the current thesis, is because regional rivalry discourse has substantial influence on ethnicity in the country. Another concern that has been raised by the work and left for the future research, is collection of the actual data from the field that would help to identify other features and events, omitted in this work, which have been important for ethnicity to become salient in politics.

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