

One Year After The June 2010 Events in Kyrgyzstan

The Possible Implications For Regional Security

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Events and statements

The outbreak of violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010 was received and commented upon somewhat differently by various countries and parts of the international community. The majority refrained from using clear terms to define what happened during the three bloody nights following 10 June.

However, a statement was made by the OSCE HCNM¹ calling the tragic events ‘an attempt at ethnic cleansing’. If one attentively reads his previous reports it becomes clear that he had warned of the danger, based on his visits to Kyrgyzstan, in early May² and June 2010, when he was informed by minority representatives about rapidly deteriorating relations between Kyrgyzstan’s ‘titular’ nation and its national minorities. Furthermore, he recommended that a power-sharing agreement should be considered, which would oblige the government of Kyrgyzstan to include ethnic Uzbeks and representatives of other national minorities in all state institutions, including law enforcement agencies, judicial bodies and public administration at all levels. In addition, he found it imperative that the Kyrgyz provisional government should establish an authoritative institution that would be responsible for communication with the different minority groups. At the time of the violence and following it most of the ‘actors’ directly interested in the developments did not highlight the causes that triggered the brutal mass killings of hundreds of ethnic Uzbeks and, to a smaller extent, members of the Kyrgyz population, whether these clashes were expected, why they all took place during the reign of the ‘interim government’ of Kyrgyzstan and what the potential consequences of these events could be for the whole Central Asian region. Only very few officials, like the US envoy Robert Blake³ and the OSCE HCNM Knut Vollebaek,⁴ called for an independent international investigation into the clashes in Kyrgyzstan that had killed hundreds of Uzbeks and forced about 100,000 Uzbeks to flee from their homes, and escape mostly to Uzbekistan, where the Tashkent government accommodated them around Andijan in refugee camps with the help of international organizations (UNHCR, UNDP, ICRC, etc.) and separate countries. The EU also took a similar position.⁵ In this regard the quick and constructive reaction and suggestions by various international non-governmental human rights groups and organizations should be mentioned too.

The special envoys and representatives of the UN, EU and OSCE⁶ as well as delegates at the OSCE forums, in assessing the situation, expressed their support for the people of Kyrgyzstan at this difficult time and stressed that the preservation of national unity and the restoration of peace and security were of the utmost importance for stabilizing the situation in the country. They also spoke about a jointly developed action plan, containing specific steps and areas where the OSCE, UN and EU can support the authorities and the people of the Kyrgyz Republic in restoring public order, stopping the spread of conflict and achieving national reconciliation, as well as economic and social rehabilitation.

1 <http://www.osce.org/hcnm/documents/68539> — Statement by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities to the (special) Permanent Council on 14.06.2011.

2 <http://www.osce.org/hcnm/item/69221> — Statement by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities following his visit to Kyrgyzstan.

3 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-yn/content/article/2010/06/19/AR2010061902683.html> — US envoy Robert Blake.

4 <http://www.osce.org/hcnm/item/69447> — OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities urges OSCE States to assist Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, calls for independent commission to investigate.

5 <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=MOTION&reference=B7-2010-0423&language=EN> — Motion for a resolution on the situation in Kyrgyzstan.

6 <http://www.osce.org/cio/documents/68619> — Statement by the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, the Special Envoy Zhanybek Karibzhanov, the UN Special Representative Miroslav Jenca and the EU Special Representative Pierre Morel.

On 14 June Russia and China vetoed the UN Security Council resolution on the tragic events in southern Kyrgyzstan (the draft reportedly mentioned the ethnic component of the conflict) and thus the UNO could not formulate a clear position on the events and the further tasks in their context. The Russian foreign minister⁷ said that ‘the essence of the problem (settling the situation in Kyrgyzstan) is that the country’s authorities should stabilize the situation independently’. His statement came at a time when there was hardly any trust, on the part of the general population, in the provisional government.

On 18 June the Uzbek President stated that the events in South Kyrgyzstan were not caused by interethnic conflict, but by subversive activities organized externally. According to him, ‘neither Uzbeks, nor Kyrgyzs are guilty’ in the conflict in the south of Kyrgyzstan. ‘These are subversive activities, organized and managed externally’, emphasized Islam Karimov. ‘The forces that organized the subversion strived to involve Uzbekistan in this confrontation’. Under these circumstances he underlined the importance of vigilance, endurance and an ability to soberly evaluate the situation.⁸ The statement was accompanied by a very ‘guarded’ public reaction in Uzbekistan to the Osh events.

In an interview with Kommersant Daily on 22 June, Major-General Omurbek Suvanaliyev, a Kyrgyz officer who led police during the unrest, contradicted the above views by saying that no outside forces had been behind the violent clashes in the south of Kyrgyzstan. He stated that there had been ‘tension in the air’ for over a month before the clashes, and ‘both sides were prepared: they set up mobile units, appointed commanders, decided which objects to attack...why the interim government didn’t take any measures to prevent the situation is a mystery to everyone’, he said. According to other Kyrgyz representatives, the leader of the Uzbek minorities was involved in the power struggle between the ousted Bakiev and Otunbaeva, and he supported the latter. The Deputy Head of the Kyrgyz Security Forces explained, some days later, another theory: the strong intervention by Islamist extremists from Afghanistan in co-operation with ‘the (former President) Bakiyev’s clan’.

By 28 June the ethnic Uzbek refugees from Kyrgyzstan practically returned to their country of origin. The relatively quick return of refugees may be partially explained by the Uzbek government’s wish to avoid a situation where the activity of the international players in connection with the crisis could be unfolded in Uzbekistan. Tashkent probably wanted to indicate that these organizations should conduct their activities in Kyrgyzstan. The Uzbek side followed the same line regarding the OSCE role: while opposing the idea to deploy a monitoring mission in Uzbekistan, it supported the presence of the Police Advisory Group in Kyrgyzstan. Another reason could be the suspicion by the Uzbek authorities that supporters of some banned extremist organizations might have been among the refugees whose stay in Uzbekistan was and still is highly undesirable. The insistence of the Kyrgyz authorities also played an important role in the quick return of the refugees, because the government in Bishkek wanted the active participation of the Uzbek minority in the referendum on the new constitution, which took place in October 2010. The measures taken by the Uzbek Government to strongly facilitate the return of the refugees could be interpreted as a manifestation of the position that Kyrgyzstan is the homeland of these Uzbek people and they should obtain justice and live further in that country.

After the waves of violence calmed down some questions remained regarding whether a similar dramatic

7 <http://news.mail.ru/politics/4004890/> — Statement by the Russian Foreign Minister.

8 Statement by President Karimov.

situation could be repeated in Central Asia, what lessons had been learnt and the potential consequences of these events as well as how the international community could act in order to stop further ethnic violence.

Regional contexts for future consideration

An important factor contributing to these disturbances could be that the country was 'de facto' divided (into North and South), with deepening economic and social disparity in general, and particularly between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek population in the South, the weak governance, the lack of political discourse and the right to legal redress. All through the years of its independence Kyrgyzstan, with its multi-ethnic population, has not managed to create a reliable and firm legal and political system that would ensure the integration of national minorities.

In connection with the tragic events, the question arises how Kyrgyzstan ended up being a starting point for them. During the last 20 years or so Kyrgyzstan has been called the 'island of democracy in Central Asia'. The disorder in Kyrgyzstan might have been aimed at discrediting this perception and showing the world that democracy can lead to bloodshed and that it cannot be a substitute for strong and autocratic leaders.

Regarding the circumstances under which the crisis developed into a conflict, one should also recall that the Uzbeks constitute the largest nation in the region and there are Uzbek minorities in all Central Asian countries. The Uzbeks have a long history and deep roots in the region, where they enjoy a rather important position and role. In the Soviet Union, the interests of the regional republics were — in some ways — harmonized (or controlled) by Moscow, mainly through the use of force. We can also add to this that post-Soviet states in CA faced the historical challenge of formulating an independent foreign policy protecting the specific interests of the new nation states. Given the very complicated intra-regional relations in this historical period, conflicts, rivalry and jealousy have also increased between the CA countries. We can witness some of the above-mentioned disputes in recent years in connection with issues like the availability of energy, the use of water resources, environmental protection and the situation of ethnic minorities⁹. All Central Asian countries have some ethnic minorities in each other's territory, which was originally their homeland, and these minorities just happened to be in another country due to the border-drawing by the Soviet leadership.

According to available but non-official figures, in Kazakhstan out of the 17 million inhabitants 65% are Kazahs, 24% of the population are Russians, 2% are Ukrainians 2.4% are Uzbeks and approximately 1.5% are Tatars and Uygurs, while 1% are Germans. In Tajikistan out of the 8 million population 80% are Tajiks, 15% are Uzbeks and 1.1% are Russians and Kyrgyzes. In Turkmenistan out of the 6 million people inhabitants about 80% are Turkmen, 8% are Uzbeks and 4% are Russians. Kyrgyzstan's titular nation has 70%, with 14% Uzbeks, 9% Russians, 1.1% Ukrainians, Uygurs, Dungans and Tajiks. In Uzbekistan there are 28 million inhabitants, out of that 80% are Uzbeks, 6% are Russians, 5% are Tajiks, 3% are Kazahs and 2% are Karakalpaks.

These figures are not exact, but they reflect the main proportions. Out of the ethnic minorities the Uzbeks more or less live in groups in certain territories in Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The Tajiks live in a similar way in for example in Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. It indicates that the Uzbeks and Tajiks are the biggest and most cohesive ethnic minorities occupying certain territories within the host nation.

⁹ In the last few decades there were some riots fuelled by ethnic motivations. In 1969 in Tashkent, the Uzbek population attacked people of Slavik origin. In 1989 Uzbeks attacked and drove out about 20,000 Meskhetian Turks from Fergana Valley. In 1990 in Osh (Kyrgyzstan) a conflict took place between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyzs. In 1991 national riot took place in Namangan (Uzbekistan). There were also similar clashes and demonstrations in other Central Asian countries.

Unfortunately the existing mechanisms, the international and regional organizations, have not provided efficient means to prevent tensions from growing into conflicts (paradoxically, the Shanghai Cooperation organization held its summit meeting just one day before the clashes started in Osh). In connection with the Osh tragedy, these organizations failed to agree on conducting an objective investigation into the events and thus contributing to a better understanding and a correct perception of the future challenges. Similarly, official circles in the countries in the region behaved in a very cautious way. They avoided addressing the real issue and sometimes blamed partial reasons for the problems.

The conflicting statements, the standpoints expressed concerning the Osh events, and the delayed and inadequate actions probably damaged the positions of some international organizations in Central Asia.

In the initial days of the crisis a perception existed that both the Kyrgyzs and Uzbeks were involved in the crisis, thereby avoiding any clear acknowledgement of the fact that it was the Uzbek minority in Kyrgyzstan that were mainly the victims and that these events took place in Kyrgyzstan where the government in Bishkek was (and still is) the responsible authority. Yet the cited statements by the HCNM referred to above and the consensus resolution on the Police Assistance Programme of the OSCE to be launched in Kyrgyzstan offer some arguments to demonstrate the positive endeavours of this organization, particularly in early warning and conflict prevention. (It is disappointing that the practical start of the programme was not welcomed by many in Kyrgyzstan and was delayed. In this regard, it is not encouraging news that as a consequence of the failure to reach a just and fair settlement in many individual cases Uzbeks were leaving Kyrgyzstan mainly for Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation).

The Uzbek government continued to demand an even-handed (international) investigation. The investigations conducted by the Kyrgyz government and by the 'Kyrgyz Inquiry Commission' (KIC) headed by Mr. K. Kiljunen, a member and Vice-President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (however not officially supported in this respect) were concluded in 2011. This could hopefully bring the crisis to a point where the emotions, speculations, and mutual accusations can calm down and be pushed to the margins of regional politics, thus making room for improvements in intra-regional relations and co-operation. However, the main conclusion of these reports should get the agreement and support from all sides concerned. In the absence of this basic common understanding, further disputes and conflicts can be expected in the region.

Based on the above described positions adopted by parties directly interested and involved one could come to the conclusion that certain political circles have realized the seriousness of the problems of the national minorities and the potential danger emanating therefrom. However, they are not yet ready to seek a solution to these challenges, they rather want to keep them under control. However, there is a substantial difference between handling a problem and resolving or settling it.

The objective investigation into and the assessment of the Osh events is only one of the tasks to be fulfilled in order to improve the atmosphere as well as relations between the CA countries, particularly concerning the problem of ethnic minorities. As mentioned above, consistent steps should be taken to politically, legally and socially consolidate the situation of these minorities. The recommendations of the HCNM of the OSCE (as well as the KIC report) can offer a 'starting programme' for this. The improvement of relations, the mutual trust, and the cooperation in a broader sense between the Central Asian countries are further conditions for the constructive work in the field of ethnic minorities who— in an ideal case — should be connecting links rather than sources and means of creating conflicts between the respective states.

The 'Afghan connection'

In the context of the Osh crisis in both countries (Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) possible 'Afghan connections' were sometimes referred to. It is not the proper time and place to dwell on the Afghan crisis here: however, it is obvious that the countries of Central Asia, especially the neighbours of Afghanistan, are affected by the crisis prevailing in that country. The endeavours of the Central Asian countries to develop bilateral relations with Kabul are natural and logical. At the same time, the ongoing multilateral efforts (including those of the OSCE) are also essential for providing regional peace and stability.


The Uzbek initiative (under the name of '6+3')¹⁰ seeks to resolve the Afghan crisis on the basis of a stronger involvement by the regional (neighbouring) countries and all Afghan parties engaged in fighting for power, although the central government of Afghanistan is not mentioned among the '6+3', which is considered by many observers to be a weak aspect of this idea. However, its basic principle also reflects 'multilateralism': why NATO and the UN would play a key role, even according to this plan.

At present, the prospects of Central Asia in the context of security seem rather misty. The factors of division and contradiction have been growing during the past few years, while the intra-regional mechanisms seem inefficient to be able to deal with the conflicts. Under these circumstances the well-known and acknowledged conflict prevention activity of the OSCE and UN can be strengthened even though some CA countries are reluctant to accept a stronger role for the former. At present they may see a challenge to the practically unlimited political power of the incumbent leaderships and consequently to the internal (and external) stability of their countries. The growth of the influence of religious extremism indeed poses indeed a serious threat to these regimes. It is to be seen whether they can function successfully and efficiently for a longer time through a certain kind of guided, controlled, gradual and limited democratization coupled with modernization.

It is obvious that the peaceful and basically secular developments in the Central Asian countries can be continued (apart from the internal factors of instability) only if Afghanistan does not fall into the hands of extremist forces. This can be guaranteed, for the time being and to a great extent by the allied forces in Afghanistan. If they decided to leave Afghanistan now, the existing regional security set-up could collapse like a house of cards and the imminent consequences of this would damage, first of all, the interests of Central Asia, and probably the remaining part of Western Asia, even the Russian Federation.

That is why it seems to be more conducive to support the emergence of an internal power structure in Afghanistan that could create an 'Afghan' model of government, which would at the same time be peaceful and agreeable to its neighbours. In the meantime, the central Government in Kabul should be prepared to handle the situation when it is expected to face its rivals on both the military front and when bargaining at the negotiation table. In order to achieve this objective, the assistance of international organizations (including the OSCE) and the '6+3' initiative by Uzbekistan (probably with some modifications thereby making the Afghan government a more integral part of the efforts) could be equally useful. If the efforts to devise a political settlement fail, new conflicts and tensions coupled with the previously described challenges (ethnic, other regional confrontations) could engulf Central Asia and West Asia the outcome of which is unpredictable.

10 On 3 April 2000 at the NATO Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council summit held in Bucharest, President Karimov of Uzbekistan, speaking on the necessity to resume a negotiation process for achieving peace in Afghanistan, suggested transforming the contact group which operated until 2001 from '6+2' into '6+3' (under an UN mandate), bearing in mind the participation of Afghanistan's 6 neighbours (Iran, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, China and Tajikistan), the USA, the Russian Federation and NATO. However, the place and role of the Afghan government was not clarified.



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