SOCIAL ECONOMIC CHANGE AS A PRECONDITION OF ETHNIC CONFLICTS: THE CASES OF OSH CONFLICTS IN 1990 AND 2010

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This article demonstrates that ethnicity itself didn't play a significant role to cause conflicts in Osh in 1990 and 2010, but was rather a side effect or a catalyst produced inevitably by political struggle in the country.

The Osh conflict in 1990 occurred at the weakening of the USSR's institutional control and decreasing material support from the center. Kyrgyzstan being the major recipient of both indirect and direct subsidies from the USSR suffered a severe economic depression because subsidies were cut or substantially reduced. Moreover, the sudden disintegration of production and trade relations further exacerbated the economic situation in Kyrgyzstan. The economic decline caused a demographic imbalance, which has contributed to increased confrontation between Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks in Osh. These social tensions coincided with political mobilization under the slogans of ethnicity and contributed to the intensification of the conflict making it look similar to an ethnic conflict for an outside observer.

Similarly, the Osh conflict in 2010 happened in the declining economy which was not only the result of the global economic crisis and difficulties in relations with Russia. The political short-sightedness of the Bakiyev regime in resolving problems with the air base at Manas led to complication of relations with Russia, which subsequently led to economic decline in Kyrgyzstan. The economic difficulties soon translated into institutional instability. Massive public demonstrations "framed" as an ethnic conflict by political elites intensified the battle, adding to it an "ethnic" dimension.

Ключевые слова: Kyrgyzstan, Osh, conflict, ethnicity, Central Asia.

The goal of the article is to demonstrate that ethnicity itself did not play a significant role in Osh conflicts in 1990 and 2010, but was rather a side effect produced by a political struggle over the material dominance domestically. Both conflicts happened under negative conditions both at the domestic and international levels. Kyrgyzstan's inherent fragility - clan regionalism and chronic economic deficiency - was heavily impacted by unfavorable political and economic environment at the regional and international level. The Osh conflict of 1990 occurred at the weakening of USSR's central power, when materially unsatisfied regional clans and the ethnic Uzbeks challenged the last Soviet leader in the Kyrgyz SSR. Such institutional rebellion was preconditioned by weakening Kyrgyz economy: removal of indirect and direct subsidies from the USSR caused enormous damage to the regional economy. Declining Kyrgyz economy caused a severe demographic imbalance, making the Kyrgyz people in the rural area of Osh region move to Osh city where Uzbeks consisted half of the population. The change of demographic composition consequently provided a pretext for fostering conflict environment against the ethnic Uzbeks in the city and of course the Kyrgyz elites did not miss the opportunity to make use of the situation by politically mobilizing the unsatisfied crowds.

The Osh conflict in 2010 happened on the background of economic recession affected by the world economic crisis of 2008. However, the declining material pattern in Kyrgyzstan was created not solely by the world economic crisis but rather caused by the deteriorated relationship with Russia. The former president Bakiyev's political misjudgment in dealing with the US especially spoiled the relationship with Russia, which consequently resulted in material pattern change (decline) in Kyrgyzstan. The political and economic misfortune caused massive public demonstrations against rising prices. The opposition, who had a strong dissatisfaction with Bakiyev and his family's monopolistic control on the national assets and major government posts did not miss the chance and staged a coup, creating the Provisional government. However, the political regime change did not go smoothly. According to the Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission report, the Provisional government, which lacked supports from the southern region,² "sought support in the south with the Uzbek population"3. This political miscalculation severely worsened the problem, as it intensified the fight adding the "ethnical" aspect to it. The Kyrgyz and the Uzbek people, escalating the discord to claims of territorial separation, clashed into a massive bloody conflict producing 470 dead and 2500 injured in June, 20104.

The article argues that "ethnicity" itself did not necessarily play a significant role in both Osh conflicts. They should not be labeled as ethnic conflicts, since the ethnic

¹ According to B. Buzan, the material element of the state accords to the physical base of the states which "comprises its population and territory, including all of the natural resources and man-made wealth contained within its borders." In this paper, we refer to the definition of B. Buzan by the meaning of "material pattern".

² Roza Otunbaeva was from Osh but she lived most of her life outside of Osh or abroad.

³ Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission. Report of the independent international commission of inquiry into the events in southern Kyrgyzstan in June, 2010. URL: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_Report_490.pdf (accessed: 01.04.17)

⁴ Ibid.

disparity itself did not start the problem. The Osh conflicts in 1990 and 2010 and their violent development mainly originated from the declined material pattern and the consequent dismantlement of the institutional control divided by strong regionalism. The cause of the problem should not be focused on ethnicity, since it functioned only as a catalyst in the conflict.

Material change, ethnicity and outbreak of "ethnic" conflicts

Contrary to many media reports portraying conflicts in Central Asia as ethnic problems, recent literature insists that the existence of heterogeneous ethnicities "does not itself naturally pre-dispose to violence but is socially constituted"5. On the basis of empirical research most of conflicts originates from the fight over the material dominance and other seemingly represented phenomena. The ethnic antipathy is merely a "side effect or a byproduct of the conflict" [11]. In other words, ethnic disparity itself does not bring up the serious social instabilities, however, when it is mobilized by political powers combined with material issues, it works like a catalyst that deepens the conflict or appear as side effects flowed out from the core of the material problem [2, p. 22]. Recent literatures of M. Fumagalli and K. Borishpolets support this argument. M. Fumagalli in his article Framing Ethinic Minority Mobilisation in Central Asia: The Cases of Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan explains the causes of Osh conflict and the Tajik civil war, based on Framing theory [9]. "Frames" are defined and understood as "interpretive schemes that condense and simplify a person's experience by selectively highlighting and encoding certain situations, objects, events and experiences" [10, p. 11]. Framing theory of ethno-political mobilization basically suggests that ethnic antipathy does not emerge naturally, but is "framed" as an essential tool used by political elites to mobilize the broader community [9]. K. Borishpolets also notes that ethnicity can be politicized by ruling elites to mobilize the communities in the process of the competition for winning the access to materials or major government posts [1. p. 44-47].

It does not mean that ethnicity is irrelevant. According to a research by H. Brady and C. Kaplan, people in society instinctively divide themselves into in-group and out-group, depending on whether they are sharing common attributes, such as religion, racial characters and language. According to H. Brady and C. Kaplan, as social contacts take place more often in the in-group, positive reputations concentrate there, whereas negative reputations are given to the people from the out-group because of less social contacts with them. The way that power and resources are distributed in the society is motivated and justified by the aim to support the interests of the ingroup and to hinder the interests of the out-group [5, p. 34-35]. Such result show how commonly shared ethnic characteristics can affect political mechanisms in domestic environment. Nevertheless, the results should not be generalized, because it does not

⁵ Reeves M. The ethnicisation of violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan. URL: http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/madeleine-reeves/ethnicisation-of-violence-in-southern-kyrgyzstan-0 (accessed: 01.04.17)

explain political disputes among the same ethnic groups or cooperative coexistence in multi-ethnic states.

It is difficult to make a general formula or proposition on the conditions of state instability or conflict, however, my empirical research of Central Asia explains that most of the social instabilities and conflicts there do not fundamentally originate from the ethnic disparity itself but from the material deficiency and fights over its dominance and improper material distribution. In such context I indicate that the first condition for social stability at domestic level is the balanced domestic political powers with balanced distribution of material resources, which were absent in Kyrgyzstan with its defective institutional governance. I make an attempt to examine the cases of Osh conflicts in 1990 and 2010 to define how material pattern change affects the institutional imbalance and precipitate ideational incoherence – "ethnic" conflicts.

The case of Osh conflict in 1990

The constituting elements of a state – material, institutional and ideational elements – are inseparable. Inter-ethnic/clan dispute often conveys an impression that it is solely an ideational (nationalistic) issue. However, it is inextricably related to institutional (political representation) material distribution issues which often directly link to the explicit cause of massive ethnic conflicts. Such complex interrelations among these elements and severe imbalance among them are represented in the case of the Osh conflict of 1990.

The Osh conflict occurred at the declining USSR's central power by the end of the 1980's. The clan politics which briefly held their breadth at the beginning of Gorbachev's reform in the mid 1980's, raised their head again by the end of the 1980's. The First Secretary of Kyrgyz SSR at the time, A. Masaliev was an orthodox communist. He replaced the former first secretary T. Usubaliev in 1985 who lost his position for abusing "informal" way of politics. In this situation the successor had to be more of a faithful party-liner than a typical clan-based leader and A. Masaliev was the person. However, with the declining USSR power, such "strength" of A. Masaliev turned to be a weakness. A. Masaliev had no firm clan supporters who could join him against other clans and the impoverished the Uzbeks.

Weakening institutional control often creates preconditions for changing the pattern of material distribution. Kyrgyzstan, the major recipient of both indirect and direct subsidies from the USSR, could no longer rely on them [13, p. 153] since the start of the economic reform in the USSR. For example, Kyrgyzstan had been supported by indirect subsidies on product prices, however, such favor had to be removed with the start of the policy of price normalization. Kyrgyzstan had to go through a huge price shock on the imported raw materials, including energy resources. Radical market liberalization brought the collapse of the conventional way of trading for the Kyrgyz enterprises and resulted in a dramatic decline in tax revenues. In 1988 the proportion of interrepublican trade took up about 40% of the GDP of Kyrgyzstan, therefore, the

collapse of Soviet system meant for Kyrgyzstan a severe economic loss [Ibid]. Kyrgyzstan was also one of the major direct subsidy recipients, the republic's budget regularly received transfers from the all-Union state budget. In 1989 all of the transfers received from the donor republics generally represented over 28.6% of national income produced in Kyrgyzstan [8]. The abrupt material pattern change that occurred in the external environment directly impacted on people's lives in Kyrgyzstan. Soaring consumer prices and high unemployment rate moved the Kyrgyz people from the rural area in Osh area to the city of Osh searching for jobs⁶.

Traditionally and over the Soviet period, the Uzbeks constituted the majority in Osh. By the end of the 1980's, due to the economic downturn, the demographic proportion of the Kyrgyz had been constantly increasing and by 1989 nearly caught up with the number of the Uzbeks. At this juncture, the local Osh government could not provide sufficient housing and land for the new local inhabitants. The need for redistribution of scarce resources, which meant redistribution of vested economic interests of the Uzbeks in Osh city, not surprisingly, caused social unrest⁷. The tensions between them deteriorated further. Social discontent merged with intellectuals and political elites who were opposed to A. Masaliev.

The Kyrgyz "Ashar" movement in Bishkek and "Osh Aimagi" in Osh mainly consisted of ethnic Kyrgyz students and peasants in rural areas; they demanded the land allocation for individual housing for Kyrgyz in the late 1980's. However, these social movements began to demonstrate systemic characteristics when political elites and intellectuals joined the group [7, p. 141-143]. These political elites used the strategic "framing" of ethnicity to mobilize the movement. They began demanding the government to protect the Kyrgyz culture, language, education and ultimately to adopt a land law that would return the land from the Uzbeks to the Kyrgyz [7, 9]. To resist this movement ethnic Uzbeks organized an ethno–nationalistic group called "Adolat" and demanded to return Osh and Jelalabad to Uzbek SSR. The Uzbeks also opposed the Masaliev regime, outraged by the fact that the government "advocates" the ethnic Kyrgyz people. Among all the demands that the Kyrgyz required, the land issue caused an acute reaction from the Uzbek community and "it served as the spark that ignited violence in Osh". As a result, in June 1990, about 1500 Kyrgyz and 10,000 Uzbeks collided at a farm resulting in more than 300 people dead and 462 seriously injured [9].

There are various explanations for the reasons of the Osh conflict, but such a complex social phenomenon cannot be explained by a single reason: it is a complex issue, parts of which are closely interrelated. Nevertheless, this article argues that the «material problem» is the main cause of the conflict. A sharp change of material pattern leads

⁶ Kyrgyzstan is an agri-exports specialized republic. Due to the process of privatization of the lands in rural area, a lot of people lost their jobs and moved to the city.

⁷ Ошская резня 1990 года. Хронология трагедии//Фергана, Июнь 8, 2010. URL: http://www.fergananews.com/articles/6601 (accessed: 01.04.17).

⁸ Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission. Report of the independent international commission of inquiry into the events in southern Kyrgyzstan in June, 2010. URL: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_Report_490.pdf (accessed: 01.04.17).

to institutional instability and demographic changes that encourage conflicts among in-group and out-group people, and these conflicts can become more intense if they are mobilized by ethnic discontent used by political elites. The Osh conflict of 1990 followed this pattern: the conflict was due to the struggle for material resources and in this process «ethnic nationalism» was strategically used as a catalyst.

The case of Osh conflict in 2010

To understand the complex causality of the Osh conflict in 2010 I attempt to take four levels of analytical frames: international, regional, domestic political elites and civil society levels. The Osh conflict in 2010 was a result of unfavorable international economic environment, global economic crisis of 2008; political misjudgment by the former Bakiyev's regime on the Manas base at the regional level; political mistakes made by Provisional government in the process of suppressing the Bakiyev's supporters in the South; political mobilization intensified by ethnicity "framing" at the level of domestic political elites; high unemployment and poverty rate. All these factors led to social tension and as a result people easily joined antigovernment demonstrations at the civil society level. As previously noted material and institutional (often political) issues are hardly separable, however, the main problem originates from material issues, and it can conceal itself under the masks of factional fighting or ethnic conflict.

The global economic crisis of 2008 had a dual impact on Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan's regional economic dependence on Russia is still quite substantial, therefore, Russian economic problems caused by the world economic crisis had an impact on Kyrgyz economy. Russia's economic decline meant for Kyrgyzstan rising unemployment rate and consequently decreasing GDP, since about 33% of Kyrgyzstan GDP is formed by remittances from migrant workers in Russia. Kyrgyz economy also has been directly affected by the crisis of 2009, when Kyrgyz GDP grew only about 2.9% and the total GDP amounted to only 99.4% of the 1990 level. Further, industrial production in the first 9 months of 2009 has decreased by more than 11%9. Yet, the declining material pattern in Kyrgyzstan was caused not only by the world economic crisis but more significantly by worsening relations with Russia. The former president Bakiyev's political misjudgment in foreign policy in the process of dealing with the great powers especially deteriorated Kyrgyz-Russian relations, that consequently resulted in material pattern change (decline). All these political and economical problems eventually led to massive demonstration in April 2010. "The immediate trigger of the April demonstrations was rising utility prices"10. The rise of the utility prices in Kyrgyzstan began with Russia's decision in March 2010 that "it would greatly increase customs duties on

⁹ Население Кыргызстана в начале XXI в. / Под ред. Денисенко М.Б. Бишкек, 2011. URL: http://kyrgyzstan.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Population%20of%20KG%20at%20the%20beggining%20of%20XXI%20century_most%20 final%20version.pdf (accessed: 01.04.17).

¹⁰ Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission. Report of the independent international commission of inquiry into the events in southern Kyrgyzstan in June, 2010. URL: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_Report_490.pdf (accessed: 01.04.17).

gasoline and other petroleum products exported to members of the Commonwealth of Independent States that did not belong to a customs union (the customs union includes Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan)" [12]. The additional duties obstructed supplies to Kyrgyzstan causing the rise in prices in early April 2010.

A number of scholars on Central Asia note that Bakiyev regime's decision to extend the lease of Manas air base to the United States resulted in such unfavorable situation in Kyrgyzstan. The decision provoked a fierce reaction from Moscow, because it constantly was asking for its closure since 2005. In early 2009 Kyrgyzstan decided to close the US Manas air base, after Russia made a decision to provide Kyrgyzstan with 300 million dollars as financial support. However, as the United States made another suggestion to raise the rent of the base several times over, Kyrgyzstan annulled its previous decision¹¹. Moreover, M. Bakiyev visited China and proposed there a series of joint industrial projects, including Kambarata-2 hydro power plant. It encroached on Russian interests, because similar suggestions were made earlier to Russia [4]. At the regional level Bakiyev's administration failed to make a deal with the great powers and this political misjudgment resulted in jeopardizing their own political base. After all these political mistakes Bakiyev administration faced an enormous opposition movement. Being against Bakiyev and his family's monopolistic control of the national assets and major government posts, it staged a successful coup, forming a Provisional government headed by Otunbayeva, Tekebayev and Atambayev. It nevertheless lacked support from the South region populated by the Uzbeks¹².

Bakiyev's authoritarian control over domestic material redistribution and exclusion of other regional clans provoked deep dissatisfaction in the elites. Initially he was supported by Kyrgyz clans, but after rapid rise to power he narrowed his support base to his family members or close relatives. In 2009 Bakiyev's son Maksim was appointed the head of the Central Agency for Development, Investment and Innovation. He created his own financial and industrial empire by setting up fake companies, which won auctions over most of the privatized energy companies in the republic. To consolidate his clan supporters he visited the Osh/Jelalabad region and promised his clan to establish a branch of the Central Agency for Development, Investment and Innovation in the region and transfer Ministry of defense to Osh which would automatically lead to redistribution of financial flows in favor of the region [4]. Bakyiev unnecessarily invoked ethnic nationalism against the Uzbeks to consolidate his southern Kyrgyz clan group. He didn't need support from the Uzbek community because he had a strong political support from the Kyrgyz southern region. Not to lose the support from the southern Kyrgyz community, he kept distance from the Uzbek community [3, p. 301].

¹¹ Михайлов Г. В Киргизии делят российский кредит// Независимая газета, Август 25, 2009. URL: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2009-08-25/1_kirgizia.html (accessed: 01.04.17).

¹² Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission. Report of the independent international commission of inquiry into the events in southern Kyrgyzstan in June, 2010. URL: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_Report_490.pdf (accessed: 01.04.17)

The three-element structure of the conflict consisting of the Provisional government, Bakiyev supporters and the Uzbeks in the south turned into a two-element one as the Provisional government "sought support in the south with the Uzbek population" ¹³. Kadyrjan Batyrov, the leader of the Uzbek community, keeping close contacts with the Provisional government, began mobilizing the Uzbeks from Jelalabad and Osh provinces. According to the investigation of the KIC, Batyrov "gave a speech urging Uzbek participation in the political process. Whatever his intention, the speech contributed to the conflation of politics with ethnicity. The message was deliberately misinterpreted by some leaders of the Kyrgyz community as a call for autonomy and to mean that the Uzbeks should unite against them". The Provisional government mobilized its supporters as well, particularly the Ata-Meken and Ak-Shumkar parties, the former led by Tekebayev's brother Asylbek.

In the process of the coup and the counterattack from the Bakiyev's supporters, the difficulties in the Kyrgyzstan's economy increased. Investors worried about the Provisional government's nationalization of businesses and other assets in which Bakiyev's family took part and several investors annulled their new projects¹⁴. Neighboring states, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, closed their borders at the time of the coup, causing difficulties for cargo traffics¹⁵. The state's chronic economic crisis stimulated the unsatisfied community to join the demonstrations and the Osh conflict in 2010 developed into a massive bloody conflict which left a great number of casualties.

Deteriorating material conditions often lead to institutional destabilization. Using ethnicity frame can play a role of a conflict catalyst. The Osh conflict of 2010 followed precisely this pattern.

In this article we have proved that ethnicity did not play a significant role in causing the both conflicts in Osh in 1990 and 2010. It rather appeared as a catalyst inevitably produced in the process of struggle over the material dominance domestically. The Osh conflicts should not be labeled as ethnic conflicts, because the ethnic divergence itself did not start the problem. In contrast to the peaceful co-existence of various ethnicities during the Soviet era, with the collapse of Soviet Union and the abrupt GDP fall in the republic the relations between different ethnicities deteriorated. The causes of the Osh conflict in 1990 can be summarized as the consequent result of the radical change of material pattern (decline), affected by the economic reform of the central USSR and its effect on the demographic change in the Osh city causing the fight between the Uzbeks and the Kyrgyz over the scarce material assets (housing and land property), which was mobilized by the political elites pursuing their own goals in the situation. Similarly, the Osh conflict in 2010 happened in the declining economy which was not only affected by the global economic crisis but mainly resulted from the deteriorated relationship with Russia. The political miscalculation of the former Baki-

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Cullison A., Toktogulov K. U.S. Ties to Ex-Kyrgyz Regime Are Questioned // The Wall Street Journal, June 15, 2010. URL: http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704324304575306580442236878 (accessed: 01.04.17).

¹⁵ Temirov U. Bishkek Suffering from De-Facto Trade Embargo Following Upheaval // Eurasianet, May 3, 2010. URL: http://www.eurasianet.org/node/60965 (accessed: 01.04.17).

yev regime in the process of dealing with the Manas air base problem complicated the relationship with Russia, which consequently resulted in material pattern change (decline) in Kyrgyzstan. Such material pattern change at the global and the regional level soon produced domestic economic difficulties and resulted in massive public demonstrations. The public demonstration was "framed" in ethnicity terms by political elites. Such social conflicts are complex in nature. Nevertheless, this article proved that it is the "material problem" which lies at the very core of the discord.

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ИЗМЕНЕНИЕ СОЦИАЛЬНО-ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКИХ УСЛОВИЙ КАК ПРЕДПОСЫЛКА ЭТНИЧЕСКИХ КОНФЛИКТОВ: НА ПРИМЕРЕ КОНФЛИКТОВ В ОШЕ В 1990 И 2010 ГОДАХ

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Автор статьи доказывает, что сама по себе этническая проблема не была причиной конфликтов в Оше в 1990 и 2010 гг., а была, скорее, побочным эффектом или триггером конфликта, неизбежно порождённым в процессе борьбы за контроль над ресурсами внутри государства.

Конфликт в Оше в 1990 г. произошёл в результате ухудшения материального положения на фоне ослабления институционального контроля со стороны СССР. Кыргызстан, один из крупнейших получателей прямых и косвенных субсидий от СССР, неизбежно впал в экономическую депрессию, когда субсидирование было приостановлено или значительно уменьшено. Более того, внезапное разрушение производственных и торговых связей ещё больше усугубило экономическое положение Киргизии. Экономический упадок вызвал демографический дисбаланс, который способствовал нарастанию противостояния киргизов с этническими узбеками в Оше. Эта социальная напряжённость, совпавшая по времени с политической мобилизацией под лозунгами этнической принадлежности, усугубила конфликт и сделала его похожим на этнический для постороннего наблюдателя.

По похожему сценарию события развивались в Оше и в 2010 г., когда экономика Кыргызстана пострадала не только от глобального экономического кризиса, но и от сложностей в отношениях с Россией. Политическая недальновидность режима Бакиева в разрешении проблемы с авиабазой в Манасе привела к осложнению взаимоотношений с Россией, что впоследствии привело к экономическому спаду в Кыргызстане. Экономические сложности вскоре дали о себе знать в виде политической нестабильности. Массовые демонстрации, вызванные к жизни политическими элитами, с политической мобилизацией под этническими лозунгами усилили противостояние.

Key words: Кыргызстан, Ош, конфликт, этнический конфликт, Центральная Азия.

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