



CENTRAL ASIA
PROGRAM



**THE CONFLICT IN SOUTH
KYRGYZSTAN TEN YEARS ON:
PERSPECTIVES,
CONSEQUENCES, ACTIONS**



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The Conflict in South Kyrgyzstan Ten Years on: Perspectives, Consequences, Actions

Translated and edited by Aksana Ismailbekova and Philipp Lottholz

Introduction

In June of this year, the conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan, which came to be known as ‘Osh’ or ‘June events’ is marking its tenth anniversary. From the direct aftermath of this conflict to this day, these events and the violence, death and destruction of property they have wrought, but also questions about accountability for their emergence have been subject to controversial discussions. Questions about the necessary and appropriate measures to end the conflict and prevent its re-emergence and, in a more long-term perspective, on how to achieve reconciliation of affected communities and build sustainable peace have been debated widely both in Kyrgyzstan and in international expert, academic and activist circles.

Against this background, the present discussion forum is devoted to reflection on the conflict itself, its consequences, and its reception and debates on it in Kyrgyzstan and in the international arena. The main goal of our discussion is to preserve the memory of these events and to raise awareness of their ongoing consequences. The contributions written by a group of four Kyrgyz and two foreign scholars offer both personal accounts and systematic analyses of the enormous changes that have occurred as a result of the conflict. Through these perspectives, this article series aims to advance the debate in Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia and among a wider international audience. We seek to generate new angles and approaches to understanding problems and tensions that still persist in the affected communities. But besides these aspects, this publication is also aimed at developing new ideas and approaches to overcome tensions in the public sphere in Kyrgyzstan and in its relations with international partners.

The key words of this discussion forum – perspectives, consequences, actions – touch upon all these important aspects. The perhaps most important one among them is the opening up of different “perspectives” on the conflict itself, its consequences and the path towards a peaceful future. The article series thus begins with two articles discussing the conflict itself and factors of its emergence. The introductory text by Professor Abylabek Asankanova demonstrates how the revolution in April 2010 and the actions of the clan of the toppled president Kurmanbek Bakiev, who tried to regain lost power, played a key role in destabilizing the country and facilitating the emergence of the Osh conflict, alongside growing political and everyday disagreements between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan. The subsequent article by Shavkat Atakhanov adds further detail to this perspective by analyzing Kyrgyzstani media discourses that incited hostility and a division into “us” and “them” along different lines, including ethnic ones, in the lead-up to the Osh events. Atakhanov further indicated the changes that occurred in the media landscape after the 2010 conflict. This leads to the second aspect of our discussion, i.e. the “consequences” that

the Osh events had for life in and beyond affected communities. For example, the large-scale redistribution and re-shaping of the spaces that people used for various purposes, ranging from business to leisure, is outlined in Aksana Ismailbekova's article about "securityscapes" of Uzbeks in Osh, which she conceives of as new spaces where people can feel protected from the problems and attacks they are otherwise exposed to in everyday life. Nick Megoran's piece about changes in the educational sector pay draws further attention to this aspect (see below).

The third key word "actions" denotes the various measures aimed at preventing further conflict and building a sustainable peace, from laws and policies to everyday security practices and other ones. In this regard, Arzu Sheranova's article provides an overview of the many efforts undertaken by international organizations and the government of Kyrgyzstan while also pointing to the limitations of international cooperation on peacebuilding and security. She discusses the difficulties and barriers faced by attempts to transform conflicts and argues that to achieve more sustainable peace a more concrete understanding of a multicultural and multi-ethnic nation, as captured in the term "Kyrgyz Jarany", needs to be built up and strengthened. Furthermore, Nick Megoran's article focuses on the importance of protecting and supporting various minorities in Kyrgyzstan and the Central Asian region, namely, by ensuring their rights to education in their own language. His comparison of the "Ferghana Valley question" with the "Schleswig-Holstein question" concerning a province on the German-Danish border offers useful lessons for both policy-making and everyday practice. The concluding article by Philipp Lottholz turns the attention back to the issue of "perspectives", as it provides a critical reflection on the limited possibilities of scientists, but also the public at large, to write or talk about the "Osh events" and draw the clear and realistic conclusions that are needed for a sustainable way forward.

Overall, the most important goal of this discussion is to think about the future and find common strategies to facilitate interaction and peaceful coexistence of all residents of communities in and around Osh, without exception of any particular groups and going moving questions of ethnic belonging. In order to chart this way forward, it is vital to pay close attention to what people in the communities are doing once peace is established, because they are the ones who know best how to preserve and protect their families, communities and the country. Local voices have often been ignored in interventions from outside the communities, so it is very important not to give attention to local experiences, practices and voices that have the closest perspective and understanding of peacebuilding and should thus inform discussions on various higher levels. With this discussion forum, we aim to add another step towards realizing such an approach that is based on the voices, opinions and perspectives of people affected by the conflict. We hope that the research into the Osh events will continue in new directions, adding new perspectives and thereby contributing to sustainable solutions to still existing problems.

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The April Events and Inter-Ethnic Conflict in June 2010: Why Did Ethnic Groups with Common Genetic Roots Raise Their Weapons Against Each Other?

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In June 2010, a tragic interethnic conflict unfolded between members of two ethnic groups of Kyrgyzstan – Kyrgyz and Uzbeks – in the cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad, as well as in the multi-ethnic districts of Kara-Suu, Suzak and Bazar-Korgon in Osh and Jalal-Abad regions. As a result of the armed clashes, about 500 people died (Erkin Too 2016). Among them were many women and children who were completely innocent citizens of Kyrgyzstan. A significant number of houses, public buildings and businesses were destroyed and burned, and immense overall material damage inflicted on the country. Every time you recall these tragic days of June 2010, you involuntarily ask yourself why some representatives of two brotherly peoples with common genetic Turkic roots, who have been living side by side for centuries, who have joined forces in collectively labouring towards achieving great success, who have built joint families, suddenly stood up to raise weapons against each other.

How much grief has this interethnic conflict brought to the two peoples and the state. How much irreparable damage has it done to the relations of the fraternal peoples. How many families were left without fathers and mothers, without sons and daughters, and how many of our citizens are today outside the country, away from their home and hearth, avoiding the retaliation of the people and judicial punishment.

There were many reasons for the interethnic conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010. According to Kimmo Kiljunen, the head of the International Commission of Inquiry into these events, there are different aspects of the crisis that had led up to them, such as political, interethnic, historical, cultural, and other ones. It is impossible to say that there was only one reason. Indeed, the factors leading to the June tragic events of 2010 had been accumulated over the years and included socio-economic, cultural, interethnic and other problems that the leadership of the Kyrgyz Republic did not focus on enough to solve on time. These unresolved issues surfaced again during the crisis period which manifested after the historical event of 7 April, 2010. At the same time, the 2010 June events have primarily political, but also socio-economic and related reasons which arose after the historical events in April 2010, which led to the conflict in various districts of Osh and Jalal-Abad regions and foremost in the city Osh.

The Role of the Bakiev Clan and of The April Revolution

Among the key factors that caused the tragic events in June 2010 are developments that arose from the political events of 6th to 7th of April of the same year in the country. Having lost their access to power, the ousted Bakiev clan and its supporters decided on a deadly battle to regain it. After all, the powers they had lost had been a source of easy profits, self-enrichment without particular

difficulties at the expense of state resources, and also helped them resolve personal issues and family problems rather than those of the people and the state. Being deprived of power for them was tantamount to the loss of these easily accessible goods, and of political control and material resources. The low standard of living of the population and the corruption of the family clan of president Kurmanbek Bakiev became one of the reasons for all progressive forces of Kyrgyzstan uniting in a struggle against him.

The economic policy of this clan was conducted primarily for the enrichment of its members and wider network at the expense of the people and the state through corruption, raiding and seizing of other people's property, illegal privatization of state-owned enterprises, low-cost implementation of publicly funded strategic and highly profitable projects in the heavy and mining industry as well as hydroelectric energy sector. Defying the law and moral standards, the family clan began illegally appropriating the country's profitable enterprises - companies in the mining industry, in the telecommunications, transport, hydropower, oil refinery, and alcoholic and beverage industries, which account for a significant share of state budget revenues. And this despite the fact that, according to the Constitution, all of these sectors are the prerogative of the executive of the country, that is, of the Government.

The point above is illustrated by the publication of a draft Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic Bakiev "On the Creation of a Sustainable Corporate Governance System in the Kyrgyz Republic" early June 2005, which was aimed at distributing power between the future president and prime minister of the country (Newspaper "Litsa" 2005). The newspaper "*Litsa*", referring to the news agency "*Beliy Parakhod*", provided the full text of the draft Decree (ibid.). It states that the heads of many leading enterprises of the country should be presented and appointed by the president, even though it is well established that the industrial block has always been under the authority of the government (ibid.). Bakiev further decided to increase the list of industrial enterprises to be controlled by the president directly from 15 to 35 (ibid.). Among them were such large conglomerates with immense balance sheets such as "Kyrgyztelecom", the "National Electric Network", "Karabaltinskii Mining Plant", "Kyrgyzaltyn", "Kyrgyzneftegaz", "Uchkun", "Manas Airport" and others (ibid.).

In a multi-ethnic country like Kyrgyzstan, interethnic conflicts were a kind of "tool" in the hands of the Bakiev clan and their supporters in their struggle for power and revenge on the new government. The family of the ousted president and their supporters first made attempts in April and May 2010 to foment interethnic conflicts in a multi-ethnic Chui province in the north of the country. Around the city of Bishkek, massive seizures of land took place despite the efforts of the city authorities and expressions of public discontent. On 19 April 2010, in the village of Maevka in the Alamudun district, unruly young men, mainly Kyrgyz, illegally seized land belonging to local, ethnic Turkic and Russians residents. The slogan of the aggressors was nationalist and provocative in nature: "Kyrgyz are without land in their own homeland." As a result of this unrest of interethnic character, five people died and about 30 were injured with differing severity. Despite the enormous difficulties, with great efforts, the Interim Government of the Kyrgyz Republic,

together with the public of the country, managed to stop the bloodshed in the Chui valley and in the suburbs of Bishkek.

On the same day of the 19th of April, Kurmanbek Bakiev's supporters seized the building of the Jalal-Abad Provincial Administration without particular difficulties. The same attempts to aggravate the situation were observed in the villages of Aleksandrovka, Novo-Pokrovka and in the city of Tokmak. I agree with the opinion expressed in the Comments of the Government of Kyrgyzstan on the report of the International Independent Commission that the coinciding of the capture of the Jalal-Abad Provincial Administration by Bakiev's supporters and the riots with human casualties in the Chui region was not accidental (President of the Kyrgyz Republic 2011: 7). Interethnic conflicts, in turn, were intended to generate discontent among the population and to weaken the spirit and strength of the Interim Government, which, was supposed to ultimately leave the political arena of the country. However, in April 2010, the revanchists were not able to foment a large-scale conflict in the Chui region and in Bishkek.

Further, on 19 May 2010, a conversation between Maxim and Zhanysh Bakiyev (Bakiev's son and brother) was published, in which they addressed the issue of recruiting 500 militants to organize a coup in the capital, or to at least expose the weakness of the Interim Government and its inability to rule the state and the people, to show the illegitimacy of this power, which was by "armed and illegal" means according to them. This telephone conversation, intercepted by the security service, indirectly indicates that the Bakiev clan had a certain relation to the organization of provocations of interethnic conflicts both in the Chui Valley in May 2010, and in some areas of Osh and Jalal-Abad Regions and in the city of Osh in May and June 2010. So, the main direct cause of the tragedy of June 2010 was the struggle for power between the Bakiev family clan, its supporters and the Interim Government of the Kyrgyz Republic. Interethnic conflict was an instrument in the hands of the ousted president and his supporters to try to regain power or get revenge. In a word, if it had not been for the revolution in Kyrgyzstan on 7 April 2010, the June tragedy might not have happened.

The socio-political situation after the April events was very difficult in the republic as a whole and especially in the south of Kyrgyzstan. According to the members of a commission of Members of Parliament, the Interim Government, having come to power in the wake of the April Revolution, "failed to develop mechanisms to seize actual control in the city of Osh and Osh and Jalal-Abad provinces. The heads of the provincial and city administrations as well as law enforcement agencies appointed by the government did not have the appropriate professional training and managerial experience" (Jogorku Kenesh 2011: 197). The ex-Ombudsman of the Kyrgyz Republic T. Akun stated that the situation in the south of the country began to become tense after the April events. It was fuelled by some political figures interested in destabilization, and the Interim Government was unable to respond to this in time. One of the reasons for interethnic conflicts was the inability of the government to protect its citizens regardless of their nationality (Murzakulova and Zhorokulov 2014: 131).

A Temporary Commission of Deputies of the Jogorku Kenesh, the Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic was tasked with investigating the reasons for the ineffectiveness of the actions

of the Interim Government, local government bodies, law enforcement agencies, special services and other authorities who had tried to resolve conflicts and reduce the conflict potential in the places where the clashes occurred. The Commission concluded that instead of research and analysis of the evolving socio-political situation, only a formal monitoring and identification of immediately obvious problems had been carried out. Further, the actions of the Interim Government to prevent interethnic conflicts, especially on the eve of the June tragedy, did not correspond to the essence of the problem and had therefore not yielded the desired results (Jogorku Kenesh 2011: 182). This resonates with the findings of David D. Laitin from the University of Oxford. In his book *Nation, States and Violence* which investigates the many interethnic conflicts and wars that have occurred in different countries of the world, Laitin argues that interethnic conflicts occur where the state and its administrative structures are weak and cannot ensure the safety of the population, and where laws do not work (Laitin 2007: 21).

The working group of the State Committee for National Security (*GKNB*), the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Prosecutor-General with the participation of specialists from the Presidential Administration and Secretariat of the Defence Council of the Kyrgyz Republic, also concluded that the Interim Government did not have sufficient political and force resources to counter large-scale provocations in the form of ethnic clashes (President of the Kyrgyz Republic 2012: 37). Tekebaev and Ukushov add that the Interim Government was lacking sufficient political, financial and power resources to counter an unrest of this scale (Tekebaev Ukushov 2016: 388). Researchers at the International Federation for Human Rights noted that provocateurs were able to achieve their goals due to the weakness of the state and widespread impunity (FIDH 2010: 23). In a sense, the idea penned by Kyrgyz intellectual Zhusup Balasagyn a thousand years ago in his book *Graceful Knowledge*, that only strong power can rule out chaos and contention, turned out to be absolutely correct (Balasagyn 1993: 180).

Emergence of Conflicts in the South of the Country

The first clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks were provoked by destructive criminal elements among the Kyrgyz ethnic group in the city of Osh. In particular, on 30 April 2010, at about 1 pm, on the unloading area of the Osh-2 railway station, there was a clash between criminals of Osh and the Osh province, consisting mainly of members of the Kyrgyz community, and Uzbek entrepreneurs B.I. Kadyrakhunov and Zh. Bohodirov, who were running a business importing cars from abroad and selling them in local markets. At the station, the latter refused to pay a “levy” to the criminal group who charged them money for each car brought in from South Korea. According to the “Kylym Shamy” Center for the Protection of Human Rights, they demanded up to 500 USD for each vehicle (2012: 3). After a verbal skirmish, a fight broke out between a destructive criminal group and the Uzbek businessmen. About fifteen of its Kyrgyz members came to ‘help’ the group. However, due to the intervention of a member of the militarized guard of the railway station, the confrontation did not develop into a major fight. There were no seriously injured, but the Uzbek businessmen and their supporters remained resentful of the criminal gang, which consisted mainly

of Kyrgyz young men. Before leaving, the criminals threatened revenge on the entrepreneurs in the near future.¹

As my field studies have shown, entrepreneurs from the Uzbek community who have been importing cars from South Korea to sell them in local markets have for long and traditionally paid “taxes” to representatives of the criminal group. However, after the historic events of April 2010, the entrepreneurs from believed in establishing justice and that the Interim Government would uphold law and order, and thus refused to pay “taxes”. The criminals perceived this as a “slap in the face” from the Uzbek entrepreneurs, which in turn served as a “trigger” for mobilizing youth of both sides – of the Kyrgyz and Uzbek – against each other. The criminal group was able to antagonize a part of the Kyrgyz population, especially young people, against representatives of the Uzbek community. This mobilization was undoubtedly facilitated by the part of the Kyrgyz population which was opposed to the Interim Government.

These “face-offs” between individual Kyrgyz from criminal groups and Uzbek businessmen and a rally organized in reaction to them to gather some Uzbek youth in the fight against the criminal group gave a start to a wider mobilization of ethnic Uzbeks as a reaction to their experiences in Kyrgyzstani society. This initial rally became the starting point for a series of rallies among ethnic Uzbeks held in May and early June. These in turn served as a powerful impetus for the formation of “Civic youth groups” [Ru. *molodezhnye grazhdanskie otriady*], “Support groups” [*gruppy podderzhki*] for occasions of “meetings” with Kyrgyz youth or with law enforcement agencies. As noted by numerous interviewers and Uzbek youth who spoke with me during my work for the National Commission in the south of Kyrgyzstan, as well as in subsequent years, in this situation, they completely lost hope that law enforcement agencies would provide any “help” and instead relied only on themselves².

The publications and material of the time of the “Osh events” and their aftermath require a separate analysis, which is presented in the subsequent article by Shavkat Atakhanov. As he shows, the Uzbek-language channels “Osh-TV” and “Mezon-TV” played a particularly important role as they systematically, and almost every day, broadcast the speeches of leaders of the Uzbek community during May and June 2010. These included calls to fight against the continuing influence of Kurmanbek Bakiev and his supporters, to actively participate in the socio-political life of the country, to demand that the Uzbek language be granted official status in districts with a large Uzbek population and to request Uzbeks’ better representation in power structures, and especially in law enforcement. These broadcast programmes without comment, analysis and evaluation played an exceptional role in mobilizing members of the Uzbek community, especially young people. At the same time, the Kyrgyz population, in particular in the south, saw these speeches as an “attack on the rights of the Kyrgyz nation” and as “a reach for autonomy and division” (Abashin 2011).

In addition, articles and interviews of some Kyrgyz well-known personalities were published in selected Kyrgyz-language newspapers, which contained ideas of an offensive nature

¹ Author’s field notes, Osh, August 2010.

² Ibid.

and tone in relation to other ethnic groups living in Kyrgyzstan, including the Uzbek community. These publications of Kyrgyz-language newspapers generated resentment and frustration from the Uzbek community.³

At the end of 2010, a round table was held at the Bishkek Press Club on the topic “2010: What Lessons Should Journalists Covering Political Conflicts Learn?”. Here, the results of a study conducted by the Agency of Social Technologies based on materials from Kyrgyz, Uzbek-, and Russian-language were presented mass media. Participants of this forum noted that “Kyrgyz media were partly to blame” for the June tragedy, as they had systematically published theses on ethnic “incompatibility”, “intolerance” and “constant hostility” that dividing the country's ethnic communities into “us” and “them” as well as “ours [Ru. *svoi*]” and “strangers [*chuzhye*]”, according to Maria Yanovskaya (Yanovskaya 2010). I agree with the conclusions of the round table that some June media publications and journalistic texts resembled leaflets and propaganda proclamations.

The Start of the Conflict Itself

The organizers and provocateurs of the clashes finally achieved the long-awaited goal of organizing a conflict near the Hotel “Alai” on 10th of June. This event gave the impetus to the rapid development of the conflict, which grew into a major interethnic confrontation. The armed conflict emerged around a grocery store near the Hotel “Alay” along Kurmanzhan-Datka Street. On 10 June 2010, between 10 and 11 pm, several Kyrgyz young men of athletic stature went into the store and purchased some products. A seller of Uzbek nationality, having calculated the total amount of the purchased goods, asked for payment. However, instead of paying money for the purchased goods, one of the visitors hit the seller, and they then left the store and left in the direction of the Hotel “Alay”. Having learned about this incident by mobile phones, young people from the Uzbek community gathered quickly and also headed towards the Hotel “Alay” to search for the young Kyrgyz perpetrators.

Based on results of a survey by the National Commission among the population of Osh, there is information about the fact that in the slot machine hall “24 hours”, located on Kurmanzhan-Datka Street, an Uzbek visitor who lost a large sum of money, initiated a fight with Kyrgyz youth. A crowd of people of Uzbek nationality gathered near the Hotel “Alai”. Soon, rumours of clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks near the Hotel and calls for help spread widely among the Uzbek population in Osh. Uzbeks who took part in the conflict began to call their friends and acquaintances via mobile phones, but also through knocking signals on heating, water and gas pipes in their homes, as well as many other channels. After about half an hour, a large group of Uzbeks, which eyewitnesses estimated to number between 300 and 500 people, approached the intersection. The crowd gathered on Kurmanzhan-Datka street, north of the intersection with the Navoi street. People were excited and shouted different things, but did not undertake any aggressive actions (Memorial et al. 2012: 28).

³ Materials of the National Commission, author's field notes.

The crowd, which was armed with sticks, iron rods, and stones, grew rapidly to about 2-3,000 people by midnight. Some eyewitnesses who gave interviews to the authors of this study believe that their number even reached 4-5,000. It consisted mainly of youth from the surrounding areas, in particular residents of the “Sheyit Dobo” neighbourhood, who anxiously demanded to punish those responsible for the fight in the store and to return the money to the owner. At the same time, protesters demanded to punish the leaders of Kyrgyz criminal groups which were raising “taxes” from Uzbek entrepreneurs, but also representatives of city and province-level law enforcement agencies who unreasonably stop and fine Uzbek drivers. Nobody listened to anyone, a lot of shouting occurred and people behaved very aggressively, while there was no single leader or any demands being voiced in a systemic way.

All province- and city-level state authorities and law enforcement agencies, including employees of the internal affairs administration, of Internal Troops, the Ministry of Defence, the *GKNB* (State Service for National Security) and many others were alarmed and began to gather near the Hotel “Alai”. They took operational measures to put the military units on alert and introduce an enhanced rule of law and order in the city, as well as protect the border. The Special rapid response detachment (*SOBR*), whose staff had been trained as part of an OSCE project, and a battalion of the Patrol and Guard Service of Provincial Internal Affairs Administration (*UVD*), were sent to the location of the events. With the situation becoming more complicated, further reserve units were deployed. Military personnel of the internal troops and Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) of the Ministry of Defence of the Kyrgyz Republic were also sent to the Hotel “Alai”. These forces were gathered near the philharmonic building.

Province- and city-level authorities tried to initiate negotiations with an aggressively-minded part of the crowd which, however, did not agree to meet. Communication with the crowd lasted about two to three hours. According to Shakir Zulimov, a colonel and former deputy head of the Osh Province Internal Affairs Administration (*UVD*), and an ethnic Uzbek and knew Osh Uzbeks well and gave testimony to the National Commission, there were unknown men in black t-shirts in the crowd who thwarted attempts to negotiate with law enforcement agencies and provoked the crowd to take action. An employee of the Osh internal affairs department also noted the presence of “non-Osh Uzbeks” who committed acts of violence until the crowd dispersed around 2 am. As street lights had been turned off during the riots, these could not be seen. Zulimov addressed the audience with the words: “Guys, there are provocateurs among you. What you are saying are the words of these provocateurs. Try not to let them go. Most likely, the setting on fire of cars is also the work of provocateurs.” (Memorial et al. 2012: 28).

Thus, the tragic June events that took place in Osh and some areas of the Osh and Jalal-Abad Provinces are the work of provocateurs hired by opponents of the Interim Government, who sought to demonstrate the latter’s inability to govern the state and thus tried to discredit the new authorities. However, as the above analysis showed, the provocateurs were both from the Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities, and they committed violations of human rights both on the eve of conflict and in its course with the aim of destabilizing the country and discrediting the consequences of the April Revolution.

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The Language of Comments on Media Reports as Barometer of the Current State of Interethnic Relations in Kyrgyzstan

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June of this year marks the tenth anniversary of the tragic events of 2010 in Kyrgyzstan. In the first years after the Osh events, there were certain problems in softening tensions between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, “ethnic groups [that are] are ethnogenetically, linguistically, religiously and traditionally similar” (Atakhanov 2014: 114). In order to improve the situation with regard to inter-ethnic relations and prevent inter-ethnic conflict, the Government has taken a number of measures in this area, and even established a special body, namely the State Agency for Local Self-Government and Inter-Ethnic Relations and a Monitoring Centre for the early prevention of inter-ethnic conflicts. Furthermore, a “National Sustainable Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for the period 2013-2017” was adopted (President of the Kyrgyz Republic 2013). As a result, a degree of stability in inter-ethnic relations and mutual trust between citizens of different nationalities could be established. Representatives of the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities continue to live and work together side by side, engaged in constructive activities. They visit each other and celebrate holidays, festive events, weddings and other events together. One indication of the improvement in intercultural relations between the two brotherly peoples is the sound of Kyrgyz songs and music at Uzbek weddings, and vice versa, Uzbek songs and music at Kyrgyz weddings.

In general, positive steps have been taken with regard to inter-ethnic relations, including in southern Kyrgyzstan. Thanks to the efforts of the state and the public, Kyrgyzstan has now already been living in peace and harmony for 10 years and there are no major inter-ethnic conflicts, except for minor domestic disputes. Practice shows that the mass media - radio, television, newspapers, electronic websites of news agencies and pages of various social networks - play an important role in improving or worsening the situation of inter-ethnic relations. In this text, I analyse the statements of some Kyrgyz citizens on the country's social networks to substantiate this fact.

The results of a 2011 study of Kyrgyzstani media coverage from the June 2010, conducted by the Agency of Social Technologies with the support of the OSCE, show an interesting picture. It states that:

“...intolerance has become the main emotional component in Kyrgyz-language media. The conflict ... was painted in the bloodiest colors, presented without any norms of journalistic ethics and human morality, pouring oil into the fire, forcing people to position themselves and divide into groups of 'Us' and 'Them'. Mass media described the population in terms of enmity, violence and confrontation ... The language of enmity of Kyrgyz journalists is straightforward, cruel and categorically demanding to beat everyone who is not 'Us'. 'Regardless of which classification is used, the rule is that one of the parties ('Us') is provided with positively connotated qualities and the other ('They') is assessed negatively” (Yanovskaia 2010).

A similar view can be found in the report of the International Independent Commission, also known as 'Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission' presenting its inquiry into the events in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010. It states that: “there is some evidence that the media played a negative role in supporting the flames of ethnic antagonism in the course of the events. To a similar extent, they have rarely contributed to constructive ways of discussing inter-ethnic issues within society. In the aftermath of the June events, the media have facilitated the spread of ethnically charged rumours and other issues. They have done little to ensure and critically assess whether some stories are based on reality or not” (Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission 2011: 26).

Thanks to the efforts of government agencies, acute hate speech in the official media of Kyrgyzstan has been gradually decreasing in the years since 2010. However, an atmosphere of misunderstanding still persists among individual members of the two ethnic groups and it manifested in the form of comments on information reports.

In one of his articles, journalist Ulugbek Babakulov expressed his views about comments of some social media users who humiliated representatives of other nationalities. According to him, 'when they write about the head of state on the internet, the special services quickly find out users who dared to criticize the president. But when the security of the state is under threat because of calls for inter-ethnic conflict in social networks, the special services either pretend not to notice it or really do not see anything' (Babakulov 2017). According to Naryn Aiyp, a Kyrgyz commentator, 'Babakulov actually raised an acute problem'. You do encounter nationalism on facebook and other social networks. After he raised the issue, at the very least, he should have been invited to talk about joint activities and ways to solve the problem together. But unfortunately, the person who raised the problem is being found guilty' (Asanov 2017).

A content analysis of some reports and videos posted on the pages of social networks covering events in which representatives of the two ethnic groups participate to some degree supports Babakulov's claims and shows that the level of ethnic enmity of the parties is quite high. For example, on 29 August 2019, the pages of numerous websites and news agencies of the Kyrgyz-language segment published a video of an incident involving the drunken Deputy Mayor of Osh, an ethnic Uzbek, and officers of the State Automobile Inspection (Russian *GAI*), who belonged to the Kyrgyz community.¹ This video was instantly distributed by various Kyrgyz-language news agencies and by numerous users on Facebook, YouTube and other social networks thus creating a resonance in the internet space. For example, the Sputnik Kyrgyzstan news agency posted this video on its YouTube channel under the title ‘The behavior of traffic police inspectors with the vice-mayor of Osh’ in Kyrgyz. This video was filmed with the help of a mobile phone by the traffic police inspector and there are words expressing the mockery of the Vice Mayor's employees. A content analysis of the total of Kyrgyz-language 22 comments left on this video found that 4 comments were against the actions of traffic police inspectors, 10 against the actions of the deputy mayor, 4 in defense of the deputy mayor's honor and 4 neutral comments.

¹ Oshtun vize-mery menen inspektorlordun zhorugu videod [Incident with the Deputy Mayor of Osh and inspectors of the State Automobile Inspectorate (*GAI*)], all links accessed 31 May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x89B3lzligA>

The person who left a comment in defense of the vice mayor under the nickname 'zari zari' politely urged commentators not to divide people by ethnicity, quoting the words of the Prophet Muhammad from the hadith 'who divides people by nation is not of us'. To this call, another user named Nazgul Sadirova responded with foul language and scorn, offending the honour and dignity of the Uzbek community. The same video, copied from Reporter.kg under the title 'Vice Mayor of Osh was fined 17,500 soms for driving', was posted on 30 August 2019 in Kyrgyz language in the group 'Oshtuktar' on the Facebook page of the user under the name 'Kyrgyzbai Koichumanov'.² Under the report, 111 comments in Kyrgyz language were left. Their analysis showed the following results: comments supporting the actions of traffic police inspectors - 19 (17.1%), condemning the actions of traffic police - 8 (7.2%), supporting the deputy mayor - 4 (3.6%), hostile towards the actions of the deputy mayor - 37 (33.33%), there were words that offended the national identity of the hero of the video - 12 (10.81%), neutral - 43 (38.73%). This video received the most comments on the same day that someone under the nickname 'Akirky Kabarlar - Sanzhar Kalmatai' posted on YouTube. In a short period of time, this video received 980 comments.³

It is worth noting the important detail that the Deputy Mayor of Osh was filmed by the traffic police. First of all, according to the law, they did the right thing when detaining a driver who violated the law. Secondly, however, there are words in the video proving that they ridiculed the deputy mayor. This kind of incident could so far not be found on the pages of Kyrgyzstan's social networks. On this basis, some commentators suggested that the incident was planned in advance, with one comment condemning the actions of Ministry of Internal Affairs officials. Furthermore, the actions of traffic policemen do not correspond to their code of ethics. Another fact to take into account is that Kyrgyz society is not very sympathetic to traffic police officers. Most of the comments to the aforementioned video showed a neutral stance, while 135 commentators wondered why the member of the Uzbek community held such a high position in the city and expressed their dissatisfaction, with some even demanding that he be immediately removed from his position and replaced by a representative of the Kyrgyz community. A total of 123 people expressed outrage over how an official can drink and drive, pointing out the lack of responsibility for a person of his position. Among these, there were four comments in Uzbek condemning the deputy mayor. Eleven people supported him: four of them in Uzbek, three in Russian and four in Kyrgyz. 62 commentators praised the actions of the traffic police inspectors, 46 were against them. Thirty commentators appealed against dividing people on the basis of ethnicity, and six commentators expressed support for tolerance. Another 42 responses used language that humiliated the honour and dignity of the respective other ethnicity in referring to the protagonists in the video.

² Mas bolup unaa bashkargan Oshtun vize-merine 17 500 som aiy pul salyndy [The vice mayor of Osh was fined 17,500 soms for drunk driving], <https://m.facebook.com/groups/750955798399638?view=permalink&id=1272191259609420>

³ Oshtun vize-mery mas bolup unaa aidap karmalghan video taraldy [A video of Osh's deputy mayor being caught drunk driving has been released], [#ЭлдикВидеоКабар.https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yg0XMZjPJzE&t=10s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yg0XMZjPJzE&t=10s)

An analysis of another video posted on the Facebook page of Next TV on 7 April 2020 under the title ‘Born in Jalal-Abad Conflict with Food Distributors’⁴ in Kyrgyz language also reveals a serious level of enmity between individual members of the two ethnic communities. Thus, out of 246 comments, 226 were published in Kyrgyz, 12 in Russian, 3 in Uzbek, and one in Kazakh, and 4 people commented with videos or smileys, condemning the protagonist's actions.

Among comments there are 21 expressions insulting and humiliating the honor and dignity of the protagonist, 11 statements insulting the protagonist with language subject to censorship (9 in Kyrgyz, 1 in Russian and 1 in Kazakh language) and 2 comments containing insults with obscene words against Kyrgyz-language commentators in Uzbek. There were three calls for inter-ethnic tolerance (one Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Russian, respectively),¹³ neutral comments (9 in Kyrgyz 9, 4 in Russian), 11 comments demanding violent reprisals against the protagonist in Kyrgyz language, 52 comments condemning the protagonist (46 in Kyrgyz, 4 in Russian and 2 in Uzbek), and 26 condemnations of the protagonist's actions that emphasized his ethnicity (24 in Kyrgyz and 2 in Russian).

The language of enmity is exacerbated in the comments on the reports referring to the tragic events of 2010, and it is used particularly acutely in discussing the names of individuals of Uzbek ethnicity who the authorities consider to be responsible for the conflict. One of them, a well-known journalist and human rights defender of Uzbek origin, Azimjan Askarov has been prosecuted and sentenced to life-long imprisonment for organizing mass disturbances, inciting of inter-ethnic conflict and for killing a police officer.

His name is often mentioned in the pages of various media because of the long lawsuits that continue to this day. Seeing Askarov's name in media pages irritates many members of the Kyrgyz community. Therefore, every time an issue related to him is discussed in reports, it is commented with insults, calls to massacres and similar things. This is well illustrated in case of the last event involving Askarov, when on 14 April 2020 a video clip entitled “Will Azimjan Askarov get out of prison?”, copied from the Bagyt news portal page, was posted on YouTube in Kyrgyz (Askarov 2020).

The video reports on the request of a number of international human rights organizations to the President of Kyrgyzstan to release Askarov from detention. The content analysis of the comments left under the video shows a serious level of enmity towards this category of people on the part of Kyrgyz community. Thus, out of 69 comments left in Kyrgyz language, 59 (85.50%) people opposed his release from prison, of which 6 (8.69%) called him a terrorist, 9 (13.0%) wanted him dead, 12 (17.19%) insulted him with obscene words, 1 (1.45%) insulted his ethnicity, 9 (13.0%) were neutral and 1 (1.45%) in his defense.

Further analysis of the content of the comments shows that the atmosphere of xenophobia and nationalism is still present on the social network pages of so among some individual users. It seems paradoxical that the comments left by members of an ethnic minority (Uzbeks) or in their

⁴ Zhalal-Abaddyn turgunu azyk-tylyk taratyp zhurgondorgo zholugup kalyp urush chygardy [A resident of Jalal-Abad met with food vendors and started a fight], com/story.php?story_fbid=1080241095708171&id=405803013120745&sfnsn=wa&d=w&vh=e

language contain less xenophobic and more calls for tolerance. Comparing the results of the content analysis of all these comments in the social networks of Kyrgyzstan, we can say that the level of hate speech varies depending on the circumstances of events, the content and nature of materials, the language in which information is transmitted, as well as stereotypes broadcast to certain ethnic communities through the media.

With the advent of a new generation of mobile devices, blogging is widely developing in Kyrgyzstan. However, unlike members of the Kyrgyz community, ethnic minorities, especially the Uzbek community in Kyrgyzstan, have not yet had time to put “their” bloggers on the scene. The language of enmity from the official media has also entered the blogosphere.

The occurrence of hate speech can be vividly demonstrated by the example of statements made during the filming of the videos of the famous Kyrgyz blogger Baurzhan Kadyrbekov, as well as in comments left under the videos. He posted a scandalous video on Youtube, which he recorded during a visit to ethnic Uzbek trading businesses in Uzgen and Osh⁵. Kadyrbekov has received great support from members of his ethnic group for his publications, but the Uzbek part of the population expressed their irritation, hatred and labelled him a nationalist. This dynamic has come to the point that Uzbek-language bloggers from Uzbekistan have called for Baurzhan Kadyrbekov to cover events in a neutral manner.⁶ The videos on his Youtube channel generated resonance in society and turned the internet into a virtual field of verbal battle between individual members of the parties. Presently, some comments on some videos by Kadyrbekov that relate to interethnic relations have been turned off.

Thus, ten years after the tragic events of June 2010, thanks to the efforts of government agencies, the language of enmity on the pages of official Kyrgyz media is gradually subsiding. However, it is still largely preserved on the social networks pages of individual users and such platforms as Facebook, Youtube and others, including in the publications of video bloggers and in the comment sections of videos documenting scandalous events involving representatives of these two ethnic groups. This still remains a vital problem.

Since the new leadership came to power, a number of measures have been developed to improve inter-ethnic relations and strengthen mutual harmony among citizens. For example, the Local Government Development Programme for 2018-2023 and the National Development Strategy for 2018-2040 were adopted.⁷

These programmes and strategies clearly outline the plans and actions of state authorities to improve inter-ethnic relations. In particular, the latest strategy for 2018-2040 states that the creation of 'conditions for the formation of a society in which ethnicity, attitudes towards religion, regional and kinship affiliation and other cultural differences do not constitute grounds for discrimination and do not influence political processes'.

⁵ Baurjanga Kirgız elim deysinda ee senin jerinbi bu degen kim? [Baurzhan, my Kyrgyz people, who is this your land?].

⁶ Sart su..ka uzbek Baurzhan gapirma, kyrgyz eli natsislar, accessed 01 June 2020.

⁷ Natsionalnaya strategija strategija razvitiya Kirgызskoi Respubliki [National Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2018-2040], p.26, accessed 04 June 2020.

However, as the results of the analysis of the above comments show, there are still many problems in the sphere of interethnic relations that are waiting to be solved and require serious work in this direction. To improve relations between the two peoples, it seems key that first of all, authorities strictly consider the legal responsibility of those who publish provocative materials and leave comments that incite interethnic conflicts on the pages of social networks, those who call for violence against representatives of other ethnic group, and those who publish statements that infringe human rights, honor and dignity and discriminate based along various lines between the citizens of this republic.

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Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding by International Organizations and the Government in Kyrgyzstan

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Since 2010, international organizations (IOs) in Kyrgyzstan have been working together with the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic (KR) to achieve sustainable peace and development of the country. International organizations conduct parallel work at the community and national levels, where they help and advise the government in creating a roadmap for the country's development and raise questions about necessary reforms. In turn, the Kyrgyz government is open to international recommendations and strongly supports cooperation with them. Notwithstanding the efforts of rebuilding infrastructure undertaken by the State Directorate for the Reconstruction and Development of Osh and Jalal-Abad, government measures for peacebuilding and conflict prevention were more technical and institutional in nature, as for example state institutions were organised and reorganised and new concepts were adopted since 2010.

The work directly at the community level after the events of 2010 was mainly carried out as part of projects and grants of international organizations and agencies, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Union (EU), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations (UN), which can be divided into three categories. The first category includes projects to alleviate the consequences of the conflict, which worked on the restoration of houses and documents, the allocation of internal refugees, and mediation and reconciliation of the parties. The second category includes projects to reduce tensions and prevent new conflicts, for example, projects focusing on building up capacity of the national and local governments, creating local networks for conflict prevention (early warning systems), training youth groups, women and community elders (Kyrgyz: *aksakaldar*), and creating networks of non-governmental organizations for effective advocacy and lobbying. Finally, the third category includes projects aiming at sustainable, long-term peace and at developing the country through mini-projects and social business projects implemented by communities (so-called 'seed grants'), and reforms in public administration, for example, reforms of the police, judiciary and in other sectors.

Despite significant efforts on the part of both IOs and the government, in practice, almost all activities in the communities were carried out in the form of cultural events. Communities have hosted many theatre performances, festivals, competitions, concerts, film screenings, or sport events that have called communities to embrace friendship, tolerance, and diversity. Notwithstanding the fact that these projects were successful in and of themselves, they were also limited, because they were short-termist and unsustainable and the slogans they propagated were quickly misplaced. Therefore, I would like to argue that such cultural events are insufficient to achieve long-term peace and prevent conflicts. The state and international donors need to work on a longer-term solution, in particular on building a "new" civic nation through constructive clarification and promotion at the community level of the collective idea of "Kyrgyz Jarany"

(“Kyrgyz citizen”)¹. So far, community-level efforts to explain and promote the idea of “Kyrgyz Jarany” have remained minimal, even though it was adopted in “The Concept for Strengthening the Unity of the People and Interethnic Relations in the Kyrgyz Republic” in 2013 (here after referred to as the Concept).

Some steps of the government to implement this idea do not receive support from communities and local governments, and both the idea and the Concept are perceived as generally seen as top-down measures that were decided without the population participating in their development and understanding their values (see Sheranova 2020). The lacking understanding of the importance of the civic idea of “Kyrgyz Jarany” precludes the solution of important socio-economic and political issues by the state, such as lacking economic opportunities and access to justice, challenges to rule of law, and insufficient minority representation. Working closely with communities to clarify and promote the idea of “Kyrgyz Jarany”, especially from the state’s side, is today’s main priority in ensuring long-term peace, as it helps to shape relationships both among representatives of different ethnic groups and between the communities and the government. I will substantiate this argument with the following analysis of the peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts of international organizations and the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic as well as effects thereof.

What Happened Yesterday, is Forgotten Today: Celebration and Lack of Diversity

In 2010-2011 community-level peacebuilding projects worth 10 million USD were implemented with the support of the UN Peacebuilding Fund. These projects involved young people, women's networks, and water user associations (Jantzi et al. 2017). In 2013-2016 the UN Peacebuilding Fund allocated another 15.1 million USD to support the second phase of peacebuilding. In the second stage, the UN has already introduced longer-term priorities for peace and development, such as the rule of law, respect for human rights, minority representation in governance, capacity-building of local government to prevent and resolve conflicts and support national cohesion (ibid.).

Furthermore, from 2010 to 2015 the OSCE and the EU provided assistance to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic to improve security in 63 communities, increase public confidence in the police and prevent crime by training 2,500 police officers (OSCE 2015). The EU allocated 5 million Euros to create a mapping of local resources and community needs for the effective distribution of humanitarian assistance (REACH 2014). From 2011 to 2013, the OSCE created local networks for conflict prevention, consisting mainly of women and youth, and trained them in mediation and conflict prevention methods (Winner 2012). In parallel, the OSCE worked with territorial youth councils in the cities of Osh, Jalalabad, Batken and Tokmok to increase tolerance and trust among young people of different ethnic groups and develop their capacities (2011-2016).

¹ “Kyrgyz citizen”, as defined in 2013 in the Concept.

USAID ran its “Kyrgyz Republic Transition Initiative” (2010-2013) that supported 450 (mostly infrastructure) projects totaling 20 million USD to mitigate and prevent conflict and facilitate political transition (USAID 2014a). In 2010-2014 USAID also organized school youth theaters to build peace through theatrical performances (USAID 2014b), supported the creation and training of local early warning networks (USAID 2014a), and increased the role of women in peacebuilding by strengthening women's initiative groups (USAID 2015a). USAID also allocated nearly 13 million US dollars for a program to improve public administration in Kyrgyzstan, implemented in 2013-2016. (USAID 2015b).

My personal observations while working as a consultant in international organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic suggest that most of the international projects implemented at the community level were carried out primarily in the form of cultural events, namely, in the form of theatre performances, festivals, competitions, concerts, film screenings or sport events. Cultural events have become endorsed as tools for peacebuilding and conflict prevention on the ground. They were often carried out as part of mini-projects run by participating women and youth groups, such as women's initiative groups, territorial youth councils and others. Mini-projects were aimed at promoting friendship, diversity and tolerance among local residents. In general, they can be described as successful, because, firstly, they have a large outreach to spread messages about friendship, diversity and tolerance among the audience. Secondly, they represent a joint organizational effort of representatives of various ethnic communities and the local government, during which representatives of ethnic groups get to know each other and develop friendly and trustful relations.

Nevertheless, cultural events are more eventually limited and inefficient. First, they are short-termist and unsustainable measures to achieve sustainable peace and development because they are one-off activities and are usually carried out only within of projects. After projects are completed, they are rarely held regularly by communities, with the exception of celebrations like Nooruz. Secondly, the messages spread by cultural events are quickly forgotten. Ideas of diversity or multiculturalism, tolerance and friendship quickly fade away in everyday life once cultural events and mini-projects are completed. The messages recede into the background of community life when unresolved socio-economic and political issues keep causing social tension. The peacebuilding efforts of international organizations were also assessed as ineffective by a group of researchers led by Nick Megoran (2014). According to them, many organizations duplicated trainings and seminars on mediation and tolerance for elders, women and youth within target communities, because such activities can be easily reported to donors while the root causes of the conflict remained unresolved.

Thirdly, at the community level, ideas about diversity and multiculturalism or tolerance and friendship are perceived more as another reason to participate in projects and use the opportunity to make profit, while not everyone understands and shares the meaning of these terms. For example, the UN Peacebuilding Fund’s program in order to achieve national cohesion mainly focused on promoting ideas of tolerance and cultural diversity and supported the implementation of multi-language education introduced by the government. However, in its report, the program

recognized that activities aimed at civic cohesion seemed more interesting for local communities and partners from a business point of view, while they were less aware of importance of the roles youth and women had played in building peace and unity in diversity (Jantzi et al. 2017: 30). They noted that the understanding of the importance of diversity and multi-language education among young people, schoolchildren and their parents was high only in multi-ethnic communities (Jantzi et al. 2017: 22). According to the researchers, government officials and UN staff understood multilingual education in their own respective ways. The latter understood it in terms of diversity and tolerance, the former as a mechanism of assimilation. Similarly, in another, more in-depth analysis (Sheranova 2020) I have shown how measures to strengthen diversity and tolerance are perceived differently among different actors, including ordinary residents and employees of local government and national institutions. When it comes to multi-language education at the community level, for example, ambiguous understandings and even misunderstandings over the increase of Kyrgyz language education in schools seem to prevail (Sheranova 2020). In the absence of interpretation guidelines by the government, this could have negative consequences, whether international project support is involved or not.

Fourth, cultural events have become practical in the hands of both the IOs and communities because they are easy to pilot, execute and report. For example, in the framework of mini-projects (seeds grants) implemented by communities, festivals and concerts were considered practical because they did not require large expenditures, while the budgets allocated within the framework of the projects were limited and there was no significant support from local government. In turn, IOs also piloted and experimented with innovative cultural methods like ‘forum theatres’ or ‘Drama for conflict transformation’ (IREX n.d.) and participatory video methodology (Davidi 2019), which were adapted from the experience of other countries. However, the coverage and discussion of social problems and issues of concern to the young participants of these projects usually did not lead to more decisive actions by the authorities or did not even receive public attention at all.

Overall, since 2010, international projects in communities have been largely limited to cultural events, which in no way are sustainable and long-term solutions to achieve peace and development of the country. Their messages on tolerance and friendship are only temporarily present in the public sphere and quickly evaporate due to unresolved socio-economic and political issues. For example, although the UN program stated the goal of increasing representation of minorities in government, it recognized in its report that this was a politically sensitive issue and that the program did not affect the actual representation of minorities in the country (Jantzi et al. 2017: 40).

From Celebrations and Slogans to Action: Implementing the Civic Concept “Kyrgyz Jarany”

The peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts of the government of the Kyrgyz Republic can be generally regarded as technical and institutional (primarily, the development of new programs)

and, judging by the events held, as cultural. In 2013, the Kyrgyz government, after consultation with the international community, adopted The Concept on strengthening of the national unity and inter-ethnic relations in the Kyrgyz Republic² The Concept identifies three main areas: (1) state and legal regulation of interethnic relations; (2) the unifying role of the state language and the development of linguistic diversity; (3) the formation of the civic identity “Kyrgyz Jarany”. According to the approved Concept Implementation Plan³, under the first direction, trainings for employees of the State Agency for Local Self-Government and Interethnic Relations (Russian: *GAMSUMO*) were delivered, 23 public reception centres and a monitoring centre were established and local initiatives to strengthen unity were supported, with a special emphasis on the Assembly People of Kyrgyzstan (ANC). Work within the second direction aimed to facilitate the transition to multi-lingual education, which for the most part included the transformation of schools and kindergartens with instruction in the non-state languages into ones with multi-lingual instruction, that is, instruction in Kyrgyz, Uzbek or other languages. Another emphasis was also put on translating Kyrgyz literature into non-state languages. In the third direction, special events, initiatives and mini-projects aimed at civic integration were supported, alongside cultural events and competitions, as well as research and print publishing in different languages.

The ANC is engaged not only in issues of strengthening the unity of the people and consolidating the “Kyrgyz Jarany” identity, but also in protecting the interests of ethnic groups. However, in practice, the activities of the ANC do not significantly go beyond cultural events and celebrations, either. For example, in the ANC report for 2016-2017 (ANC 2018) the number of cultural events and celebrations prevails over other aspects. In its report for 2019, *GAMSUMO* also notes that it mainly held cultural events in conjunction with the ANC. In addition, the website states without further specification that *Gamsumo* carried out 1,011 preventive measures in 2019 and reviewed 242 reports submitted via the public reception centres or other mechanisms⁴. An evaluation of the work of the Concept was carried out with support of the Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities of the OSCE. While the overall assessment was positive, the High Commissioner found that the government’s work on access to justice and minority representation in the country was insufficient (OSCE 2016). Already in 2018, on the part of *GAMSUMO*, a draft of the new “Concept of general integration of Kyrgyz Jarany in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2019-2023” was developed and discussed, which is currently under consideration by the Office of the President.

As the above analysis of the activities of international organizations and the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic has shown, the main peacebuilding and conflict prevention activities on the community level remained in the framework of cultural events. Despite their achievements, these efforts were limited by their short-termist and unsustainable nature. Furthermore, in the course of project implementation at the community level a lack of understanding of the ideas and

² *The Concept* (2013), all links accessed 25 May 2020, http://www.president.kg/files/docs/kontseptsiya_ukrepleniya_edinstva_naroda_i_mejjetnicheskikh_otnosheniy_v_kr.pdf

³ Decree of the Kyrgyz Republic dated 30 October 2013 № 430-p on approving Concept Implementation Plan for 2013-2017 for realization of the Concept (2013), <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/210041?cl=ru-ru#p1>

⁴ Inter-Ethnic Relations, *GAMSUMO* (2020), <http://www.gamsumo.gov.kg/ru/interethnic>

goals of the events themselves often became visible; the messages they put forward were often quickly forgotten. Therefore, I would argue that these cultural events are insufficient to achieve effective conflict prevention and a long-lasting peace.

In the current period, the government and international donors need to work on a more long-term solution, in particular on building a “new” civic nation (nation-building). Even though “Kyrgyz Jarany” was adopted in 2013 as part of the Concept, no work has been done in communities to explain measures to implement this civic concept. Due to the lack of public information and interpretation guidelines on the measures to implement the Concept and the idea of “Kyrgyz Jarany”, the implementation steps taken by the Kyrgyz government have not been (and still are not) met with understanding and support from the communities and even from local government. Indeed, the lack of understanding about the importance of the civil idea of “Kyrgyz Jarany” precludes the solution of important socio-economic and political issues by the state, such as the lack of economic opportunities and of access to justice, challenges to the rule of law, and insufficient representation of minorities. Thus, in order to achieve a sustainable peace, it is necessary to build a new nation through the idea of “Kyrgyz Jarany”, which the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic and international organizations need to explain and promote among the population. Unless the nation realizes that all ethnic groups living in Kyrgyzstan are part of a bigger entity and have one common future, the risk of interethnic distrust and tension will remain.

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‘We Are Golden Fish’: Uzbek Businesspeople’s Search for Safety in Southern Kyrgyzstan

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Scholarship on the Osh events has generated a rich body of anthropological, political and sociological research. These perspectives help better understand not only the larger political causes of the conflict, but also the micro-level of the local population's peacebuilding and coping strategies by taking their local strategies seriously (Murzakulova and Zhorokulov 2014, Khamidov et al. 2015, Kutmanaliev 2015, Ismailbekova and Megoran forthcoming). My already published studies contribute to diversifying and enriching this growing body of scientific work by combining security with everyday practice (Ismailbekova 2013, 2018).

Based on fieldwork in southern Kyrgyzstan in October and November 2017, this text explores at a micro-level the security practices undertaken by Uzbek people in Osh. It closely examines the experiences of Uzbek taxi-drivers, traders and businesspeople and thereby seeks to understand how and why local actors have managed to find creative ways to secure their economic activities, which I explore in depth elsewhere (Ismailbekova 2018). In this way, representatives of the Uzbek community are easily able to successfully adapt their lives to their current circumstances, taking into account their location, expectations and needs.

These things show us the broader context of post-conflict situations, that people simply have to adapt to the drastic changes, which normalizes the conflict itself and everything that has happened since, because they have no alternative options available to them. They have to live their lives within the limits of their possibilities. Moreover, I was able to see the changes in the public space without even talking to the people, because it was obvious and understandable to those who had been exploring local culture for years.

The business sector before and after Osh events is the sector in which the Uzbek community is dominant, whereas the Kyrgyz community dominates the state structures. Historically, the two ethnic groups have lived side by side and have been in constant contact with each other through this state/business symbiosis (Liu 2012, Megoran 2013). However, the conflict of 2010 drastically changed and destroyed this symbiosis, and with it threatened the Uzbek business sector (Ismailbekova 2018).

Many economically active Uzbeks face a number of challenges on a daily basis, under constant financial pressure and physical intimidation from both State authorities and criminals. As a result, businesspeople have resorted to finding different kinds of creative strategies to keep their businesses secure. Measures include moving trading from the bazaar to the mahallas, using mobile phones for passenger bookings from the bus station and airport, and avoiding selling to, or serving, potentially “suspicious” clients (Ismailbekova 2018).

Since the outbreak of violence in 2010 the Uzbek businesspeople have developed developed their own set of security measures, which can be better understood under the concept of ‘security landscapes’. According to von Boemcken, Boboyorov, Bagdasarova. (2016: 5)

“securityscapes can be understood as ‘imagined worlds’ of security and insecurity that guide and structure the lives of people as they go about their daily business”. In other words, this is about local people’ agency, proactive attitudes, as well as their creative security making strategies (von Boemcken and Ismailbekova 2020). Thus, a kind of ‘scape’ is created around a group of people or individuals, in which one can effectively carry out one's life without constantly thinking about security issues. Of particular importance is the creation of such ‘securityscapes’ for vulnerable groups that are somehow stable in the face of heightened risks and threats (von Boemcken and Ismailbekova 2020).

For the Uzbek community in Osh, these securityscapes have developed as a reaction to different “imaginings of danger”, that actually took place and many experienced as physical violence, harassment, and takeover of Uzbek businesses in the aftermath of conflict (Ismailbekova, 2018). The various strategies that create these securityscapes include the use of video cameras, networking, and 'invisible' avoidance of contact with the Kyrgyz in a subtle and discreet manner that does not cause offence. Many Uzbek restaurants have changed their names in order to avoid 'causing offence' or annoyance, and thus avoiding attacks of aggressive people and authorities. (Atakhanov and Asankanov 2020).

Facing Insecurity in the Main Bazaar

Trade is an integral part of Osh's local culture, and therefore the bazaar plays a crucial role in the economic activities of the entire population. Trade in the bazaar is more than just an exchange of goods and money; all kinds of transactions take place, including the exchange of ideas, news and gossip. It is an arena where different ethnic groups meet face to face, and come together to share stories and experiences. People from different regions of the Osh Oblast (province) came to the city's bazaar to buy the goods they needed at a relatively low price and hear the latest news from the city. During the Osh conflict the most important central Osh bazaar was destroyed, partly because some bazaar buildings were burned down, partly because trade within the bazaar was unsafe.

As a result, many Uzbeks became frightened to enter the bazaar right after the conflict and for Uzbeks it was soon considered as one of the unsafe places in Osh. During my visit to the bazaar I observed that many trading stalls remained empty, abandoned or partially destroyed. Furthermore, many of the Uzbek stands at the local bazaar had been taken over by unknown traders; some trading spots had been sold, but the remaining Uzbek traders were too frightened to come to the bazaar. Many of the traders complained that trade was not as good as it had been before, and many Uzbek shoppers expressed a preference for buying things in their own *mahallas* (the Uzbek neighbourhoods in Osh) instead of coming to the bazaar.

According to my informants, the ethnic composition of the bazaar has thus been reversed. For example, sectors within the bazaar for the sale of fruit and vegetables, meat, dry fruits, and Russian lottery tickets previously belonged to the Uzbek traders, but now Kyrgyz traders have

replaced them in many of these sectors. For the same reason, almost the entire fruit and vegetable sector that belonged to the Uzbeks moved from the bazaar to alternative places, such as Uzbek quarters (mahalla), and the size of the meat sector decreased within the bazaar but expanded elsewhere.

Finding Safety in the Mahalla

In the aftermath of the events in Osh the mahalla became a secure space for Uzbek traders and became the safest place for young people, as young men were at constant risk of being drawn into conflicts and being harassed by the police. Shops and trade, previously based in the bazaar, have moved to the mahalla for security reasons. As a result, economic activities are now concentrated within the mahallas. Not only has the trade moved, but also a variety of leisure activities (amusement parks, cafes) are now available within, further encouraging people to move into the mahallas, which they view as a safe place to live. Thus, the security landscape of the Uzbek community is created at the expense of two main strategies. On the one hand, it is segregation and holding borders in public places; on the other hand, it is adaptation, avoiding irritating behavior and avoiding risky contacts.

At the same time, there are businesses that are still outside the mahalla, and businessmen in these cases have also found creative ways to ensure security for their business. Most owners of Uzbek businesses protect their businesses with a video camera. The video camera sign is visible everywhere, from the smallest shop to the large largest restaurant in the city. In general, the majority of businesspeople believe that they can protect themselves from abuses more effectively with a camera because it makes it easy to prove if someone does not pay, and more importantly, people are less likely to violate rules if they see the sign that a video camera is being used in a public place. Owners of shops and cafes in particular regularly face problems of 'payment denial' - the use of a video camera helps to solve this problem. Once the camera is installed, it is possible to record all the activities that take place in the store as a certain measure for self-protection. (Ismailbekova 2018).

It should be noted that Uzbeks do not openly avoid developing business in its economic niche. Instead they are trying an already existing economic niche to a safer place by using practices that are not visible to the Kyrgyz community and thus protecting their business. For example, some business enterprises have been turned into 'safe' social projects such as school, hospital and mosque. In these cases it is important to recognize the role of the mahalla in ensuring the safe operations and functioning of the Uzbek elites: their access to political and economic resources allows them to manipulate this institution and through the mahalla makes their position legitimate, both within and outside the Uzbek community (Ismailbekova 2018).

This mahalla zone has been further strengthened and developed in various ways. The Uzbeks are rebuilding life there, as if organizing a small city inside a large one, but at the same time Osh is becoming more segregated as a result. The mahalla is a safe and comfortable place outside the influence of the state and criminals who threaten the economic and physical well-being

of Uzbeks. It is a safe place where outsiders cannot enter. Through negotiations (including ‘corrupt’) with government officials and criminals, the mahalla can function as a separate and secure economic zone. In other words, there is an implicit contract that provides security in the mahalla.

At present, it is possible to say that Uzbek residents of Osh tried to spatially separate themselves in order to prevent conflicts and organize some life within their capabilities. Today, this strategy seems to be effective, but most likely only in the short term. The result of such separation in the long term could prevent people from integrating socially in the future. Obviously, some areas in Osh have opted for segregation as a strategy to overcome the consequences of conflict, finding themselves entirely on the side and within their own community. However, other areas have chosen not to use segregation as a conflict prevention strategy. Consequently, strategies differ from region to region depending on where victims of conflict live and the impact of past conflict on them. My research shows that the emerging division is not just a matter of mutual segregation. According to my data, Uzbeks are marginalized and forcibly displaced. This separation was not voluntary: rather, it happened or was practiced in the absence of other alternatives. This solution was the best option in times of chaos and insecurity, because belonging to one's own community without wasting time or energy. However, the local security landscapes of Uzbek businessmen, which can be observed today, make us think about the future and about finding strategies for the resumption of interaction and joint existence of all residents of the city without exception of any particular community.

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From ‘The Schleswig-Holstein Question’ to ‘The Ferghana Valley Question’: Minority Education and Conflict Resolution

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2020 marks two significant anniversaries. The first is the centenary of a series of plebiscites that sought to resolve ‘The Schleswig-Holstein Question,’ a long-running ethno-territorial dispute between Denmark and Germany. These popular referenda began the long path to what is now regarded as one of Europe’s most successful cases of conflict resolution. The second, and the focus of this forum, is the decadal anniversary of terrible violence in the Kyrgyzstani part of the Ferghana Valley. The ‘Ferghana Valley Question’ – how the nationalising post-Soviet successor states can provide a secure future for minorities in a polyethnic valley stranded outside their kin states by the collapse of Moscow’s rule – remains unanswered.

Of course, no two places are the same and no one case of conflict resolution can be scripted as a simple ‘blueprint’ for another. But it is the contention of this article that at two important lessons from Schleswig-Holstein can be learnt to help address conflict in the Ferghana Valley. First, a borderland ethno-territorial conflict cannot be resolved unilaterally by action within one state alone. Attempts by local, state or international actors since 2010 to address inter-ethnic issues in southern Kyrgyzstan have been unable to guarantee peace or promote harmonious co-existence because they have been focussed on Kyrgyzstan alone. Second, securing minority-language education is crucial for addressing long-standing conflicts.

The Schleswig-Holstein Question

Historically the King of Denmark was also Duke of Schleswig and Holstein. This presented few difficulties for the ethnically-mixed populations speaking various dialects of German, Danish and Friesian. However, the ‘age of nationalism’ politicised nationhood, ethnicity and belonging, provoking two wars. Denmark was eventually defeated in 1864 by Prussia, which seized both territories and sought to enforce a rigid Germanification on the Danish minority (Rerup 1982). This was held as the archetypal intractable, borderland ethno-territorial dispute, with British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston famously quipping that:

The Schleswig-Holstein question is so complicated, only three men in Europe have ever understood it. One was Prince Albert, who is dead. The second was a German professor who became mad. I am the third and I have forgotten all about it.

The 1920 plebiscites returned the northern part of Schleswig to Denmark. This left a Danish minority stranded in Germany, and a German minority in Denmark. In 1955 Denmark and Germany issued the famous ‘Bonn-Copenhagen Declarations’, guaranteeing ethnic minorities’ cultural and linguistic rights. German-language schooling in Denmark and Danish-language

schooling in Germany were protected, with kin states having the right to support their co-ethnic education systems over the boundary and minorities able to pursue higher education in their ethnic kin-state. In time, this arrangement has led to a remarkable easing of tensions with both minorities feeling secure (Malloy 2017).

The Ferghana Valley Question

The formation of the Kyrgyz and Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republics in the 1920s created significant national minority communities either side of their new Ferghana Valley boundary. In what Abdullaev (2005) calls ‘the polyethnic Ferghana Valley’ the Soviet authorities made provision for minority schooling, with Uzbek-language schools in the Kyrgyz SSR and Kyrgyz-language schooling in the Uzbek one. This system worked well because minorities could receive primary and secondary education in their native communities, travel to their ethnic kin states for specialist higher and further education, and then return home if they chose.

Independence in 1991 created new states with substantial ethnic minority populations. Borderland families who had spent their lives moving between the two states for education, work and marriage at different found this way of life threatened, as governments sought to control movement through the materialisation of new borders, and promote the language and culture of the majority group as the national culture. This led to insecurity amongst minorities, who were often viewed suspiciously by majorities.

This ‘Ferghana Valley Question’ was particularly acute in the realm of education. Post-1991 the outward form of this system remained the same, with Uzbek-language primary and secondary education in Kyrgyzstan, and Kyrgyz in Uzbekistan. However, it came under increasing strain: new textbooks were needed, and there were no domestic minority-language higher education institutes to train schoolteachers. Whereas previously young people went to institutions in their kin-SSR for higher education and teacher training, by the late 1990s this had become very difficult and mutual recognition of degrees was no longer guaranteed.

In response, both states sought to facilitate domestic minority-language educational provision. In Uzbekistan, a Kyrgyz philology department was opened at Andijon State University, and the Turon-Iqbol publishing house produced Kyrgyz translations of Uzbek textbooks for use in Kyrgyz schools. In Kyrgyzstan, the Ministry of Education established the Kyrgyz-Uzbek University in Osh and the Uzbek Humanities-Pedagogical Faculty of Osh State University. These new institutions also produced Uzbek-language textbooks for Kyrgyzstani Uzbek schools.

These measures were well-intentioned but were inadequate in terms of overall numbers and quality of both teachers and materials. Further, in Kyrgyzstan, they fueled populist resentment against a supposedly-privileged minority of Uzbeks whose lot was contrasted favourably with the supposedly-underprivileged Kyrgyz of Uzbekistan who apparently lacked educational provision (Megoran 2013). This perception was untrue, but it led in part to the 2010 violence. During this violence Uzbek educational establishments were physically attacked, but more seriously became the symbolic sites of post-conflict nationalist retribution. The name of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek

University was hurriedly changed to the ‘Osh State Social University,’¹ and Osh State University’s Uzbek Pedagogical-Humanities Faculty was evicted from its building and downgraded to a department of the university’s philology faculty. Uzbek-language university entrance exams were abolished. In 2011 the mayor of Osh, Melis Myrzakmatov, reportedly announced his desire to see an end to most Uzbek-language schooling in the city; and neighbouring Kara-Suu regional educational administration instructed all Uzbek schools to convert one incoming September class from Uzbek to Kyrgyz language instruction (Megoran 2017: 218).

However, in the intervening decade there has been some roll-back of this approach. This is in part due to the stabilization of the situation in southern Kyrgyzstan and the efforts of the Kyrgyz government, and also to improved relations between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In 2016 Shavkat Mirziyoyev succeeded Islam Karimov as President of Uzbekistan. Mirziyoyev has emphasized the importance of inter-ethnic relations both in Uzbekistan and regionally (Mirziyoev 2017). In 2017 he not only relaxed border controls in the Ferghana Valley, but made an official visit to Osh where he announced the sponsoring of a new Uzbek-language school in the city as well as joint economic cooperation projects. On a separate occasion he visited the ethnic Kyrgyz village of Manas, in Uzbekistan’s Jizzak region, and ordered its general infrastructure to be wholly refurbished, returning 45 days later to inspect the outcome. This was accompanied by savvy media coverage at home and in Kyrgyzstan. He has also ordered the opening of a Kyrgyz philology department at a university in Jizzak (Jabborov 2019: 4). These moves have been well-received in Kyrgyzstan. Pressure on Uzbek schools to switch to Kyrgyz has receded, and, symbolically, the Kyrgyz-Uzbek University was returned to its original name.

These are positive moves but, nonetheless, since 2000 the number of Uzbek-language schools in Kyrgyzstan has fallen from 141 to 43 and the number of Kyrgyz schools in Uzbekistan has dropped from 87 to 56. The Soviet-era model of minority-language education persists in theory in the Ferghana Valley, but is no longer fit for purpose. As Valeriy Khan argues, Central Asia needs “a new ethnic policy” shifting from ethnocentrism to an expansion of minority rights (Khan 2018).

Linked Destinies

Ten days after the June 2010 violence, populist Kyrgyz paper *Alibi* published an opinion piece by Mashakbay Rakhmankulov that implicitly justified violence against the Uzbek minority by contrasting the educational provision for Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan with that given to the Kyrgyz in Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan’s Uzbeks, it said, “were served by kindergartens, schools, universities” and other facilities. In contrast, it claimed (completely incorrectly), “Currently in Uzbekistan, the Kyrgyz ethnic group has been completely eliminated.... In Uzbekistan there are no Kyrgyz-language kindergartens, schools or universities” (Rakhmankulov 2010: 2).

In this year of significant anniversaries, revisiting the ‘Schleswig-Holstein’ and ‘Ferghana Valley’ questions is important. These are the questions of how newly nationalising states can

¹ This change was never formally ratified by the education ministry.

secure the wellbeing and rights of minority communities stranded across newly-significant boundaries. The twin lessons of Schleswig-Holstein for the Ferghana Valley are that *education* is key to this, and that it is best addressed *bilaterally*. Rakhmankulov's poisonous diatribe – reflecting a widely-shared view in Kyrgyzstan – shows that the fates of the two minorities are linked together in popular imaginations. The Kyrgyzstani and Uzbekistani governments must work *together* to creatively secure the future of minority-language education. What might this look like? It may involve strong and unequivocal state commitment to the support of minorities in their own (host state) territories, as well as the mutual support of ethnic kin educational facilities in each other's states. Cost-free educational exchanges to allow the best quality instruction in minorities' mother tongues should be facilitated. Exchanges for refresher and teacher-training summer schools could be provided for minority schoolteachers and university lecturers in each other's kin state universities. As well as the long-term benefits for education and the provision of opportunities for minorities, a 'Tashkent-Bishkek Declaration' would build trust, reassuring minorities that they have futures in their host-states, and reassuring majorities that they need not suspect the loyalty of minority populations. This alone would not prevent further violence, but it would go some way to address the grievances that feed it.

It is of course important to recognise that the Ferghana Valley and Schleswig-Holstein contexts are not identical. The geopolitical pressures of the post-World War 1 German defeat and later NATO facilitation of the 1955 Bonn-Copenhagen declaration enabled key milestones in the resolution of that conflict, whereas the geopolitical environment of post-Soviet fracture has provided more centrifugal than centripetal pressures.² In present-day Central Asia, the impetus must come more from the leaders of both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, with external actors supporting their initiatives.

In his 1967 'Christmas Sermon for peace,' Martin Luther King said: "We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny" (King 1986, see also Baldwin and Dekar 2013) A proverb found in both Uzbek and Kyrgyz says, '*bazaarybyz bir, mazaarybyz bir*' – 'our markets and cemeteries are one.' This points to the long-standing grassroots sense that the histories and destinies of the Kyrgyz and Uzbek people are symbiotically joined. It is the responsibility of the governments of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to translate this into a concrete reality. And minority-language education is a good place to start.

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² I am grateful to Sergiusz Bober of the European Centre for Minority Issues, Flensburg, for making this observation to me.

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Enter the Matrix, or: How to Deal with Inevitable Complicity to Structural Violence

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You have to understand, most of these people are not ready to be unplugged. And many of them are so inured, so hopelessly dependent on the system, that they will fight to protect it.

The Matrix

Not only scholars and journalists, but pretty much anyone living in, visiting or working in Kyrgyzstan sooner or later realize that the 2010 “Osh events” are the perhaps most contested issue in this country. In academia, the by now conventional wisdom has us believe that we can navigate the challenges and dangers of research by being reflective of our own stance and ensuring that research participants are ‘fully aware’ of the implications of their involvement in the research. Similarly, in society at large and especially in the world of liberal emancipatory politics, the corresponding maxim for avoiding problems in everyday life is to be very sensitive about such topics or avoid them altogether.

However, as I would like to argue in this text, this pragmatic and problem-solving attitude does not work in a world in which discussions of the representations of certain events, and even the very reality and seemingly established facts is dependent on questions of belonging and (geo-)political loyalty. Thus, as I will show in the context of my own experience as a researcher working on Kyrgyzstan since 2012, the more one tries to balance and weigh against each other the different claims and perspectives contesting the “events”, their consequences, their broader meaning and even what can be said about them (and what cannot), the more one realizes the impossibility of reconciling different viewpoints. Attempts to present the Osh events and their consequences in a balanced way make one realize that this encompasses the impossible task of reconciling different realities of life – indeed livelihoods, interests and agendas that are at stake in the construction of this conflict and its legacy. This has been demonstrated most clearly by Aksana Ismailbekova’s contribution to this debate, which shed light on the need to not only accept, but also adapt to a new reality in which Uzbeks’ continuing victimization is further silenced and denied.

Taking a – even if very stylistic – metaphor, it can be argued that the version of reality about the ‘events’ that has been established in Kyrgyzstan’s domestic discourse – and which remained effectively unchallenged by international versions – presents a kind of matrix. As imagined by the authors of this sequel, even though deceptively real, this ‘reality’ turns out to be a simulation created by forces that seek to cover up the actual reality of a darker, inherently violent world. Notwithstanding limitations of this comparison, it useful in helping us reflect on how much we have already – maybe subconsciously – accepted the hegemonic version of the ‘Osh events’ and related policies in its aftermath as normal or inevitable. It can help us ask if we, and the population at large, are still able to ‘be unplugged’ from this reality and embrace a more critical

and complex picture that is not sanctioned or even contested by authorities. Finally, another important point to be drawn from The Matrix is that, notwithstanding the seemingly unsurmountable superiority of the regime sustaining the matrix, there are ways to contest it and join forces to build a better future.

Trying (and Failing) to Do Research ‘Safely’

As previous contributions to this discussion pointed out, the Osh 2010 events are a tremendous tragedy foremost for the people directly affected, but also for wider Kyrgyzstani society. Apportioning blame or liability, and let alone proving it, is near impossible in this context, and the tragic legacy of the events requires a measure of distance and non-interference especially from people coming from a foreign context. So much I understood when I decided to analyze initiatives for peacebuilding in the aftermath of the Osh events as part of my Masters dissertation research in 2012. It was the first time when I visited Kyrgyzstan, and Central Asia for that matter, and my project was not unproblematic given that I did not receive any context-specific preparation or training but had to carry out my field visit in a do-it-yourself way. Thanks to many friends, colleagues and generous helpers along the way, I managed to carry out the necessary number of interviews and to write a very well-received dissertation.

The very pragmatic way of making sure that I did not endanger my interviewees or myself was to not publish the dissertation online. After all, this research spoke about the Osh events and challenges to the government’s (in-)actions in their aftermath. I was smart enough to understand the informal hints and stories shared by interlocutors. Writing about the events and about the legitimate criticisms of government and law enforcement mistakes and even active misconduct required a good backing to weather the storm that one would face in political, judicial and personal safety terms. The controversies around the report of the ‘Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission’ and the ongoing threats faced by human rights organisations seemed to be only the most visible cases of what happens to those who criticise the authorities (Wilkinson 2015).

When I embarked on my PhD journey about a year later, I vowed to approach the puzzle posed by this restricted discursive environment more boldly, and to produce more revealing research while still upholding the principle of ‘do no harm’ and protecting both research participants and myself. Surveying the situation in Kyrgyzstan, I realized more and more that the authorities were in fact monopolizing public discourse to maintain a version of the ‘Osh events’ and their consequences that matched primarily their interest. The main tool of state agencies – mainly the State Committee for National Security (GKNB) and various local Internal Affairs Administrations (GUVD) – has become article 299 of the Kyrgyzstani criminal code, under which anyone covering the ‘Osh events’ and their aftermath – as well as many other societal problems in the country – is charged with ‘instigation of religious or interethnic hatred’. Prominent examples include the criminal investigation into a survey conducted by the international NGO Freedom House and its Kyrgyzstani partner Advocacy Centre for Human Rights in September 2014 (Beishenbek kyzy 2014) and the detentions of journalists Conor Prasad and Frederik Faust (Mets

2015) and, most recently, bezpredel.kg founder and editor Aftandil Zhöröbekov. Especially the public outcry and campaign to demand Zhöröbekov's release exposed the GKNB's arbitrary application of article 299, which eventually made it withdraw the charges.

The regime's attempts to shut down debate and critical reporting turned out to be obviously misguided and arbitrary. Yet, to adhere to protect both research participants and myself when doing my PhD, I decided to avoid the 'sore' and inappropriate framings about the discontents with 'interethnic relations' that had caused backlash in the above cases. Instead, I defined my main research objective as understanding the reception, application of and resistance against globally dominant notions of democratic governance and statebuilding in Kyrgyzstan, with a focus on the spheres of peace-building and community security. I devised a practice-based, cooperative approach in which I tried to establish research partnerships with organizations to trace, contextualize and interpret their practices in a language they would find appropriate and representative of the issues they dealt with (Lottholz 2018: 79 ff.). I thus tried to focus on my partners' practices and own perspectives instead of introducing certain framings into the research cooperation (e.g. about 'conflict', 'interethnic relations', 'transitional justice' etc.). That way, I hoped to mitigate concerns that cooperation with me could bring these organizations into trouble with law enforcement and security services.

Most people within the NGOs and initiatives I worked with appreciated this approach at least sooner or later. However, I soon realized that this cautious, 'context-sensitive' approach, as I developed it out of critical and reflexive social science methodology debates, could only grasp one version of reality in post-conflict Kyrgyzstan. This version was the one sanctioned by authorities, where the 'Osh events' are not an interethnic conflict and no noteworthy misconduct from law enforcement, judiciary and other state institutions has taken place in its course of aftermath. With a few exceptions of people who had already taken an official stance on the subject matter (e.g. in their own published analyses), I did not manage to get any meaningful data about the current reality of inter-ethnic relations and particularly Uzbek lifeworlds in Osh.

The more frustrating aspect with this bifurcation between the actual, 'everyday' reality and the version that seemed to emanate from my research was that I received more and more information about the former from the same people who participated in my research or knew about it. Thus, I gathered more and more 'off the record' information from second- and even third-hand accounts ('some told me that...'), for instance on how Uzbeks were marginalized and forced to give up their stalls in the Osh bazar, or how international organizations partly refrained from hiring Uzbeks to avoid possible difficulties with their operations. Of course, due to ethical and moral concerns I could not possibly include this information into my research, and even mentioning it now is only possible with the relative degree of temporal and social distance from the context.

As I realized when reflecting back on my fieldwork (Lottholz 2017: 101), instead of having the patience to meet people and build relationships that would help me to shed light on the construction of a 'Potemkin village' façade in my research project, I stuck fast on the very fact that reality was bifurcated and there was little I could do to get to the ground of things. This shows how, although technically 'free', my research was inherently limited by the emotional and

discursive effects of the securitized and politicized research environment in southern Kyrgyzstan, which made members of organizations/networks I cooperated with, and the population at large take a vary stance in interaction with me (Lottholz 2017: 101).

Thinking Strategically about Inevitable Structural Violence, and One's Complicity with It

Towards the end of my PhD field research, I was finally given the chance to engage and build up a relation to members of a youth group in the Uzbek-majority neighbourhood On Adyr at the Southeastern fringe of the city of Osh. However, when pondering if to seize this opportunity and to prioritize this over other communities I was visiting, I realized that doing so and potentially gathering data on the difficulties and discrimination faced by Uzbeks in this district, (if people were to share them in the first place) would only lead to new dilemmas. Was I the right person to document and eventually publicize the issues this community was facing? And given my focus on the practices and activities of the so-called youth councils I cooperated with, would it even be accepted if I decided that inter-ethnic tensions and conflictive relations between Uzbeks and the authorities or with Kyrgyz residents were an important aspect to be addressed? With a heavy heart, I decided that the – by then more numerous – statements on the fallout from the 'Osh events' and on the necessity of re-building trust and peaceful relations between Kyrgyz and Uzbek youth were sufficient for my analysis (see Lottholz 2018: 256 ff.). The numerous stories of journalists, researchers and NGO representatives detained and investigated by security forces made me conclude that at this point it was not necessary, let alone desirable, to try to inquire the terrain of inter-ethnic relations in Osh 'first-hand' (ibid.: 22).

As some contributions to this exchange and a growing body of research beyond it has shown, the Uzbek communities in and around Osh have faced continuous pressure to withdraw their political involvement, business operations and even their very presence from public spaces that have once been shared (Ismailbekova and Karimova 2018, Megoran 2013). Worse so, the events of June 2010 and the misconduct in their aftermath has in many cases still not been brought to justice, but continues to stand in the way of a more genuine process of reconciliation (Bennett 2016).

In this light, one truth that all researchers, both the ones documenting these injustices and the ones feeling unable to do so, need to accept is that injustice will continue every day, hour and minute. What can we do in light of such ongoing structural and even literal violence with which we seem complicit unless we take radical action? This dilemma very much resonates with the often-observed bifurcation between the world of social activists whose lives are dedicated to the struggle for a more just world, and, on the other hand, academic researchers who are confined to a life more remote from such struggles, as they have to address their teaching, administrative and peer review publication requirements.

As Lara Montesinos Coleman has argued (2015), such remoteness of activist struggle and academic inquiry should not lead to despair, but can be held in a dialogical and mutually supportive relation if we embrace an 'ethos of critique'. That is, while acknowledging the inherent limitations

to our actions and ability to influence the status quo, we can continue – or start, in the first place – the debate on what can be done and how the forces maintaining present injustice can be gradually and incrementally exposed, undermined, and dismantled. Ten years on, the authorities’ stance regarding their narrative on the 2010 events seems largely unchanged, as was illustrated in the recent upholding of Azimjon Askarov’s lifelong prison sentence by the Supreme Court (Rittmann 2020). In this light, it appears high time that activists, academics and wider societal circles embrace a cooperative and mutually supportive approach towards challenging injustice and recovering the voices and lifeworlds of people affected by the 2010 events. As both I and the contributors of this discussion hope, it could serve as another step towards such a cooperative and solidary agenda.

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