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Elina Karakulova: Multiethnicity in Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution

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Abstract

The purpose of this work is to investigate and analyse the role of ethnicity in the 2005 "Tulip revolution" in Kyrgyzstan. More precisely, the work attempts to understand why the political confrontation during the February-March 2005 events in Kyrgyzstan increased concerns about the country's multi-ethnicity. Drawing on an analysis of the secondary literature, media and field reports on the "revolution" and theories on transition and nation-building, this work analyses why ethnicity became an issue, in what ways an ethnicisation of political confrontation took place and what the possible consequences of it are.

Using Brubaker's theory on "ethnicity without groups," I argue that the political struggle between the incumbents and opposition during the "Tulip revolution" did not acquire an ethnic spin because the sudden change of government unleashed long-standing ethnic groups' antagonisms and competition for better opportunities. Instead, I argue that ethnicity was summoned, mobilised through various deliberate and unintended activities and narratives, such as intra-ethnic elite rivalry, the patterns of political mobilisation by the opposition, a media "discourse of danger" and specific issues of political instability which involved ethnicity.

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

Some of the findings suggest that one of the most conspicuous activities was electoral mobilisation during and after the parliamentary race, which often evolved around ethnic candidates, political and media discourse on intra-ethnic group struggle, and discussion of the status of the Russian language after the "revolution." Among the indirect consequences of the reification of ethnic "groupness" after the March 2005 events are the increased out-migration among members of the non-titular nationalities, some objective instances of ethnic violence, and fears of prosecution and oppression expressed by some national minority groups.

By identifying and analysing the ways ethnicity becomes politicised, one can also identify the ways to intervene and prevent such forces from making ethnicity the primary feature of every-day politics. Consequently, by stopping ethnicity from becoming politicised, it may be possible to avoid inter-communal confrontations with dreadful repercussions.

Multi-ethnicity in Kyrgyzstan's "Tulip Revolution"

This work seeks to contribute to the debate on the February–March 2005 protests that forced the first president of the newly independent ex-Soviet Kyrgyz republic, Askar Akaev, out of the office on the allegations of authoritarianism by looking at a rather specific issue of ethnicity and the role it came to play during and in the early aftermath of the "Tulip revolution." The focus is inspired by the increased concern over the interethnic conflict and ethnic violence allegedly unleashed by the drastic political change, expressed by the people, media and early scholarly works.¹

Drawing on an analysis of secondary literature, media and field reports on the "revolution" and theories on transition and nation-building, this work will analyse why ethnicity became an issue, in what ways ethnicisation of political confrontation took place and what the possible consequences of it are. Using Brubaker's theory on "ethnicity without groups,"² I will argue that political struggle between the incumbents and opposition during March 24 events took an ethnic tone through the patterns of political mobilisation, intra-ethnic struggle and the "securitisation"³ of multi-ethnicity by the media, political entrepreneurs and civic organizations. Thus, multi-ethnicity, even if has become conflict-prone after the "Tulip revolution," is not a result of "long-standing" ethnic cleavages, but rather of the reification of ethnic "groupness"⁴ under rapid political change.

With the ousting of Askar Akaev, the idea of Kyrgyzstan as a "common home" promoted by his presidency in an attempt to accommodate the country's multi-ethnicity seemed to have suffered a setback, putting the issue of future interethnic relationships and the fate of the national minorities into question. Represented by over eighty different ethnic groups, with Uzbeks and Russians being the largest national minority communities, multi-ethnicity in the region has been generally seen as problematic and conflict-prone.⁵ Political changes and economic stagnation after the fall of the Soviet Union apparently exacerbated the potential for ethnic conflict, especially in overpopulated areas like the Ferghana Valley in the South of Kyrgyzstan, which witnessed violent armed clashes between Uzbek and Kyrgyz population in June 1990. As a result, instability following the fierce takeover of the government headquarters on the March 24 was said to be unleashing "long-standing" ethnic antagonisms.⁶ However, approaching ethnicity from "long-standing" hostilities obscures an analytical view of the events, implying that any political instability will be almost automatically followed by interethnic confrontation.

The way in which the country's multi-ethnicity received social salience early after the "Tulip revolution," with reports on increased instances of interethnic clashes by the media and civil society organisations⁷ and appeals of discontent with the ethnic situation by national minority groups,⁸ not only "securitises" ethnicity, but also to a certain extent contributes to a reification of ethnic identities, putting them in the "fore-

1 See for example, Burke, Justine: *Kyrgyzstan's Revolution: Be Careful What You Wish For*, in: EurasiaNet Commentray, March 25, 2005; Saipov, Alisher: *Interethnic Clashes are Possible in Kyrgyzstan*, in: Ferghana.ru, March 6, 2005; Pushaev, Yuri: *After March Events in Kyrgyzstan Russians Face New, not the Best Times in Their Lives*, in: Ferghana.ru, July 15, 2005; Herd, Graeme: *Colorful Revolutions and the CIS: Manufactured versus Managed Democracy?*, in: *Problems of Post-Communism*, 2005 (vol.52), No. 2.

2 Brubaker, Rogers: *Ethnicity without Groups*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2004.

3 "Securitisation" is used as formulated by Ole Wæver.

4 Brubaker, Rogers: *Ethnicity without Groups*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2004.

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

6 Burke, Justine: *Kyrgyzstan's Revolution: Be Careful What You Wish For*, in: EurasiaNet Commentray, March 25, 2005.

7 International Crisis Group: *Kyrgyzstan: After the Revolution*, in: ICG Asia Report, 2005.

8 Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan Appeal to President for Protection Against Nationalistic Tendencies, in: *Gazeta.kg*, 2005, November 1.

ground.”⁹ Once it has been politicised and mobilised, ethnic “groupness” can lead to dismal outcomes, for it is hard to demobilise and de-politicise.

Among the indirect consequences of the reification of ethnic “groupness” after the March 2005 events has been the increased emigration among members of the non-titular nationalities, some objective instances of violence on an ethnic basis,¹⁰ and fears of prosecution and oppression expressed by some national minority groups.¹¹

Ethnicity and political change in semi-authoritarian societies

It has been widely suggested that “revolutionary” and rapid attempts to introduce political changes in semi-authoritarian societies run the risk of producing violent conflicts and aggravate already existing social and ethnic cleavages.¹² Transitologists give different accounts on why ethnic heterogeneity is conflict-prone in semi-democracies. Thus, Snyder suggests that the early stages of democratisation tend to spark ethnic conflict not because nations are being awakened by liberal institutions, but because elites use nationalist appeals to gain popular support. Nodia argues for the normalcy of the ethnicisation of political change in transitional semi-authoritarian societies as the “demands of democracy-building provide incentives for molding nations out of preexistent ethnic material”¹³ since any democratisation movement needs to determine the substance of “We the People.” Horowitz in his extensive research of the *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*¹⁴ criticises the elitist approach to ethnic violence in transitional societies, suggesting instead more focus on the psychological power of ethnic identification, and the search by ethnic communities for a “group worth” and group legitimacy in a certain polity. This possesses a much stronger explanatory power for ethnic conflict than do the materialist and elitist approaches. According to Horowitz, the self-interested elites do not simply manipulate the blind masses in order to create ethnic hostility. This symbolic zest for “group worth” represents a *real* and not phoney consciousness among both the elites and the wider population.

Gurr and Ottaway¹⁵ give a thorough analysis of regime-types in the interdependent triad of political change – regime – ethnicity. Regime type is viewed as a dimension of the ethno-political environment that shapes the course and modes of ethnic political mobilisation. Aklaev, for instance, suggests that in the post-Soviet period, during ethno-political crises leaders turned to authoritarian methods of dealing with various competing groups.¹⁶ Ottaway explained this with the semi-authoritarian nature of most of the former Soviet states,¹⁷ which she singles out as a separate regime type. As rightly noted, “In countries where ... ethnic or

9 Abdurasulov, Abdujalil: Titular Group and Ethnic Minorities after the Kyrgyz Revolution: The Changed Interaction, paper presented at the roundtable on ‘Understanding the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan One Year On: Dynamics and Implications,’ London School of Economics and Political Science, 2006, February 28.

10 Disturbances in Iskra Village Intensified, in: Akipress, February 06, 2006; Toralieva, Gulnura: Russians are Fleeing Kyrgyzstan, in: Gazeta.kg, February 14, 2006.

11 Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan Appeal to President for Protection Against Nationalistic Tendencies, in: Gazeta.kg, November 1, 2005.

12 Snyder, Jack: *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict*. London: W.W. Norton and Company Ltd, 2000; Nodia, Ghia: Nationalism and Democracy, in: Diamond, Larry / Plattner, Mark (eds), *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994; Ellingsen, Tanja: Colorful Community or Ethnic Witches’ Brew? Multiethnicity and Domestic Conflict during and after the Cold War, in: *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2000 (vol.44), No. 2, pp.228-249.

13 Nodia, Ghia: *Nationalism and Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994, p. 9.

14 Horowitz, Donald: *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley, London : University of California Press, 2000.

15 Ottaway, Marina: *Democracy Challenged: the Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003; Gurr, Robert: Peoples Against States: Ethnopolitical Conflict and the Changing World System, in: *International Studies Quarterly*, 1994 (vol. 38), No. 3, pp. 347-377.

16 Aklaev, Airat: *Democratization and Ethnic Peace: Patterns of Ethnopolitical Crisis Management in Post- Soviet Settings*. England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 1999.

17 The similar view was expressed in Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder: *Democratization and the Danger of War*, in: *International Security*, 1995 (vol. 20), No. 1, pp. 5-38.

religious conflict divides and mobilizes the population, for example, semi-authoritarian governments play on the public's grievances and fears and get support by promising solutions."¹⁸

Ottaway's typology is very useful in providing an understanding of why semi-authoritarian regimes possess little institutional framework for legitimate change of political elites. It also explains the fact that once rapid transformation is in place in such societies, the rules of the game change completely, creating uneasy allegiances and instability.

Another strand of literature has been focused on unfinished and exclusionary nation-building projects that contribute to the politicisation of ethnic belonging and intensify ethnic cleavages.¹⁹ On the one hand, this is due to the tendency of radical voices to prevail among different competing ethnic communities during the transitional nation-building process, which further polarises divisions.²⁰ Horowitz, drawing on the example of African and South Asian transitional societies, argues that any attempts to shut out minorities from political participation is dangerous and can lead to various forms of violence.²¹

On the other hand, nation-building in semi-democracies is very often about "nationalising"²² state policies, which attempt to identify legitimate a "owner," ethno-cultural leader and "indigenous" group. Such policies tend to divide the citizenry between more legitimate "owners" and partially legitimate ones.

To use Bohr's standpoint on the issue, some the Central Asian states managed all the same to make valuable steps in protecting ethnic minorities and introducing democratic institutions. In this way, their "nationalising" policies transcended the earlier efforts impeding the democratisation process.²³ Most of the ex-communist countries have been involved in rather exclusionary nation-building practices, exacerbating interethnic tensions.²⁴ In this respect, ethnically polarised societies are more difficult to consolidate for a common nation-building project, which is said to be one of the pre-requisites for a peaceful transitional process.²⁵

The common critique of the outlined theories is the disproportional analytical value given to the state and its institutions as a key-determinant of ethnic interaction during rapid transitional processes.²⁶ Thus, these theories tend to overproblematise multi-ethnicity. Another point of critique is that most of the discussed theories take ethnic groups as fixed, bounded and conflict-prone. It has been unclear what qualifies as a

18 Ottaway, Marina: *Democracy Challenged: the Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003, p.17.

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

20 Snyder, 2000; Diamond, 1994; Horowitz, Donald: *Democracy in divided societies*, in: Diamond, Larry et al (eds): *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Democracy*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.

21 Horowitz, Donald: *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*. Berkeley : University of California Press, 2001.

22 Brubaker, Rogers: *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

23 Bohr, 1998.

24 Brubaker, 1996; Bohr, 1998; Mark Saroyan: *Majority-Minority Relations in the Soviet Republics*, in Mark Saroyan (ed), *Minorities, Mullahs and Modernity: Reshaping Community in the Former Soviet Union*, California: University of California at Berkeley, 1997.

25 Aklaev, 1999; Snyder, 2000; Patnaik, 2003; Horowitz, 1994; Diamond, 1994.

26 Hughes, James/ Sasse, Gwendolyn: *Comparing Regional and Ethnic Conflicts in the Post-Soviet Transition States*, in: James Hughes/Gwendolyn Sasse (eds): *Ethnicity and Territory in the Former Soviet Union: Regions in conflict*. New York, NY: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001.

"deep ethnic cleavage"²⁷ and whether it precedes or follows on from the political upheaval. Thus, there has been little attention given to the saliency of cleavages and accounts that differentiate between perceived and objectively existing cleavages, which makes a big difference in an analysis of inter- and intra-group interaction during political upheavals.

"Eventful" ethnic identity

A rather different approach to ethnicity and "ethnic conflict" was introduced by Brubaker, who, first, suggests avoiding treating ethnic groups as "putative things-in-the-world... but rather in relational, processual, dynamic, eventful, and disaggregated terms,"²⁸ which can help us to analyse how ethnic "groupness" is being formed as a result of deliberate group-making projects, coding and framing by politicians, media, and governments. Brubaker suggests that nowadays there are many more actors that are interested in "ethnicising" political violence, such as incumbents, kin states, organisations, politicians and the actors of the political struggle themselves. Brubaker notices that in such cases "ethnicity" as such is not a source of conflict; rather conflicts or violence for specific political interests are being deliberately framed in ethnic terms, reifying ethnic "groupness."

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

Reeves, in her accounts of identity during the "Tulip revolution",²⁹ rightly suggests that this is precisely the "groupist" approach that predominates nowadays and hinders a cohesive analysis of the events, producing an ethnic discourse of danger, which has the potential to materialise.

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

The "Tulip revolution" in ethnic "groupness" reification

In this section I will focus on three factors which had the most immediate and profound effect on the reification of ethnic "groupness": the omnipresent discourse of intra-ethnic group struggle, patterns of political mobilisation by the opposition and some instances of political instability that accompanied the "Tulip revolution."

There are a growing number of scholars who believe that regional divisions in Central Asia are the primary feature of political life since independence in 1991.³⁰ According to Melvin and Kadyrov, the centre-regional developments in the post-independence Kyrgyz Republic have been marked by a clear South-North political rivalry, which had already intensified under the perestroika policies. The interpretation of the causes of the "Tulip revolution," both in the media and academic writings, have followed this pattern and see the

27 Horowitz, 1994.

28 Brubaker, Rogers: *Ethnicity without Groups*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 11.

29 Reeves, Madeleine: "We're with the People!" The Eventfulness of Identity in Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution: paper presented at the roundtable on 'Understanding the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan One Year On: Dynamics and Implications,' London School of Economics and Political Science, February 28, 2006.

30 Melvin, Neil: *Patterns of Centre-Regional Relations in Central Asia: The Cases of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan*, in: Hughes, James/ Sasse, Gwendolyn eds: *Ethnicity and Territory in the Former Soviet Union: Regions in conflict*. New York, NY: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001; Kadyrov, Shokhrat: *Political Technologies in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Central Asia*, in: *Vestnik Evrazii*, 2005 (vol.4), No.2, pp. 202-235; Beissinger, Mark: *Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena: the Diffusion of Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip Revolutions*, paper presented to the LSE Shapiro Seminar Series, 2005); Kurmanov, 2005.

events of 24 March as a North-South political confrontation.³¹ Whether clan rivalry was political reality or a constructed myth, the argument here suggests that the regional struggle substantially reified ethnic identities during the events of February-March 2005 in Kyrgyzstan and was one of the contributing factors to the emergence of the narrative of ethnic conflict in the media.³²

The ousting of the Akaev's administration by seizure of the "White House" in Bishkek was seen by many as a victory of the southern political elites over their northern rivals,³³ a victory of the more ethnically conservative "Kyrgyz nationalists" over more Russified urban and "multicultural" Kyrgyz elite from the north.³⁴ The omnipresent discourse on regional strife and the presence of two potential presidential candidates from the South (Kurmanbek Bakiev) and the North (Felix Kulov) produced numerous speculations in the media on the possibility of civil war between the two regions, as though people really divide themselves into "southerners" and "northerners," unless the two strongest leaders negotiate a joint form of governing.³⁵

Markedly, there was persistent discussion of the ethnic aspect of both politicians. The local media expressed hopes for the new president Bakiev to be minority-friendly due to his former education in Russia and, more importantly, his ethnically Russian spouse.³⁶ This factor seemed to be enormously powerful for the people in the atmosphere of ethnicised politics and fear of ethnic conflict and minority oppression. Due to the lack of empirical data it is hard to say with great confidence whether it was the case or not. However, drawing on the media writings, the ethnicity of Bakiev's wife seemed to be an ethnic security card for the new president. For Felix Kulov this card appeared to be his low proficiency in the state language,³⁷ which for many was a proof of his high level of Russification pulling him out of the raw of "Kyrgyz nationalists."

Thus, the growing ethnic polarisation within the Kyrgyz has had a tendency of scaring away national minority communities.³⁸ It produced a sense of exclusion from decision making process on the part of members of the non-titular nationalities, as they were not allowed to get involved in the ethno-regional Kyrgyz strife.³⁹ The politically important Uzbek minority community, whose support was used by the early Akaev's administration, grew increasingly isolated. Attempts by the opposition to include representatives of the national minorities in their movement failed to encourage participation of the key non-titular groups, Uzbeks and Russians.⁴⁰

31 Kurmanov, Zaynidin: The 2005 Parliamentary Elections in Kyrgyzstan and Collapse of the Akaev Regime, in: Central Asia and the Caucasus, 2005 (vol. 3), No.33, pp. 7-14; Knyazev, Alexander: Damped Revolution. 'New Clans' are Striving for Power in Kyrgyzstan, in: Liter.kz, March 5, 2006; Pushev, 2005; Todua, 2005; Marat, 2006.

32 Election-related Disturbances Hit Southern Kyrgyzstan, in: Eurasia Insight, 4 March 2005; Saipov, Alisher: Interethnic Clashes are Possible in Kyrgyzstan, in: Ferghana.ru, March 06, 2005.

33 See Dual Power Scenario Takes Hold of Kyrgyzstan, in: Eurasianet, March 22, 2005; Knyazev, Alexander: Damped Revolution. 'New Clans' are Striving for Power in Kyrgyzstan, in: Liter.kz, May 3, 2006.

34 Melvin, 2002; Pushaev, 2006; Todua, 2005; Marat, 2006.

35 Temirbaev, Vyacheslav: Who is Interested in Distemper?, in: Moya Stolitsa Novosti, April 19, 2005; Dubnov, Arkady: One Year Ago the President Fled Kyrgyzstan, in: Vremya Novostei, March 24, 2006.

36 Saidzimova, Gulnoza: Kyrgyzstan: Will Opposition Leader Bakiev Be Kyrgyzstan's Next President?, in: Institute For War and Peace Reporting, March 24, 2005; Jasek, Timothy: Russians Leaving, Despite Acceptance by Kyrgyz, in: Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe, August 29, 2005.

37 Language Politics in Kyrgyzstan, in: Institute for War and Peace Reporting, April 29, 2005.

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

39 Sukhov, Alexei: Russians in Kyrgyzstan – To Leave or To Stay?, in: Navigator.kz, June 10, 2005.

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

Another force that reinforced ethnic "groupness" is the very way political mobilisation occurred within the "revolutionary" movement after the rigged parliamentary elections. During the election campaign, the ethnic background of a certain candidate came to be important because ethnic communities sought political representation, but also because political candidates themselves either directly or tacitly manipulated ethnic identity in order to gain necessary support. What is dangerous in electoral ethno-politics is that the victory of a certain candidate is projected into a victory of the whole ethnic group which that candidate appealed to and claimed to represent. On the one hand, representatives of the Uzbek communities were uneasy about the possible victory of some ethnically Uzbek candidates, fearing protests by the Kyrgyz,⁴¹ but on the other hand, success of these candidates determined the whole minority group's social and political status. As one barber reasoned about the political race and the place of the ethnically Uzbek candidate Batyrov, one of the influential figures in the southern Kyrgyzstan: "It [the elections] will show the true status and power of the Uzbek people. Batyrov is the head of the [Uzbek] cultural centre. If he loses, then Uzbeks are worth nothing."⁴²

The eventual victory of some ethnically Uzbek candidates in the elections, which international organisations claimed in no way met international norms, and the protests by the losing candidates easily took on an ethnic spin. Therefore, an already growing sense of ethnic "groupness" instigated by elections was intensified when the protests against the fraudulent elections started in late February. The mobilisation of supporters for protests, especially in some cities in the south, like Uzgen and Jalalabad, was seen not so much as a call for justice and the resignation of the president, but more as a growing antagonism between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.⁴³

The southern city of Jalalabad witnessed a fight between supporters of the victorious Uzbek candidate Batyrov and the defeated, ethnically Kyrgyz candidate Jusupbek Bakiev. The fight was immediately reported to be an ethnic confrontation,⁴⁴ whereas there were only few people initiating and getting involved in the brawl. To refer back to Brubaker's argument, in this case the political institutions and the empowered individuals they represent, not ethnic groups, instigated the street violence.

Protesters in support for Adakhan Madumarov⁴⁵ in the southern city of Uzgen, inhabited mostly by the Uzbek population, were predominantly ethnic Kyrgyz from nearby villages. Not only were protesters seen to be intruding into the private life of the city dwellers, they were seen as alien and aggressive Kyrgyz:

Uzbeks were irritated by the fact that Kyrgyz people were coming and disrupting their work, intervening in their life, forcing them to stay at home as they did not join the demonstrators. One Uzgen student said, "they were behaving as if it was their city."⁴⁶

The patterns of mobilisation by both the defeated and victorious candidates, which was based almost solely on ethnicity, laid dangerous foundation for a crystallisation of antagonistic ethnic "groupness." Moreover, such mono-ethnic group-making projects reminded many of the patterns of ethnic mobilisation during the events in Osh in 1990.

The Russophone population has been generally passive in political life throughout the Central Asian region and loyal to the Akaev's government. Therefore, there have been few attempts on the part of the oppositional forces to target this particular group for their support. The inclusion of the Russophone population

41 Abdurasulov, Abdujalil: *Titular Group and Ethnic Minorities after the Kyrgyz Revolution: The Changed Interaction*, 2006.

42 Abdurasulov, Abdujalil: *Titular Group and Ethnic Minorities after the Kyrgyz Revolution: The Changed Interaction*, 2006, p.2.

43 Saipov, Alisher: *Interethnic Confrontations are Possible in Kyrgyzstan*, in: *Ferghana.ru*, March 06, 2005.

44 Saipov, Alisher: *Interethnic Confrontations are Possible in Kyrgyzstan*, in: *Ferghana.ru*, March 06, 2005.

45 One of the opposition leaders who ran for a seat in the parliament and lost the race: Madumarov became a Vice Prime Minister after the "revolution".

46 Abdurasulov, Abdujalil: *Titular Group and Ethnic Minorities after the Kyrgyz Revolution: The Changed Interaction*, 2006, p.3.

was also a matter of communication. Most of the protests that took place throughout the country were in Kyrgyz.

The situation with the Uzbek minority was rather different. Oppositional forces, together with the youth organizations, such as the Kel-Kel movement,⁴⁷ tried to mobilise the Uzbek population despite the fact that the majority of them seemed to be pro-Akaev.⁴⁸ The figure of Anvar Artykov, an ethnic Uzbek, who joined the oppositional forces, was mentioned as a sign of the ethnic inclusiveness of the anti-Akaev movement and its solidarity with other groups.⁴⁹ But despite all the attempts, the Uzbek minority remained largely uninvolved due to its distrust towards the opposition and due to the similarity of oppositional political mobilisation, expressed in seizures of lands and administrative buildings, with the Osh riots of 1990, when hundreds of Kyrgyz and Uzbeks were killed in brutal mutual violence.⁵⁰ Memories of the Osh events made participation in the "revolution" unattractive for the Uzbek population in the south. During the days of mass protests throughout the country many Uzbeks preferred to stay in *mahallahs* (a traditional community of neighbours) fearing that the outrage against the government could easily turn against them.⁵¹ In addition to that, the leading opposition figures have been associated with the "Kyrgyz nationalists": "The reason why Uzbeks play no role in Kyrgyzstan's opposition movement can be explained by the fact that the opposition movement is dominated by Kyrgyz nationalists," said the journalist, who requested anonymity. "The rhetoric of these politicians frightens many Uzbeks."⁵²

It was obvious that oppositional forces were weak in mobilising the urban population and were much distrusted by both the Uzbek and Russian communities. Consequently, the unfolding pattern of village mobilisation allows one to see the March events through the prism of not only the regional, North-South struggle, but also the fight between the rural Kyrgyz and the Russified urban population, and as an ethnic "nationalist" Kyrgyz group against other ethnic groups. Thus, political mobilisation during the revolution, influenced by the pre-revolutionary interplay ethnicity and the characteristics of individual oppositional leaders, was one of the conspicuous factors affecting ethnic "groupness."

The post-revolutionary weakness of the rule of law, a scandalous series of assassinations of the parliament deputies, the alleged penetration of the criminal elements into the higher echelons of power,⁵³ the re-distribution of property, the unwillingness of the tandem to conduct constitutional reforms, and ongoing rallies have been prolonged political instability, inciting migration⁵⁴ and an atmosphere of unease. I will not concentrate on each of the mentioned aspects of instability precisely, but rather focus on several of the most relevant to our study of ethnicity in the "revolution," such as the lootings of the night of March 24 in Bishkek, land seizures, anti-Russian leaflets, and the discussion of the Russian language status.

47 Kel-Kel is a youth movement to which was attributed a similar role in the "Tulip revolution" as Otpor in Serbia, Enough in the Georgian Rose revolution, and Pora in the Orange revolution in Ukraine.

48 Khamidov, Alisher: Kyrgyzstan's Uzbeks: A Safe Vote for the Government, in: Eurasianet, September 9, 2004.

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

50 See Pannier, Bruce: Kyrgyzstan: Deputies Condemn Elections, Urge Early Presidential Poll, in: Eurasianet, March 10, 2005.

51 Abdurasulov, Abdujalil: Titular Group and Ethnic Minorities after the Kyrgyz Revolution: The Changed Interaction, 2006.

52 Khamidov, Alisher: Kyrgyzstan's Uzbeks: A Safe Vote for the Government, in: Eurasianet, September 9, 2004.

53 Political Showdown Brews in Kyrgyzstan, in: Eurasia Insight, January 1, 2006; Kyrgyzstan's Revolution at Risk, in: Eurasia Insight, September 26, 2005; Bruce, Pannier: Kyrgyzstan: Lawmaker Murdered in Apparent Mafia-Related Shooting, in: Eurasia Insight, September 22, 2005.

54 In 2005 migration to the Russian Federation doubled when compared to 2004, comprising 25,000 people. In February 2006, 55,000 individuals were on the waiting list to leave Kyrgyzstan – See Toralieva, Gulnura: Russians are Fleeing Kyrgyzstan, in: Gazeta.kg, February 14, 2006; Emigration from Kyrgyzstan is Surging, in: Eurasianet, March 21, 2006.

The absence of the rule of law on the first night of the "revolution" led to massive looting in the capital on the night of March 24. The demographics of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan display the legacy of the Soviet modernisation policies, which meant a large presence of the ethnically Russian population in the cities. The visible non-involvement of the Slavic population in the protests and reports on the oppositional buses bringing people from the southern regions set a stereotype that the night of night was organized by "hungry tanned marginals, who came from the south to direct revolution."⁵⁵ Although this information was refuted several times in the media, it seemed to spread the panic of Kyrgyz "revenge" against other, primarily, Slavic minorities, who were reported to suffer disproportional financial losses through the looting.⁵⁶ This perception of the rural Kyrgyz versus urban Russian was further exacerbated by anti-Russian leaflets⁵⁷ and the illegal seizure of the land lots on the outskirts of Bishkek. Several leaflets which the police were not able to confiscate produced panic and rumours about the possible forceful expulsion of the Russians. Ethnically loaded rumours have an enormous power on the reification of ethnic "groupness", as demonstrated by the appalling Osh events. In times of political instability, inadequate reporting and the lack of a prompt reaction from the state officials, such rumours force people to undertake en masse actions, such as preventive protectionist measures, violence or mass migration; in this case, the Slavic population chose the latter.⁵⁸

Land seizure after the "revolution" was accompanied by nationalistic statements,⁵⁹ spreading fear among all city dwellers and among members of the non-titular nationalities especially,⁶⁰ confronting them again with their "non-titularness." Although the land fever was blamed on growing poverty in the country, which affects a large percentage of the population regardless of nationality, illegal seizures of plots of land⁶¹ did not remain ethnically neutral as some of the squatters made their claims on basis of their alleged "Kyrgyz-ness," "titularity," "indigenoussness" and thus, apparent legitimacy over land.⁶² The latter was the second striking similarity with the Osh events of 1990, when divisions in the ownership of the land triggered large inter-communal violence.

After the "revolution" there have been attempts by both elites and lay people to fulfil what Horowitz called the psycho-political search for "the real owners of the country." Among the attempts to restore justice in "symbolic politics" have been ongoing discussions on the status of the Russian language.⁶³ Horowitz

55 Mikhailova, Natalya: Why are Citizens of Russia Concerned about Kyrgyz Revolutions?, in: Komsomolskaya Pravda, July 2, 2005.

56 This fact was mentioned in the ICG report and voiced by Vyachelav Hamisov, Chair of the International Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic (see Sukhov, Alexei: Russians in Kyrgyzstan: to Leave or to Stay?, in: Navigator.kz, June 10, 2005).

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

58 The number of applications for emigration in the first quarter of 2005 was four times higher than over the same period in 2004, see Mikhailova: Komsomolskaya Pravda, July 2, 2005.

59 Toursunov, Hamid: Kyrgyzstan: Land Fever, in: Eurasianet, August 15, 2005; Saralava, Leila: Land Rights and Wrongs in Kyrgyzstan, in: Institute for War and Peace Reporting, November 12, 2005.

60 Abdrakhmanova, Ainagul /Jumagulov, Sultan: Bishkek Residents are Alarmed at Land Seizures, in: Institute for War and Peace Reporting, April 12, 2005.

61 According to different estimations, the number of those seizing land varied at approximately 30,000- 50,000 people. IWPR reported that 80,000 people submitted applications for land. The agency also reported that those seizing land are very well organized and experts fear that if their demands are not satisfied there is a high probability of open confrontation. See Abdrakhmanova, Ainagul and Jumagulov, Sultan: Bishkek Residents are Alarmed at Land Seizures, in: Institute for War and Peace Reporting, April 12, 2005

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

63 See My Language – Your Enemy? In: Vecherni Bishkek, May 12 2006; Cherikov, Sadyrbek: Jihad against Those Who Does not Speak Kyrgyz, in: Eurasiamedia.ru, July 7, 2005; Panfilova, Viktoria: The Russian Language as a Political Tool,

called language one of the "quintessential entitlement issue[s]."64 Discussions of the status of the Russian language, and suggestions by prominent political figures to revoke its official status due to its impeding influence on the development of the Kyrgyz language,65 has created additional friction to the growing instability and insecurity, forcing many Russians to realise again that they are treated like ethnic Russians and not like Kyrgyzstani people.

To come back to our central theoretical account, it is plausible to say that the formation of ethnic "groupness" was under way during and after the "Tulip revolution," whether it was created deliberately or unintentionally, and is partially a result of certain *events* rather than intrinsic cleavages. This section presented some of those *events*, such as the looting after the "revolution", the spread of anti-Slavic leaflets, illegal land seizures, and renewed debates on the status of the Russian language. Obviously, it is almost impossible to measure the level of ethnic "groupness" or identify clear links of causality.

Conclusion

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

In order to substantiate my argument, I used a combined conceptual framework that brought together some elements of transitional theories in semi-authoritarian societies and a constructivist approach to ethnicity. The vast range of literature has been focused on ethnicity in semi-democracies or semi-autocracies, trying to explain the structural causes of the high potential for ethnic conflict in such settings. Among the normative suggestions have been the lack of institutional basis for a peaceful transfer of power, the presence of deep cleavages along which political competition occurs, elites playing an ethnic card in order to get a plurality of supporters, and an unfinished nation-building project. Most transitologists refer to ethnic communities as fixed and unitary actors, whether they are involved in a conflict as part of a psychological quest for "group worth" or driven by opportunistic competition. This work has attempted to combine some parts of the mentioned theories, such as the role of elites and nation-building legacies, with a somewhat new approach to "ethnicity without groups".66 The latter perspective on ethnicity as something fluid, ever-changing and eventful enabled me to identify some factors and *events*, which are not directly connected to ethnicity but which contributed to a reification of ethnic "groupness," i.e. a certain degree of unity and solidarity on an ethnic basis.

Notably, the argument does not imply that ethnic conflicts and ethnic groups are wholly constructed. What is being constructed is not ethnic identity per se, but certain elements of it (for instance, the inability to live together and the perception of other ethnic communities as intrinsically belligerent) and a certain amount of often conflictual solidarity. This account is case specific – the work dealt with the issues of ethnicity in semi-authoritarian societies undergoing a rapid political change.

Some of the findings suggest that one of the most conspicuous activities was electoral mobilisation during and after the parliamentary race, which often evolved around ethnic candidates, the political and media

in: Nazavisimaya Gazeta, December 12, 2005.

64 Horowitz, Donald: *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley, London : University of California Press, 220.

65 Panfilova, Viktoria: *The Russian Language as a Political Tool*, in: Nazavisimaya Gazeta, December 12, 2005.

66 Brubaker, 2004.

discourse on intra-ethnic group struggle, the discussion of the status of the Russian language after the "revolution."

Importantly, by identifying and analysing the ways ethnicity becomes politicised, one can also identify the ways to intervene and prevent such forces from making ethnicity the primary feature of every-day politics. Consequently, by stopping ethnicity from becoming politicised, it may be possible to avoid inter-communal confrontations with dreadful repercussions. Among the questions that still remain either only partially answered or unanswered, one is whether regionalism constitutes an objectively salient feature of Kyrgyzstani politics and serves as a dividing line among population, or whether it has only been perceived as a salient feature, publicised and taken up in the analyses of scholarly and journalistic writings. The reason why it is important, as has been demonstrated by the current thesis, is that the discourse of regional rivalry has a substantial influence on ethnicity in the country.