

# Violence in Kyrgyzstan, Vacuum in the Region

## The case for Russia-EU joint crisis management

Dr. Anna Matveeva



**LSE Civil Society & Human Security Research Unit  
Working Paper**

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# **VIOLENCE IN KYRGYZSTAN, VACUUM IN THE REGION: THE CASE FOR RUSSIA-EU JOINT CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

Dr. Anna Matveeva

## **Introduction**

Interethnic violence in the South of Kyrgyzstan in June 2010 attracted little international spotlight. As Kyrgyzstan is notable for the lack of great power interest, the crisis was mainly of concern for its Central Asian neighbours of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Russia, the EU and other actors demonstrated cautious attitudes, guided by apprehension than by responsibility to protect. The consequences involved a loss of life, destruction, displacement, and a breakdown in interethnic relations.

The paper outlines the failure of the state security providers to manage the crisis, the regional and international responses to the outbreak of violence and argues that a chance for positive international cooperation has been missed.<sup>1</sup> Unlike other crises, the warring parties recognised the need for external involvement and the Kyrgyzstan government appealed for assistance – which never materialised. Willingness to receive help was not matched by the desire to provide it, underscoring the limitations of international response. This failure calls for a reassessment of security policies in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia and, a debate over regional cooperation in crisis management in the post-Soviet space. Russia and the EU need to draw lessons from the experience and assess what modalities of cooperation should be drawn up if another crisis unfolds.

The author held a position of the Head of Research Secretariat for the Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission (KIC) in 2010 based in the South of Kyrgyzstan. The paper draws upon some field research material gathered in 2010 for the KIC.

## **June 2010 Violence in the South**

The conflict was preceded by an April 2010 uprising against the rule of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, whose ascent to power was caused by an overthrow of his predecessor Askar Akayev in the 2005 'Tulip Revolution'. Anti-Bakiyev protests turned violent, leading to the death of 86 people. The events brought into power a Provisional Government (PG) that consisted of representatives of opposition forces, oppressed by the previous regime, but disunited ideologically and organisationally. Roza Otunbayeva, a former high-level international diplomat, was elected as the chair of the PG and interim president thereafter. The new power-holders initiated a constitutional reform to transform Kyrgyzstan from a presidential republic into a state, where the parliament and the presidency share power more equally. The new constitution was adopted at the referendum on 27 June 2010.

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Matveeva 'Long-term prospects for Kyrgyzstan are worrying,' *The Guardian Comment is Free*, 1 August 2010.

As political change unfolded in Bishkek, situation in the South was deteriorating. The ex-president Bakiyev's clan tried to cling to power. Its removal created a free-for-all environment for asset raiding and racketeering. The Uzbeks were more vulnerable to crime, since they had low standing among the police and prosecutors. They started to make their own security arrangements. Escalating group fights between Kyrgyz and Uzbek in Osh were assuming interethnic character, as sides mobilised supporters from their ethnic kin.

Inter-communal relations were deteriorating. Uzbek leaders were raising the minority concerns, such as language and cultural rights, representation in public administration, judiciary and security sector, and acknowledgement of multiethnic character of the state. The Kyrgyz community in the South felt ostracised by the new government, which, in their perspective, preferred to rely on Uzbeks. Fascinated by political reform and by the opportunity to launch the new constitutional design, the PG lost sight of the South.

### *Opening a Security Gap*

The April power change disrupted established relations, including those in the security sector. Politicians who assumed office in Bishkek had been harassed by the state security agents in their years in opposition. Many of these agents came from the South, following Bakiyev's policy of recruitment of southern cadre. The new politicians could hardly trust them (Matveeva, 2010). In the period between 7 April and 10 June the PG was frantically changing their security officials - the Minister of Defence Ismail Isakov arrived into power from jail - while considerations of loyalty rather than merit prevailed. Police reports on what they increasingly saw as a rise in interethnic tensions rather than ordinary crime, as originally thought, was drowning in a general sense of instability and insecurity.

On 10 June the police in Osh were unable to make an angry Uzbek crowd disperse. The crowd clashed with police and Kyrgyz residents who mobilised against them, and beatings and burnings ensued. By early hours interethnic violence spread throughout the city. Crowds of rural Kyrgyz advanced towards Osh. The situation aggravated when they surrounded the city. The Uzbeks set up defences to prevent Kyrgyz crowds from entering their neighbourhoods. Some Uzbeks had firearms and used them to fire at advancing Kyrgyz. The Kyrgyz seized weapons from the army, police and border guards, and captured military vehicles. After fire fights, retreats and sieges, the Kyrgyz crowds overpowered the Uzbek defences and poured into Osh. Killings, looting, rape and arson attacks unfolded on a massive scale. On 13 June violence subsided as the information came that fighters from Uzbekistan were approaching to take revenge. This turned out not to be true, but motivated many Kyrgyz attackers to leave.

On 12 June violence spread to Jalalabad province, where Uzbeks tried to set up defences to prevent Kyrgyz from the North from joining rioters in Osh. This tactics created a stand-off between communities in Suzak and Bazar-Korgan. Some rural Kyrgyz went to Jalalabad motivated by a desire to rebuff what they saw as a treacherous Uzbek plot to set up the autonomy and undermine 'Kyrgyz statehood'. Street fighting, looting and arson took place on 13 – 14 June, but not on the same

scale as in Osh. Altogether up to 470 were killed (74% Uzbek, 25% Kyrgyz and 1% belonged to other ethnic groups). Over 90% were men.<sup>2</sup>

The epicentres of violence (Osh, Jalalabad and Bazar-Korgan) are located along the border with Uzbekistan. As Osh clashes began, Uzbek civilians, - mostly women, children and the wounded, - started to flee towards Suritash, VLKSM and other crossing points. However, they were confronted by the Uzbekistan's border guards, who were under strict orders not to let refugees through and to hold the gates closed. This created a feeling of being trapped and some people started to panic.

Apparently, local civilian and security officials found it difficult emotionally to fulfil the order and not let the suffering population through, especially since they witnessed how Uzbek civilians were chased by armed gangs to the border and had nowhere to flee from there. Anger increased when dead bodies sailed down Ak-Buura river to Uzbekistan's territory. Senior officials in the bordering provinces kept urging president Islam Karimov to change his mind. Finally, the border was opened, allowing a flood of refugees through. Several children and old people died in the ensuing stampede, as the crowds rushed through ditches, built as border fortifications. However, the border remained closed in those areas, where violence was low-key, despite of the concentration of displaced Uzbeks from Noukat and Aravan.

### **Collapse of the National Response System**

Networks of patronage and corruption constitute important pillars of governance throughout the region, but they function differently in different countries of Central Asia. Personality politics substitutes for an orderly political process, and patronage networks take the place of open competition based on merit. A place in the network guarantees a position in the power hierarchy or in state-controlled businesses, and enables advantages to be secured during the privatisation of state assets.

Appointments held by outsiders hold little weight. Patronage networks that operate on the provincial and local level are dependent on the standing of the patron in the capital. When a patron falls out of grace, the network becomes redundant and is replaced by an alternative one (Koehler and Zürcher, 2004).

Networks are based on loyalty, and kinship and regionalism is a key factor. Networks are vertically organised and there is little horizontal cooperation and alliance-building between them, other than at the top where elite bargaining happens. Central Asian institutions resemble their Soviet predecessors, but in fact represent a product of adaptation of these institutions to post-Soviet realities. The relative standing of the ministries is often related to their lucrative fund-raising power: a Ministry of Interior, for example, can be richer and more powerful than a Ministry of Defence, since it enjoys more opportunities to engage in official racketeering (Matveeva, 2006, p. 14). In Kyrgyzstan the security sector was weakened by two power changes, split regional loyalties, low morale and widespread corruption. Removal of Bakiyevs' regime which previously played a regulatory role in organised crime, created a vacuum, allowing

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<sup>2</sup> Information provided by Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Healthcare, figures of dead by *Kylym Shamy*, Kyrgyzstan's NGO. They slightly differ from the Prosecutor General Office's figure of 439 in December 2010, but prosecutors acknowledged that the number may grow slightly as investigations proceed. Information provided to the Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission, KIC Report, p. 44, Para 222, [www.k-ic.org](http://www.k-ic.org)

vicious competition between rival groups. Corruption and job-buying of powerful appointments and those which allow rent-seeking, undermined the rule of law.

The central government in Kyrgyzstan was not prepared to deal with a crisis of such magnitude so early in the office and underestimated warning signals from the South. State Committee on National Security (GKNB) was caught unprepared.<sup>3</sup> Even when the key officials assembled on 11 June at a crisis management meeting in Bishkek, they did not have an adequate sense of the character and scale of violence. Reports coming from the police, the Osh mayor and the provincial governor were confusing, as they were not sure themselves if the disturbances were of criminal, religious extremist or interethnic nature, whether any organised group was behind them, and whether they were localised in one place or spread over a larger territory. Night conditions prohibited to access how many people were involved.

The PG uncovered the true condition of the security agencies they inherited only during the crisis. They found out that defence cuts made under Bakiyev had left it under resourced and under equipped, and that some equipment had been stolen. Defence Minister Isakov, the main person in charge of the crisis, was out of contact for hours on 11 June, as he was out of mobile network coverage and did not have a satellite phone.<sup>4</sup> Nobody from among international agencies lent their phone to the struggling officials.

Military, police and border guards became easy targets for seizing weapons and equipment, and some started to flee. The border guards abandoned their posts on the border with Uzbekistan either on orders from their commanders or out of their own volition. The military did not fare well. On 11 June three APCs-80 were ordered to move to Osh from Maily-Suu regiment. Their column was stopped on approaches to the city by a 2,500-strong Kyrgyz crowd, who demanded the military vehicles and arms. The officers were at a loss as their mobility was limited: the first APC towed the second, and the third APC was towed by a KAMAZ truck, because the two APCs had technical faults and were out of petrol. The commander deceived the Kyrgyz crowd by promising to use the 1<sup>st</sup> APC to get petrol to fill the other two and return. The crowd let 1<sup>st</sup> APC pass. In return they got 27 small arms, 1 SVD, 2 AK-74, 2 RPK-74 and 21 AKS 74. The two remaining APCs were repaired by Kyrgyz civilians, and petrol was found.<sup>5</sup>

Bishkek attempted to send troops from the north and called in reservists. The government believed that Bakiyev supporters were plotting a coup in the capital and were reluctant to move all forces to the South. Their efforts to bring reservists were only partially successful: some did not show up, others – ethnic Kyrgyz – turned up to be motivated by a desire to ‘show the Uzbeks their place’ and had to be pulled back. Some among the army and police solidified with the Kyrgyz rioters and facilitated their attacks on Uzbek *mahallas*.

The Uzbek communities were surprised by the outbreak of violence and by the state’s inability to put it down. Self-organisation included warning calls from mosques for residents to wake up to avoid being killed while asleep and banging on pipes to make

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<sup>3</sup> Author’s interview with Elmira Ibragimova, November 2010, Bishkek.

<sup>4</sup> Author’s interview with Omurbek Tekebayev, November 2010, Bishkek.

<sup>5</sup> Based on information provided by Kyrgyzstan’s military to the KIC and KIC witness accounts.

noise. Uzbek men toured around *mahallas* in cars, calling people to prepare for defence. Fortification of *mahallas* began: trees were cut and used to bloc the roads together with trucks, trenches were dug and barricades erected. Armoured plates were welded onto KAMAZ trucks. An APC was apprehended from a DOSAAF (Territorial Army) school, repaired and put to use. On 11 June groups of Uzbeks from different parts of the city tried to come to assistance of those *mahallas* which came under attack, but by 12 June realised that they were trapped inside their own quarters. Their defences became more deliberate, and they mounted a few successful counterattacks.

The PG started to recognise on 11 June that the country did not have sufficient capacity to cope with a deepening crisis and needed external help. The same message was coming from the Uzbek community leaders, civil society and opposition politicians in Bishkek. Uzbek diaspora organised demonstrations in Moscow and used Russian media channels to make their appeal for intervention public. On 12 June Otunbayeva addressed President Dmitry Medvedev for a peacekeeping deployment.

### **Regional Inaction**

As the clashes broke out, the Kyrgyz authorities were worried about how Uzbekistan may behave. There were fears that angry community members in the bordering Andijan and Ferghana provinces of Uzbekistan would mobilise from across the border. As violence progressed, the Osh Uzbek community leaders kept issuing appeals to Uzbekistan's President Karimov to intervene. While the Uzbeks looked at Tashkent with hope, the Kyrgyz feared such a prospect, since, in their view, such intervention would not be neutral.

The Uzbekistan authorities responded to the refugee crisis efficiently and with caution. A restrained policy of allowing a substantial but not unlimited numbers to cross and treating the refugees with consideration had a stabilising effect on the situation. Uzbekistan received 110,938 refugees, whom the Emergencies' Ministry accommodated in 59 tent camps. Andijan province had 45 tent camps where 85,033 refugees were settled, six were opened in Namangan for 6,514 persons, and eight in Ferghana which received 20,021. About 90% of refugees crossed during 11 June. Uzbekistan also did help those at the border who remained in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>6</sup>

Kazakhstan which chaired OSCE was of limited help, as it feared problems with its own Uzbeks in Southern Kazakhstan province. Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks migrating northwards to Russia in the aftermath of violence were discretely allowed to traverse through Kazakhstan's territory. Tajikistan was condemned by the Kyrgyz side for harbouring culprits, accused that its security officials helped to foment the June violence, and/ or allowed the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) together with foreign *ihadis* and Bakiyev's relatives to do so. Tajik side denied the allegations, stating that UTO ceased to exist in 1999 and challenging the Kyrgyz officials to present proof.<sup>7</sup> Relations between the two countries deteriorated.

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<sup>6</sup> Alan Waddams contributed to this section.

<sup>7</sup> 'Tajik General Denies Involvement in Kyrgyz Violence,' 1 July 2010, RFE/RL Newline, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajik\\_General\\_Denies\\_Involvement\\_In\\_Kyrgyz\\_Violence/2088314.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajik_General_Denies_Involvement_In_Kyrgyz_Violence/2088314.html)

### *Russia's Reaction*

Given Kyrgyzstan's history of turmoil - it is the only post-Soviet country which has undergone two popular uprisings leading to regime change - it was reasonable to expect that the country would be on a crisis 'watch list' of the international players. Moreover, both Russia and the US have their military bases there. However, the international community stayed placid. Neither Russia nor the EU reinforced their capacities on the ground after April. Their diplomatic operations remained limited and focussed at politicians in Bishkek. There was no effort to strengthen the OSCE Office in Kyrgyzstan, mandated with conflict prevention which could have been an operational vehicle for joint Russia, EU and US efforts.

As the conflict broke out, Russia's actions dashed all hopes on the ground. Moscow chose to concentrate on relief measures: provided emergency medical evacuation, sent humanitarian supplies and assisted with medical forensic examinations, including DNA tests. Beyond that it remained non-committal, calling the crisis 'an internal matter'.<sup>8</sup> Instead of troops, Moscow gave advice to deal with the crisis by themselves and 'restore order with maximum speed'.<sup>9</sup>

Russian officials criticised Bishkek's continuous failure, made fatalistic predictions about an 'Afghan-type scenario' in Kyrgyzstan, kept promising assistance with APCs, helicopters and fuel that never materialised, and remained unsympathetic to the government's pleas (International Crisis Group, 2010, p. 21). The Russian Embassy was receiving calls from members of the public in the South asking for help, intervention, emergency evacuation or humanitarian supplies, but it merely documented the cases and issued appeals to the Kyrgyzstan's government to act.<sup>10</sup>

As the riots were exhausting themselves, the Kyrgyz authorities no longer felt the need for an intervention. The Uzbeks, by contrast, felt vulnerable, as prosecution and reprisals against their community has started. Whereas at the height of the clashes both sides desired external help, the subsequent campaign for external involvement was increasingly seen to be in Uzbek interests. The most practical assistance from Russia's side was the willingness to receive all those - mostly Uzbeks - leaving in the aftermath of violence. Such people did not claim a refugee status, but most are determined to resettle in Russia permanently and obtain citizenship.

Why did Russia not intervene? Seemingly, there were no legal obstacles to a peacekeeping operation. Russia could have used the government's invitation as the legal basis, given its direct appeal and the Friendship Treaty between two countries of 27 July 2000. Mylonas and Radnitz attribute the reasons to low geopolitical significance. 'The two powers [Russia and US – AM] perceive little at stake in Kyrgyzstan. The country is impoverished, possesses no oil or gas, it does not border Russia, and has no known al-Qaeda presence. Unlike Georgia, Kyrgyzstan has never

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<sup>8</sup> Coverage see in Hulkar Isamova, 'Kyrgyzstan asks Russia to help quell ethnic clashes,' 12 June 2010, Report— Reuters – AlertNet, <http://reliefweb.int/node/357824>

<sup>9</sup> Dmitry Medvedev in telephone conversation with Roza Otunbayeva on 13 June 2010, reported by *RIA Novosti*, <http://en.rian.ru/exsoviet/20100613/159412629.html>

<sup>10</sup> Author's interview with Vladimir Rushailo, October 2010, Bishkek.

been under consideration for NATO membership and is therefore not at risk of exiting Russia's 'sphere of influence.'<sup>11</sup> There is some truth in this argument.

Some Kyrgyz politicians, such as Omurbek Tekebayev, deputy chair of the PG, attribute Russia's inaction to its alleged displeasure with the idea of turning the country into a semi-parliamentary republic. In this line of reasoning, were Kyrgyzstan to halt the constitutional referendum and dismiss Tekebayev from his post, Russia would have sent the troops in. President Dmitry Medvedev's statement of 27 June 2010 disfavoured the new Constitution, when the referendum brought an overwhelming 'Yes' vote, serves as an indirect confirmation of that.

Arguably, the reasons were different. They lay at the highest echelons of power in Moscow, which are influenced more by global factors than local developments. Intricacies of power rivalries and political alliances in Kyrgyzstan were not what the Kremlin was concerned about. Although individual Kyrgyz politicians enjoyed good relations with various parts of the Russian establishment, Moscow did not have a single horse to back. It is believed that Russian Embassy supported the dispatch of peacekeepers at the time.<sup>12</sup>

Logistically, a rapid deployment would not have been hard to organise. Russia has its largest military base in the neighbouring Tajikistan, where the 201<sup>st</sup> Motor Rifle Division is deployed. It constituted the backbone of the CIS Peacekeeping Force during the civil war in Tajikistan. In fact, troops from Russia were already sent to the Russian military base at Kant in the north, but then Moscow announced that their arrival was necessary to protect personnel at the base.

The main factor deciding against the intervention seemed to be the fall-out from the 2008 war in South Ossetia, for which Russia paid a dear political price. In this context, potential negative repercussions of an involvement in Kyrgyzstan loomed large, but benefits were not obvious. Russian politicians feared that Cold Warrior discourse in the West would easily accuse Russia of projection of geopolitical influence.<sup>13</sup> It would be assumed that Russians intervened for the sake of getting the US military base at Manas out.

Fear of adverse publicity was also a factor. In messy conditions of an interethnic conflict peacekeepers would inevitably do something wrong and be vulnerable to criticism of their conduct. The troops may have to use lethal force, and in an event of casualties, Russians would be to blame. They would have to enforce order, against the wishes of Kyrgyz community members who might feel that foreigners would tell them how to behave. By the way of comparison, the deployment of the Soviet paratroopers and prosecutors in the 1990, now remembered in Osh as helpful and fair, had been criticised at the time: investigators had been accused of theft and of

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<sup>11</sup> Harris Mylonas and Scott Radnitz, 'Stopping Ethnic Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan' Nationalities Blog, 22 June 2011, <http://nationalities.wordpress.com/2010/06/22/stopping-ethnic-pogroms-in-kyrgyzstan/>

<sup>12</sup> Author's interviews with Russian Embassy diplomats, Bishkek, July 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Discussions at 'One Year after the Independent Report on the Conflict in Georgia: Responses and Updates with Heidi Tagliavini,' Chatham House Roundtable, London, RIIA, 12 October 2010.

siphoning assets from Kyrgyzstan. An investigation into their conduct was launched which failed to uncover proof of misconduct.<sup>14</sup>

Kyrgyzstan is an open country, where foreign media operates freely. Any pitfalls could be duly reported by what Moscow sees as unfriendly Western press. Thus, the Kremlin feared that any robust action on the ground could easily turn into a public relations disaster, to which image-conscious Russians are particularly sensitive. In the opinion of a senior Russian military officer, 'we are not yet ready, as the Israelis, to produce a videotape in response to an allegation of unlawful use of firearms. We would grow sick and tired, proving that we are not camels.'<sup>15</sup>

Domestic audience also mattered. In case of casualties among peacekeepers, Russian press would surely make an issue out of it, unleashing a debate on why Russia should pay with the blood of its soldiers for mismanagement of interethnic relations by the Kyrgyz authorities. An online survey conducted on 14 June 2010 by the *Ekho Moskvy* radio station suggested that the vast majority of Russians wanted to keep their troops out of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>16</sup> The military feared a long-term engagement. An apprehension of a 'mission creep,' as was the Soviet and later Coalition's experiences in Afghanistan, and lukewarm attitudes towards Otunbayeva's government, too fresh in power to develop strong links in Moscow, contributed to Kremlin's caution.

Russia did not receive sufficient international encouragement either. Non-intervention did not cost the Kremlin anything. Nobody apart from the Uzbek community in Kyrgyzstan condemned Russia for the failure to protect, and their voices are too weak to matter on a global scene. The international Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission attributed blame solely to the national authorities and did not discuss international responsibility in any measure.

### **International Responses**

Russia did not have to mount an operation alone. It could have obtained a Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)<sup>17</sup> mandate, to which Bishkek addressed its appeal on 14 June, when it was clear that Russia would not send troops. Given Russia's supremacy in CSTO, a Russia-led coalition seemed a possible option, but proved problematic due to opposition from Uzbekistan and Belarus. Isolationist Islam Karimov from the onset decided not to intervene, and CSTO gathering was not going to change his position. Minsk hosted the exiled ex-president Bakiyev and was in no mood to either bail out the politicians who ousted him, or to please Moscow, as bilateral relations left much to be desired.

In March 2010 the UN signed a cooperation agreement with the CSTO, recognising it as a legitimate regional security organisation. Conceived as a regional response to

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<sup>14</sup> Author's interview with Valery Bolshakov, former deputy head of joint investigation of the USSR Interior Ministry, KGB and Prosecutor's General Office into the events of June 1990 in Osh, Moscow, October 2010,.

<sup>15</sup> Denis Telmanov, 'Российские десантники готовы к отправке в Киргизию,' 15 June 2010, <http://pda.gzt.ru/topnews/politics/-rossiiskie-desantniki-gotovy-k-otpravke-v-/310275.html>

<sup>16</sup> Simon Shuster, 'Why Isn't Russia Intervening in Kyrgyzstan?' *Time Magazine*, 16 June 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1997055,00.html>

<sup>17</sup> Member-states are Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

NATO, active in the post-Soviet periphery, CSTO never proved itself in action. Crisis in Kyrgyzstan may have been its golden opportunity, but instead showed it as an emperor with no clothes. As a result, analysts started questioning what purpose this security organisation served. 'Russia, and especially the CSTO leadership, does not have a clearly-defined policy in this [Kyrgyzstan's] case, or any concise economic and military goals.'<sup>18</sup>

The other option was to act through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), but that may have been more problematic, given the cautious stance of the Chinese government regarding operations abroad. It was not even seriously discussed. In general, the prevailing sense was that potential gains of an international intervention were uncertain, but negative repercussions could be unpleasant. Jos Boonstra noted that 'the US, Russia and certainly the EU do not seem to be eager to intervene since consequences of duration, intensity and regional implications of the mission would be difficult to foresee.'<sup>19</sup>

Kyrgyzstan's authorities were very disappointed. In their words, 'during the violent clashes Kyrgyzstan did not receive assistance from the international community or organisations whose purpose is the resolution of such problems.'<sup>20</sup> Neil Melvin outlines how despite the loss of life, the real possibility of the breakup of Kyrgyzstan, and the potential for the spread of conflict to neighbouring countries, the international community proved unable or unwilling to respond effectively to the violence (Melvin, 2011, p. 35).

In spite of discussions of 'crisis in Kyrgyzstan' and investment into conflict prevention and early warning programmes, the international organisations were caught by surprise by the outbreak in the South. They did not recognise the gravity of the situation when violence was at its height. Despite Otunbayeva's former high-ranking positions at the United Nations, the UN failed to react and appeared to be looking at Russia. On 14 June the Under-Secretary General for Political Affairs Lynn Pascoe called for 'urgent action by the international community,' which could only be an intervention by Russia or a coalition led by it. On 24 June the Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs Oscar Fernandez-Taranco reported to the UN Security Council on continuing tensions. On neither occasion did the Council take any action (International Crisis Group, 2010, p. 22).

Russia, in its turn, looked at the UN to give it a clear signal. According to President Medvedev, any decision to send peacekeepers would only be made after consultations with the UN.<sup>21</sup> Events moved too fast to be able to adopt a UN or, potentially, an OSCE mandate, which could have been another option if Russia, US and the EU discussed such format in advance. Melvin argues that Russia appeared to restrict the

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<sup>18</sup> Konstantin Sivkov, former head of the Centre for Military-Strategic Studies of Russia's General Staff, quoted in Vladimir Mukhin, 'The Central Asian peacekeeping issue,' *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 13 May 2011.

<sup>19</sup> 'Experts: Russia can be only guarantee of security in Kyrgyzstan,' 21 June 2010, <http://en.trend.az/news/politics/foreign/1707492.html>

<sup>20</sup> 'Kyrgyzstan's Response to Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission Report,' April 2011, [www.k-ic.org](http://www.k-ic.org).

<sup>21</sup> Natalia Timakova, Medvedev's spokeswoman, quoted in 'European Union 'concerned' about Kyrgyz unrest,' 14 June 2010, <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,5679812,00.html>

involvement of the international community in the crisis (Melvin, 2011, p. 36), but the author's experience in Kyrgyzstan during the time does not support this.

The consensus among the international community on the ground was that Russian intervention was desirable and in fact the only feasible solution. The UN and OSCE did not have any strategy for non-Russian-based peacekeeping, capacities on the ground for crisis intervention or intentions to do so. Rather than sending staff to the South, they were evacuating personnel from there. The US Ambassador promised to allocate armoured jeeps for delivery of humanitarian aid in response to an appeal from the PG Social Coordinator Elmira Ibragimova on 13 June, but withdrew the offer, citing 'legal reasons.'

### **The EU in Kyrgyzstan**

The EU was slow to turn its attention to Central Asia. Only international intervention in Afghanistan prompted it to notice the region (Matveeva, 2006, pp. 83 - 95). The EU launched its 'The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership' in 2007 during the German Presidency. The strategy promotes a 'regional approach' and refuses to recognise specificities of individual countries.<sup>22</sup> The EU and individual European countries provide substantial aid to Kyrgyzstan, which benefits from regional and national programmes. Since 1991, over 500 projects amounting to €130 million were funded by the EU to support Kyrgyzstan directly. For the period of 2011-2013 an annual average of €17 million is foreseen. In addition, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights funds European NGOs to team up with their Kyrgyz partners to help promote democracy and human rights. With the launch of the first *Instrument for Stability* projects in 2008, the European Commission stated that it intensified its work in the area of conflict prevention, crisis management and peace building.<sup>23</sup>

Still, Kyrgyzstan, and Central Asia more broadly, does not have a champion EU member-state which would promote its interests. The larger states of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, important for energy and geopolitical reasons, occupy a higher place on the EU agenda, and have stronger lobbying capacities in European capitals. Kyrgyzstan remains politically in a modest place, despite substantial development assistance.

The reasons for which early warning and conflict prevention by the international community failed are many. They include the following considerations. First, most such programmes were implemented by ethnic Kyrgyz, did not employ Uzbeks and made few efforts to reach out to them. Projects were implemented by national staff who either did not recognise seriousness of interethnic problems, or shared nationalist sentiments of the majority group. Second, while experience of the 1990 and 2010 clashes suggests that cities act as conflict hubs, most of the internationally-sponsored programming had a rural bias. The donors interpreted conflict causes as economic competition over tangible resources such as land and water, typical for the countryside, and overlooked other conflict drivers. Third, outsourcing conflict programming through a chain of implementers meant that a myriad of activities were

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<sup>22</sup> See [http://eeas.europa.eu/central\\_asia/index\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/central_asia/index_en.htm)

<sup>23</sup> EU Delegation to the Kyrgyz Republic website, [http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kyrgyzstan/projects/overview/index\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kyrgyzstan/projects/overview/index_en.htm)

not joining into a strategic whole. Lastly, even when early warning was available, the international community was reluctant to listen.

As the crisis broke out, the EU was initially silent. Germany was the only EU member state with an embassy in Kyrgyzstan, and dealt with evacuation of EU citizens from Osh. On 14 June the EU's Foreign Policy Representative Catherine Ashton expressed her concern, and the EU Special Representative for Central Asia Ambassador Pierre Morel travelled to the country. Subsequently, the EU contributed substantially to humanitarian efforts. The Commission approved a €5million emergency aid for medical support, food, water, shelter, non-food items, protection and psychosocial assistance to the victims.<sup>24</sup> On 1 July the Commissioner for International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response Kristalina Georgieva travelled to Kyrgyzstan.

The envoys of three international organisations – EU's Pierre Morel, UNSG Special Representative Miroslav Jenca and Kazakhstan's Special Envoy Karibjanov on behalf of OSCE Chairman-in-Office travelled to Kyrgyzstan. Intense consultations with national and international stakeholders followed, but high-level officials could not travel to the South. They relied upon assessments by humanitarian organisations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the first to deploy on the ground when violence was on-going. The ensuing response consisted of reinforced diplomacy by the EU Special Representative, strengthening of reporting and analysis capacities of his office on the ground - although EU restrictions prohibited his staff to be deployed in the South and they were barely allowed travel there<sup>25</sup> - increasing humanitarian and reconstruction aid, and expressions of concern.

One concrete initiative, politically and financially backed by the EU, was the establishment of Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission.<sup>26</sup> Bishkek's initial idea was to set up a national commission and compliment it with international experts who would bring sufficient expertise and impartiality. This, however, was rejected by the international community for the fear that such commission would not be hard enough on the authorities and would not be 'objective.' A decision to establish two separate commissions – National and International, - was made, on a condition that they cooperate. This may have been another lost opportunity. Should a joint commission with participation of Kyrgyz, Russian and EU experts be established, it would have been beneficial for strengthening of the national justice capacities and improved chances for the recommendations to be implemented, as they would have had a local ownership and an international buy-in.

As the international Commission was being established, Kyrgyzstan's authorities favoured the EU mandate for it, the same way as it mandated the 'Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia' headed by Ambassador Heidi Tagliavini. The EU, although supportive of the initiative, stopped short of ascribing the mandate to it. The reasons were that it had not been involved

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<sup>24</sup> EC News, 15 June 2010, [http://ec.europa.eu/commission\\_2010-2014/georgieva/whats\\_new/headlines/archives/2010/06/20100615\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/georgieva/whats_new/headlines/archives/2010/06/20100615_en.htm)

<sup>25</sup> This was mainly due to airline safety: Kyrgyzstan is on the European Union's list of prohibited countries for the certification of airlines.

<sup>26</sup> Terms of Reference for the Inquiry are at [www.k-ic.org](http://www.k-ic.org)

politically from the onset as it was in Georgia and that convincing 27 members states that such inquiry in Kyrgyzstan matters for the EU would take too much time.<sup>27</sup>

The resultant Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission (KIC) chaired by the Finnish parliamentarian Kimmo Kiljunen, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Representative for Central Asia at the time, was mandated by Kyrgyzstan's president. It consisted of seven members nominated by the states or international organisations including the EU, but acting in their individual capacities. The KIC Report, published in May 2011, dwells heavily on accountability and attributes most of the blame to the PG members.

The EU Foreign Policy Representative Catherine Ashton issued a statement calling upon the authorities to implement the Commission's recommendations,<sup>28</sup> although as there was no explicit link between the KIC and the prospects for the EU assistance, this would be hard to insist upon. Russia's stance was supportive, if not as vocal: its Foreign Ministry spokesman noted that 'the conclusions seem generally balanced.'<sup>29</sup> Still, the Report and its recommendations were rejected by the Kyrgyz Parliament on the grounds that the Commission had no legitimacy in either national or international law. Kimmo Kiljunen was declared *persona non-grata*.<sup>30</sup> Were the Commission to have the EU mandate, it would have allowed more political control over its work and held a stronger ground in insisting on follow-up recommendations.

#### *Reasons for Weak Cooperation*

In the end, little crisis management was done by the internationals. This is a great loss, because Kyrgyzstan is a unique case in the post-Soviet space where geopolitics hardly presents an obstacle to cooperation between Russia and the West. Unlike Georgia, where Russia and the West support different 'sides' in the conflicts for geopolitical reasons and where Russia projects its special security and political interests,<sup>31</sup> they do not hold mutually exclusive views on issues in Kyrgyzstan and in Central Asia more broadly.

In fact, their interests in stability and security in Kyrgyzstan are similar, making it in theory possible to pool resources together. Both welcomed the new government which came to power in April, signalling their frustration with the ousted Bakiyev regime. Both have been sympathetic to Kyrgyzstan's plight vis-à-vis Uzbekistan, its powerful neighbour. Both tried to promote regional cooperation through structures they helped to create to ensure a better deal for Kyrgyzstan in terms of regional trade, transit and border regime. So, what accounts for the lack of coordinated response? Why did

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<sup>27</sup> Author's interview with a high-placed EU diplomat, September 2010.

<sup>28</sup> 'Statement by the High Representative Catherine Ashton, regarding the publication of the report of the independent international commission of inquiry into the events in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010,' Brussels, 5 May 2011, A 175/1,  
[http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/121877.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/121877.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Briefing by Alexei Sazonov, Deputy Director of the Press and Information Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, 13 May 2011, Moscow,  
[http://www.mid.ru/bdcomp/brp\\_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/7791b0372962344bc3257892004573ad!OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/bdcomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/7791b0372962344bc3257892004573ad!OpenDocument)

<sup>30</sup> 'Jogorku Kenesh (Parliament) Statement on KIC Report,' parliamentary hearings on 26 May 2011,  
<http://www.kenesh.kg/Pages/ViewNews.aspx?id=8&NewsID=2349>

<sup>31</sup> Discussed in 'Helsinki Plus: Towards a Human Security Architecture for Europe,' the First Report of the EU-Russia Human Security Study Group, May 2010, pp. 14 – 15.

Russia and the EU failed to cooperate, when the stakes were the highest and when all protagonists in Kyrgyzstan were looking at its international friends with hope?

Seemingly, there were no obstacles of institutional or even personal nature. The major EU-funded security programmes Border Management in Central Asia (BOMCA) and Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP) involve cooperation with Russia and include Russian advisers in their integrated training, which should facilitate better personal links. The EUSR in Central Asia Ambassador Morel is well-known and well-received in Moscow, also in his capacity as the EUSR to Russian – Georgian Geneva negotiations process in the aftermath of the 2008 war. The Russian Embassy in Kyrgyzstan is well-integrated into the diplomatic community of Bishkek.

The reasons seem to be more of a ‘default’ rather than design nature:

(1) *Lack of foresight.* The crisis was not anticipated by either Russia or the EU. The latter was more concerned by state fragility in Tajikistan, where violent incidents mounted in 2009 – 2010, and by a possibility of a sudden collapse of authoritarian regime in Uzbekistan. The Uzbek leaders from South Kyrgyzstan tried to bring the rising tensions to the attention of international players. They met with the visiting Russian Presidential Envoy Vladimir Rushailo in Bishkek on the eve of the violence, impressing upon him that the situation was very grave. On 4 June the same Uzbek group gave this message to the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) Knut Vollebaek. Inomjan Abdurasulov, one of Osh Uzbek leaders, and a group of Uzbek journalists met with the Washington envoy George Krol on his visit to Kyrgyzstan.

None of these signals were interpreted correctly. The HCNM spent a day in Kyrgyzstan and left for other business. No robust action on his part followed until 14 June when his office issued an ‘Early Warning to the Permanent Council.’<sup>32</sup> Most killings and burnings were already accomplished by that time.

(2) *Absence of a clear plan.* Neither Russia nor the EU had an action plan of what to do if a violent conflict unfolds. The EC funded a disaster preparedness programme, but this funding, allocated to the Ministry of Civil Emergencies, went into coping with natural calamities. Although the Ministry is located in Osh, its role was hardly felt during the conflict.

(3) *Low-level political engagement by the EU in the previous period.* Unlike Georgia, Kyrgyzstan had a low profile in the EU, which limited its chances to pursue pro-active lobbying. It was not obvious for many EU member-states why the Union had to be engaged in what is now seen as Chinese backyard. Instead, the EU and the US expected that Moscow would act - which appeared likely at the time - but perhaps underestimated the Kremlin’s sensitivities over a possible Western reaction.

(4) *Lack of leadership’s interest.* The crisis was not dealt with at a sufficient level of leaderships’ engagement. In Georgia’s case Nicolas Sarkozy was personally involved in the process that led to a ceasefire and peace negotiations as the President of the EU.

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<sup>32</sup> Statement by Knut Vollebaek, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, ‘Early warning to the (special) Permanent Council on 14 June 2010,’ <http://www.osce.org/hcnm/68539>

The crisis in Kyrgyzstan was dealt with on the level of the EUSR, who ultimately could not substitute top political leadership. The appointment of Rushailo with no Central Asian expertise by the Russian side, who deals with numerous other issues and priorities, did not signal a dedicated commitment to Kyrgyzstan in Moscow decision-making circles.

## **Conclusions and Future Prospects**

The sad outcome is that 470 victims died in Kyrgyzstan and nobody stepped in or encouraged others to do so. The EU did not take a pro-active stance on intervention as Kyrgyzstan was not high-profile enough in Western capitals. Russia did not intervene because non-intervention cost is virtually nothing, while intervention, it was feared, would be used to extract a political price by the West. Unlike in the cases of Rwanda and Sudan, external inaction was not even questioned. The communities in South Kyrgyzstan who suffered do not have a powerful voice to criticise the internationals in their failure to protect. The EU's role could have been to persuade Russia to intervene directly, or through the CSTO or another format such as OSCE, but it did not see this route as an option. The EU could have supplied EU-mandated civilian involvement, for instance, on the justice and reconciliation side.

Given the lack of geopolitical and strategic interests, the human security dimension, such as increased viability of community 'soft security' mechanisms, cooperation on prevention of potential displacement in the future or, in Russia's context, exporting of interethnic tensions into the Federation itself, can form the basis of joint EU-Russia initiatives. Moreover, the fact that Kyrgyzstan does not cherish ambitions of EU membership which the Union cannot satisfy, removes certain constraints on its potential for action.

Why does it still matter? First, there are issues to be tackled in Kyrgyzstan in the aftermath of violence that require international attention. Kyrgyzstan experiences a rule of law deficit. Its national justice system ran into problems over investigations and prosecution of cases concerning ethnic Kyrgyz perpetrators. The EU has experience in deployment of European Security and Defence Policy 'Rule of Law' missions either as a part of a larger peacebuilding intervention, such as in Kosovo, or as a free-standing initiative as EUJUST *Themis* in Georgia in 2004 - 2005. A mission prototyped on the Georgian one could be relevant for Kyrgyzstan.

If this is a joint initiative between Russia and the EU, and includes judges and prosecutors drawn both from Russia and the EU countries, such a mission would be seen as more neutral, professional and conducive to the needs on the ground. The two sides have complimentary advantages: Russian experts better understand the Kyrgyz law and judicial culture, while EU experts have more experience in bringing justice to divided communities ripped by conflict. A police advisory programme for deployment of 52 unarmed police advisors was launched by OSCE in 2010, in which Russian and EU personnel already participate. A Rule of Law mission can link up with the OSCE Community Security Initiative project. Such an initiative will not only help Kyrgyzstan to overcome the consequences of the crisis, but can have a wider significance of gaining experience of how Russia and the EU can work together.

Secondly, there is a need for a joint framework for crisis management in the region. The EU and the US have to decide on an existential question: whether they think that a Russian peacekeeping intervention to restore stability in Central Asia is in principle a good idea which deserves to be supported in future. If not, and if they consider that Russian geopolitical interests to project its 'sphere of influence' underline all its actions and the West's role is to contain its 'predatory instincts,' they need to identify what are the workable alternatives to protect civilian populations in the circumstances when their states are incapable of doing so. Such framework should be designed in advance rather than hastily negotiated in a midst of a crisis.

Thirdly, Russia and the EU must draw lessons from the 2010 experience for potential future calamities in the post-Soviet periphery. It cannot be excluded that the conflict in Kyrgyzstan would re-ignite. Interethnic or intergroup violence can flare up elsewhere in Central Asia, where state capacities are weak, e.g. in the neighbouring Tajikistan. Moreover, old conflicts, such as Nagorno Karabakh, may re-open and lead to renewed hostilities. If Azerbaijan indeed launches a military attack on Karabakh and Armenia, it is unclear who – if anybody – would intervene, and where such development would leave Russia and the EU.

Fourthly, the case has wider ramifications for a potential spill-over of instability from Afghanistan into Central Asia. If several years ago a scenario of the Taliban using Tajikistan's territory as a launch pad for further attacks appeared far-fetched, growing instability in northern Afghanistan and the porous Afghan/ Tajik border make this prospect more likely. Given the weaknesses of Tajikistan's security sector, it is unclear who would protect the population in such an event.

Thus, an honest dialogue on the state of affairs in conflict-prone countries is needed, discussing the situations as *how they actually are* rather than as *what they should be*, which is what Russia – EU dialogue is often about. The sides should also re-think what they can offer to crisis management. Russia has military and peacekeeping capabilities, and human resources; its troops speak Russian largely understood in the post-Soviet countries, they have cultural affinity with the population. The EU has soft capabilities, such as peacebuilding *know how*, civilian expertise in the rule of law, gender equality and inclusion in pan-European solidarity networks.

In any event, whatever the EU does in Kyrgyzstan, it should do it with determination and firmness of purpose, and concentrate its assets on clear goals. The human security perspective has to serve as a guiding principle, without which the state's long-term viability cannot be ensured.

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