

# Official Memory and Legitimization in Kyrgyzstan. The Revolutionary Past in the Public Statements of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev after 2005

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## Introduction

The rise and fall of Kurmanbek Bakiyev, the second president in Kyrgyzstan's history, was inextricably linked with revolution. During his tumultuous five-year rule, the myth, idea and methods of the Tulip Revolution of 2005 were instrumental in his maintaining the status quo in which he and his large family maintained power. To the new regime, the symbolic dimension of the revolution was one of its fundamental pillars; new monuments, street names, books and articles, conferences, movies and public staging of historical events were used for its legitimization. This symbolic politics was emphasized by the president's initiative to establish 24th March as the national holiday and the subsequent organization of various national ceremonies. The purpose was to preserve the desired collective memory and push into oblivion anything that was non-functional for the new power.

Despite the growing number of works devoted to the analysis of collective memory, there have been surprisingly few studies focusing on Central Asian countries and the practices of building political legitimacy through discursive constructions of the past. While bearing in mind the importance of the institutional basis of non-democratic regimes and their tendency to resort to brute force, this paper emphasizes the significance of “softer”, but by no means less efficient instruments of controlling the population in authoritarian regimes. The aim of the paper is to analyze the discursive mechanisms President Bakiyev and his proponents used to build the memory of the Kyrgyz revolution of 2005.

## Theoretical and methodological assumptions

The theoretical basis of the paper includes the following assumptions. First, collective memory is one of the social practices through which society transmits and reproduces the interpretation of its past. This means that memory is the outcome of the activity of social groups rather than a passive transmission of the given facts. Obviously, actors are not equal in their ability to disseminate ideas about the past. Official memory is a set of ideas about the past which is diffused by the individuals and groups occupying the most powerful positions in the given society, be they political, economic or cultural ones (Achugar 2008: 10).

Secondly, the past can be transmitted only through the use of language or, in other words, discourse. Following Maarten Hajer (1995: 44), discourse is defined here as “an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations through which meaning is allocated to social and physical phenomena, and that is produced in and reproduces in turn an identifiable set of practices”. Language functions as a mechanism for a society to access its past. It is impossible to directly access historical facts. Hence the importance of the selection of categories, arguments, and rhetorical strategies. They are tools which inevitably affect the shape of the past. In this article I shall make a detailed analysis of publicly available texts in order to establish certain patterns of thought, narratives about the past, the main characters used in these narratives and lines of argumentation.

Thirdly, the references to the past serve manifold functions. Nevertheless, students of official and collective memory most often point to the relationship between power (Olick and Robbins 1998), memory and the function of legitimization, understood as explanation and justification of the governing incumbents’ decisions and activities (Wertsch 2004). Thus, official memory can be perceived as a set of resources used to justify the execution of power by the authorities.

Fourthly, the progressive appropriation of the state and weakening pluralism facilitated the impact of official memory in Kyrgyzstan. Its content depended mostly on the statements of the president – the dominant player on the political scene, who set the agenda for national and local institutions of power – as well as the politicians, journalists and other players who reproduced the line of the government.

Accordingly, in this paper, the official memory is understood as the images of the past constructed by Bakiyev to shape the collective memory, i.e. how the citizens of Kyrgyzstan remembered the events of March 2005 and the ideas behind them, and how they understood their past and present and hence their future. As collective memory is never static, in Kyrgyzstan, too, it was volatile and dynamic, due to the mutual influence of official, social and individual sources (Szacka 2006: 44; Zerubavel 1995: 5).

The empirical basis of this paper consists of President Bakiyev's statements, interviews, commentaries, and press publications during his term in office from 2005 to 2010, a body of 181 texts in total. The analysis mainly concerned the official memory of the Tulip Revolution of 2005. The methodology was based on two consecutive steps. First, initial reading of the empirical data, and secondly, the formulation of research questions on the basis of existing literature and general knowledge of the data under scrutiny. The questions posed in this phase of analysis were the following. How did Bakiyev define the revolution? Who were the main players of the Tulip Revolution according to the President? What was his evaluation of these events and their aftermath? Is it possible to determine the continuity and recurring themes in the promoted vision of the revolution, or was it ever-changing? How were the events reported in the political discourse? Which elements were emphasized and which were omitted? Did the official memory of the Tulip Revolution have any influence on later protests – the April Revolution of 2010 and the fall of the Bakiyevs? In this paper, I am more interested in the internal structure of discourse developed by Bakiyev than the social reception of his words. Thus, the aim of the analysis is to distinguish the main themes and recurring lines of argumentation referring to the aforementioned questions.

## Historical overview

The events in Kyrgyzstan belonged to the wave of color revolutions triggered by the fall of Milošević's government in Serbia in 2000. Their legitimization was partly based on the myth of social contract and democratic ideas, emphatically promoted in the first years of Kyrgyz independence, when, despite serious economic problems and deepening economic crisis, the republic boasted of itself, before both its citizens and the international community, as an "island of democracy". Lacking any substantial resources for the necessary accumulation of capital, the new republic was to thrive based solely on the free market and civil liberties. Free media and NGOs financed by the West enjoyed a relatively liberal climate, and the language of politics and the legitimization discourse abounded in democratic rhetoric. However, not for long.

Constitutional amendments, introduced almost every other year after 1994, led to the concentration of power in the hands of President Askar Akayev. Civil rights and liberties were limited and promoted values altered; they then started to include a somewhat authoritarian image of Akayev as an enlightened sage, scientist, or a hereditary leader, a descendant of a king. However, the official discourse by no means resembled a well-structured set of legitimizing arguments based on a specific ideology. It was more like a patchwork of haphazardly linked symbols and codes in order to justify their dominant position in the political and economic life of Kyrgyzstan. It is important to underline that not only the

president, but also the presidential family occupied a central position in the legitimizing formula.

In March 2005, social protests triggered by the allegations of rigged elections led to the occupation of government buildings in some parts of the country. On 24th March 2005, protesters in the capital of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek, seized control of the government office; President Akayev fled the country and his government resigned. The acting prime minister and president were delegated to the representative of the opposition, former prime minister Kurmanbek Bakiyev. However, the eruption of activism and the mobilization of considerable parts of the society were not followed by a radical and fast transformation of political institutions. The old regime was replaced by a new government without any serious systemic changes; the idea of holding the previous rulers liable for their crimes was quickly forsaken.

The events of 24th March 2005 were explained using the categories of a “revolutionary coup d’état” (Lane 2009: 131), “electoral revolution” (Bunce and Wolchik 2006), or “revolutionary collective action against the corrupted government” (Fuhrmann 2006: 16-29). The last of these interpretations gradually became the official one, although in practice the introduction of immediate systemic reforms – the main revolutionary slogan – was replaced by a new theme of maintaining stability and legalization of the revolutionary power. As the reforms were postponed again and again, vociferous protests of the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition finally managed to force a constitutional amendment on 9th November 2006. However, that achievement was to be short-lived, as only two months later President Bakiyev managed to introduce a counter-amendment (which again was quickly replaced by another one). The subsequent decisions on constitutional and economic reforms, as well as the personnel policy, showed the increasing concentration of power and resources in the hands of the large Bakiyev clan.

In 2007, the president initiated and organized a referendum on the new constitution and electoral law, dissolved the Kyrgyz parliament (Jogorku Kenesh), and then triumphantly won the elections with his newly formed party of power Ak Jol. The legislature, so far the only relatively independent power, was transformed into a passive entity.

In spring 2008 the parliament proclaimed 24th March the Day of Revolution and a national holiday<sup>59</sup>. The preparations for the fifth anniversary two years later,

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<sup>59</sup> According to the decree of President Bakiyev dated 6 March 2006, 24th March became a national holiday. The Parliament, Jogorku Kenesh, was given authority to develop and pass an act that would commemorate 24th March as a national holiday. However, it did not back the initiative, even though it was the parliamentary elections in 2005 that directly caused the social protests against Akayev. The initiative was eventually passed by the parliament three years later, during its

in 2010 were carried out in the context of increasing social tensions and protests. On 7th April, two weeks after the anniversary, about 90 people were shot and 1500 wounded after the use of weapons by the government forces during a protest before the government offices. The use of force did not help the Bakiyevs avoid the fate of their predecessors; five years after the Tulip Revolution, the memory of which was so painstakingly nurtured by the Bakiyevs, a new April Revolution erupted. The new temporary government took power, and Kurmanbek Bakiyev left Kyrgyzstan.

## Memory of the revolution, the president's family and the legitimization of the system

The March events which resulted in Bakiyev's seizure of power required an ideological justification, if only a weak one, especially in a situation when Kyrgyz legal institutions were rapidly losing their validity. Although on the institutional level the new regime was reluctant to break with the past, the symbolic sphere was filled with the rhetoric of rejuvenation and a new beginning. The memory of revolution was used for the cognitive, emotional, normative, legal, moral and institutional justification of the authoritarian claims of the Bakiyev family. What really happened in 2005 was not important. The lack of typical traits of revolution was not an obstacle for those that wanted to commemorate the glorious revolutionary past. As is common in the political sphere, memory is important only when it can be politically exploited – in this sense, the past is foremost the creation of the present (Ziółkowski 2000: 92, 105).

In their appropriation of the state, the ruling elite attempted to stabilize their position through the manipulation of symbols, values and frames of reference (Szacka 2006: 55). In their attempts to shape history in order to control the present, they also tried to set the future and determine the interpretations of the past. The communist past and the time of independence were used to influence the discussions and political conflicts present at the time. The Akayev period was demonized in order to justify his surprising escape, and the Tulip Revolution was described as a new beginning in Kyrgyz history. In this way, the present situation and interests of the new rulers greatly affected the shape of memory. The past became an integral part of the present (Florescano 1985: 71-72, 78).

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subsequent fourth term. In this way, Jogorku Kenesh backed the presidential policy of shaping the memory of the revolution.

Kurmanbek Bakiyev had a privileged position in the construction and distribution of the memory of the revolution, due to his supremacy over the parliament, government and judiciary (a clear violation of the principle of the separation of powers). This centralization of power and wide presidential prerogatives without institutional accountability made him the main creator of the official memory. Presidential decrees, interviews, public statements, speeches and publications set the standards for public officials, pro-government journalists and politicians who reproduced the official line in interviews and other public statements.

The official politics of memory also involved the presidential family, quite numerous even by Kyrgyz standards. The president's seven brothers and two adult sons worked in high state posts and dominated the sphere of informal arrangements. Their actions and high position were justified not only with traditional and revolutionary rhetoric but also by presenting the special traits of the Bakiyevs, e.g. honesty, reliability, diligence and general uniqueness. The image of a family who had sacrificed their lives in the fight against injustice and who helped Kurmanbek to lead the nation to victory<sup>60</sup> had a dual effect on the president's position. On the one hand, it strengthened his efforts and intensified legitimization; on the other hand, it introduced an element of family pluralism which was significant for the interpretation of the March events. The presidential brothers and sons created a complex system of projections of the past resulting from their specific political interests – and their image was not always consistent with the presidential version. In this way, the family pluralism was the only pluralism of interpretations of the latest history of Kyrgyzstan.

Jusupbek Bakiyev, the president's brother, who died from heart disease a year after the March events, became a martyr of the revolution. The figure of Jusupbek was raised almost to the level of state worship, which was obviously accompanied by concealing many inconvenient aspects of his biography. The inscription on his tombstone praises him as a man who “devoted his heart for the nation, gave his life for the Fatherland”<sup>61</sup>, a phrase that was consistently replicated in public and

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<sup>60</sup> Omurzak Tolobekov during his interview with President Bakiyev: “Jusup [the President's brother], in spite of his terrible health problems, completely devoted himself to the national revolution and sacrificed his life for the better future of the nation. [...] When you, Mr. President, became the leader of the opposition movement..., you lost your brother..., and all your brothers, sisters, and kin, who fought with passion, got hurt and received injuries... Your political victory did not come easy”. The layout of the interview is non-typical. Usually, the questions of the interviewer are in bold and/or in italics. Here, it is the other way round – it is Bakiyev's answers that are in bold. This interesting layout and the unusual construction of the interview may suggest to the reader that Tolobekov's questions are of minor importance; they serve only to induce and enhance the words of the president. See Kurmanbek Bakiyev, *El uchun kujgon ishmer ele...*[He was an activist fighting for the nation], interview by Omurzak Tolobekov (2007, pp. 8, 12).

<sup>61</sup> Inscription on Jusupbek Bakiyev's grave (Jalalabat 18.09.1951-21.02.2006).

private sphere. To the public, Jusupbek became “one of the organizers and leaders of the nation against the injustices of the previous regime”<sup>62</sup>. The relationship between the death of the president’s brother and the revolutionary memory was also built by referring to the traditional Kyrgyz worship of ancestors and the dead (Le Goff 1992: 72). A school, park and street received Jusupbek’s name; the president also erected a monument to him and built a special museum. The Jusupbek Bakiyev Foundation was established by another influential brother of the president, Janybek. This operation exemplifies the typical personalization of the Kyrgyz revolutionary events – one person (always associated with the Bakiyev family) was to epitomize the will and effort of the entire community that stood behind the events. The sacralization of Jusupbek was a crucial argument for the ruling family; similar to presidential public statements, it was supposed to convince the society that the current state of affairs was self-evident. The attempts to construct and impose the Bakiyev version of events can also be interpreted as the efforts to create a loyal imagined community. The usurpation of power was to be perceived as a natural implementation of the demands of the people (Szacka 2006: 54-58; Anderson 2002: 155-162).

## Representation of revolution in the statements of Kurmanbek Bakiyev

The democratic and authoritarian themes used in the official interpretation of the revolution could be observed even at the level of general definitions. Kurmanbek Bakiyev’s memory of the revolution in its democratic version was not a product of a refined approach with a complicated and coherent structure. He did not go beyond typical rhetorical clichés, and was closer to popular conceptions of democracy, characteristic of the populist form of politics, as he stressed the sovereignty and will of the people. The revolution was supposed to be a unique moment of history in which power was restored to the people, therefore the question of the beginning and the myth of the social contract was becoming increasingly significant (Arendt 1990: 34). This myth, highlighting the perennial Kyrgyz passion for freedom, included a story of centuries of vicissitudes when the nation fought against aggressors and tyrannies. The idea of the free Kyrgyz state was finally realized when the people themselves established the sovereign state. This founding myth of a democratic Kyrgyzstan had previously been a permanent element of Askar Akayev's rhetoric. It changed only slightly in Bakiyev’s

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<sup>62</sup> Quoted in “Vyshla v svet kniga ‘24 marta 2005 goda – Narodnaja revoliutsia’” (Published book: “March 24, 2005 – National Revolution”) *Kabar Kyrgyz National News Agency*, March 22, 2006.

revolutionary discourses – the time of the breakthrough and renewal became the March events and Bakiyev’s rise to power. Under this interpretation, the people regained their lost power and freedom, and the job of the president was to serve the people. Moreover, this discourse acknowledged the right of the people to resist power. In the case of usurpation of power, the sovereign could rise again and restore the legitimacy of the government<sup>63</sup>.

The authoritarian interpretation of the revolution negated its democratic nature and even the revolution itself. This is manifested by blurring the memories of the March events or in attempts to background or even silence specific topics. The term “March events” was preferred to “revolution”, Kurmanbek Bakiyev became the main character and the people were deprived of subjectivity. In the authoritarian variant of this description, the people were not the sovereign, but rather a raging crowd or passive mass at best. There was no mention of a social contract – the moment of the beginning became the presidential election and manipulated constitutional amendments.

The following section examines how these two entangled and contradictory narratives were developed to achieve political effects. It poses questions about the processes preceding the social protests, their main characters and events. The reconstruction of the two narratives also includes representation of the moment of breakthrough and its aftermath. These issues organized the structure of the empirical part of the text.

## What preceded the revolution?

Every revolutionary act is always the result of an existing balance of power in society and the political elite, the properties and characteristics of the immediate context of social and political structures. What preceded the moment of explosion plays an important role in explaining the very phenomenon of revolution; not only does it relate to analytical statements of a scientific discourse, but it also has its application in political discourse through which actors construct their interpretations of the past. Hence discussing a revolution always involves pre-

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<sup>63</sup> The tools of legitimization used by Akayev’s government were also used by the new power. In an interview for the newspaper *Kyrgyz tuusuin* 2009, the Minister of Economic Development and Trade Akylbek Japarov reproduced Bakiyev’s line: “*we should take a political lesson from the people’s revolution. It determined what democracy is, and the views and position of the Kyrgyz nation [...] According to our constitution, the people are the source of power. The power [Akayev – NS] forgot about it, showed disrespect to the people and ignored their needs. If you do not think about the nation, then one day the nation, despite your power, is going to throw you out of Kyrgyzstan*”. This vision of the sovereign people was still valid in April 2010, when social protests forced President Bakiyev to resign and leave Kyrgyzstan (Japarov 2009, p. 9).



conditions and actors. In Bakiyev's discourses, the representation of the pre-revolutionary era in Kyrgyzstan could not do without the presentation of Akayev and his actions. The former president was of course shown in a negative light, but the causes of the revolution were not arranged into a coherent narrative with an explicitly negative evaluation; Bakiyev's vision included a certain ambivalence in the evaluation of the previous period.

According to Bakiyev, the fundamental cause of social protests was the departure of President Akayev from democratic standards. Although the first president considerably contributed to the establishment of an independent Kyrgyzstan and the introduction of a free market economy and democratic development, the last period of his presidency was characterized by detachment from the people. He betrayed the principles of democracy and allowed the enrichment of his family at the expense of the people. In the words of Bakiyev (2005c), the rule of his predecessor proved to be disastrous for the most important of issues, the Kyrgyz civil identity: "The people stood at the threshold of losing their traditional, cultural and moral values, losing their identity". The authoritarian system was presented as something harmful and identified as the cause of all problems, not only those associated with power and economic exclusion, but at the levels of symbols and identity (e.g. 2005f; 2005g).

This vision of democratic social and political order, which ceases to be functional only after the violation of democratic rules, and only then subject to heavy criticism, was juxtaposed with a vision of order that from its very beginning in 1991 deserved only a negative evaluation. The political terms in which the reality was discursively constructed was replaced by the economic one. The narrative contained no mention of a fight for freedom and democratic values. Instead, it was dominated by the issue of social and human welfare problems. According to Bakiyev, the collapse of communism in Kyrgyzstan resulted in great sorrow. The change of regime was decided by others, strangers, not the citizens of the republic. "They tried to live according to foreign designs. Foreign examples were used, with poor results" (September 28, 2007). The national wealth, accumulated in Soviet times, was plundered and destroyed; regions were neglected; corruption and criminal behavior was widespread – according to Bakiyev the reasons for their growth were the transition to a market economy, the introduction of private ownership and the weakened position of the state. In his view, the introduction of elements of direct and representative democracy did not bring any good. "Fifteen years without interruption, we announced the elections for the authorities of villages, regions, districts and Jogorku Kenesh, and we were voting for one another. Every two to three years we conducted referendums. Did they bring us prosperity? Did they improve our lives? Eventually, the February parliamentary elections swallowed the head of the old power" (2005f). That time of great degradation was contrasted with the glorified time of the Soviet Union, referred to as the best, positive system of reference (e.g. 2007d).

## The main actors of the revolution

In Kurmanbek Bakiyev's rhetoric, the most important hero of the revolution was the sovereign people. The people, despite internal differences, are described as a single community, fighting for freedom and implementation of democratic ideals. On the one hand, they constituted an immortal, collective body, a specific combination of past, present and future; an entity that intervened in politics and took action (Canovan 2005: 91-94): "Since ancient times, democratic values were part of our blood and soul" (Bakiyev 2005e). The Kyrgyz had spent two or three centuries fighting for freedom; they were a nation bravely fighting lawlessness and authoritarianism.

On the other hand, the people were presented as the collective of mortal individuals, a simple sum of the citizens of Kyrgyzstan, including those who died in the protests against the government in 2002, those who were injured and those who triumphed in 2005. The representation of the actors of the revolution was full of pathos, emphasized by the number of participants, the depth of commitment and the breakthrough effects. The revolution included tens of thousands of people who on the fateful March 24 "went in ranks", or "shoulder to shoulder". These people "endured under the pressure of provocateurs and removed the rotten power" (Bakiyev 2007a).

These two images portrayed the nation as a homogeneous and indivisible whole. Altogether and individually, the people were presented as victors. The statements of Bakiyev cannot be reduced to a mere glorification of the people. The very same events, participants and their behavior were also portrayed with quite an opposite evaluation. The revolt of the people in this other version was not so much a final protest against oppression, but a force undermining the authority and the law. In this sense, the community was not only the mainstay of wisdom and justice – the people were a threat: "a pillaging crowd, thousands of people destroying [...] shopping centers, pavilions and shops" (2005j). It was something full of brute strength and danger that without a proper leader could transform into an uncontrollable, destructive power that might sweep away order and authority. Such a metaphorical approach inevitably discounted the possibility of the bottom-up pressure on power. It contradicted the idea that in this unique moment a nation had renewed its founding contract. The vision of the raging crowd which had to be calmed down and pacified implied a paternalistic policy. It justified the marginalization of the people as the main hero of the revolution.

In the aforementioned interpretation, the glow of flashes is reserved only for the most important actor – Kurmanbek Bakiyev. In his public statements, the theme of leadership of the revolution was carefully constructed, saturated with detail and full of nuances. In one version, the anointing of a future leader of the nation took place even before the March events. Interestingly, in the structure of

his own leadership, he avoided a frontal assault on the former president. It was not a conflict and open opposition to his predecessor that set the scene for the new leader, but an unexpected turn of events. “Even in a nightmare I could not imagine that the president would not begin negotiations with his people but run away. When I saw that I could not stop the people, that their indignation knew no boundaries, I could not stand aside” (2005b). In this way, Bakiyev builds a vision in which the orphaned and abandoned people needed a leader; the people’s confidence in him endowed him the attribute of a natural contender for power. Importantly, that interpretation made him a savior not only from unjust rule and authoritarianism, but also from the untrammled power of collective actions.

Bakiyev was accompanied by other actors used to reinforce his position. The presentation of his leadership in the opposition party was supposed to indicate that he already had his own shadow cabinet and was the leader of a “real political force” (2005h), with which he could aspire for power. An important actor of the revolution was the Bakiyev family, placed at the opposite pole to the widely criticized family of Akayev. While denouncing the nepotism of his predecessor, Bakiyev presented his family as victims with a special relationship with the people, or even as martyrs of the revolution. In contrast to Askar Akayev, the Bakiyev family “never interfered with the affairs of state, with the employment policy” (2005j); family members were independent, and their high positions were natural in their biographies. Not only did they not need any support from the president, but also “none of them could affect his (presidential) actions” (2005j). Another line of argument assumed that family ties with the president could not be a sufficient reason to give up one’s career. On the contrary, giving the Bakiyevs the highest offices was represented as entirely consistent with the national interest. The personal qualities of the family members, e.g. honesty, diligence and professionalism, guaranteed that their work was always dedicated to the people and to the state.

## The moment of breakthrough

It seems quite obvious that in President Bakiyev’s public appearances the revolution was a turning point, and thus the beginning of new principles, or restoration of the original ones. It is an open question what the relationship was between the key categories used to define this reality, i.e. a breakthrough, a revolution, and March events.

The first of the versions presented by Bakiyev assumed that 24 March was the day of the national revolution. This time was saturated with symbolic meanings, and the modern and universal phenomenon of revolution was attributed a purely national character. According to the president, the people, armed only with faith and belief, peacefully prevailed over lawlessness and injustice. This

victory was described as a historic, unique and groundbreaking moment of deep significance, which would always remain part of the centuries-long history of Kyrgyzstan. Theses on an external cause of the revolution were strongly rejected. According to Bakiyev, the revolution did not depend on foreign financial assistance; it was not an imported product, but the sole result of the nation's actions. It was not a continuation or imitation of the Rose Revolution in Georgia or the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. Actually, during his five years in power, Bakiyev (e.g. 2005a) never used the popular term "Tulip Revolution", preferring "March Revolution" instead. This kind of "nationalization" of the revolution, however, did not prevent him from rhetorical connections with democratization in post-communist countries.

The second vision pushed the revolution into the background. Here, the foreground was occupied by another event – the presidential election. The revolution was reduced to a subsidiary role, not an autonomous event but rather a complementation of a chain of events. The point was that the "the fruit of the revolution" was not the introduction of systemic reforms, but Bakiyev's triumph in the 2005 presidential elections. The importance of the elections as a crucial moment was only temporary. Later on, the requirements of the current political situation attributed the "breakthrough value" to other, usually later events, e.g. the constitutional reforms initiated by the president or elections (e.g. 2010).

President Bakiyev's public statements also included a third interpretation, in which he avoided the word "revolution", replacing it with the phrases "March events" or "change of power" (2006a). Even if he used the category of "revolution", it was not understood as an act of opposition by the sovereign people. It was framed not as a time of hope, but rather one of crisis and uncertainty. According to Bakiyev, nobody had expected that President Akayev would forsake his country and the nation at such a difficult moment and resign with his government. In the resultant vacuum of power and chaos, "the parliament as the only legitimate authority" endorsed Bakiyev (2005j) as the acting prime minister and president. Importantly, "he himself did not propose his candidacy" (2005b), but was elected by others. He was not the initiator of change, but an advocate of preservation. He did not speak on behalf of the people, but represented power.

## The aftermath of the revolution

In Bakiyev's statements on the consequences of the revolution, the actions and decisions of the new government were described with the dichotomy of change and preservation. On the one hand, the government tried to capture the democratic imagination awakened by the March events; it attempted to use the collective memory, emotions and passions to its advantage. While declaring allegiance to

revolutionary demands, it sought to replace the authoritarian reality with the illusions of democratization, and actually preserve the institutions of the previous regime. On a rhetorical level, it introduced the idea of the total and immediate change of the political system; the illusion was supported by the presentation of the revolution as a great historical victory, a source of pride and optimism. In Bakiyev's statements (e.g. 2007b), the new government broke with the past almost from the first days of its tenure – and used this unique opportunity to establish a new order.

On the other hand, Kurmanbek Bakiyev also posed as a continuator of the policies of the former government. He abandoned the rhetoric of change, and replaced the revolutionary legitimacy with legal legitimacy and a compilation of various conservative arguments. He described Askar Akayev as a traitor, but not as a usurper; the problem lay not in the institutional and legal aspects, but in Akayev's personality. The main charges related to his inability to conduct a dialogue with the people and his decision to escape and leave the country in a serious condition. The system that allowed the accumulation of political power in the hands of the head of state did not raise any major reservations for Bakiyev. Furthermore, the new president saw certain advantages in this system, as he openly admitted, "I like this constitution" (2005i). The wide-ranging powers of the president could ensure economic growth and reduce the level of corruption. From this perspective, Bakiyev (e.g. 2006d) presented himself as a defender – he had to protect the people from chaos and uncertainty, a state of decay, and save the system from changes.

According to Bakiyev, the nation was tired of political shocks – it had had enough of experiments based on copying and imitating Western democratic systems. It was tired of the elections and constitutional changes repeatedly introduced during the Akayev times, and which had apparently led nowhere. Now, progress was to be achieved on the basis of the nation's own vision of the future, and any modernization would have to allow for local traditions and needs. This vision was based on the specific diagnosis of the state of society, where general demands and problems in society were reduced to social issues. The priority for the authorities was to solve the economic ills – after the victory of the revolution, the people did not need the new constitution, just good jobs, stable incomes, opportunities to study, decent pensions and solutions to many other basic problems. For Bakiyev (e.g. 2006b), it was contempt for these needs that was the main cause of social protests in the spring of 2005. In his view, the economic difficulties were not the effects of systemic problems. In order to prove this thesis, social political and legal spheres were separate from one another; their mutual interactions and connections were denied.

## Completion of the revolution

The completion of the revolution is probably one of the most important dilemmas of any revolutionary collective action. Issues related to mass mobilization, terror, or the legalization of the new order require not only political solutions but also appropriate interpretation. One of the key issues of each revolution is its completion – in a way that does not foster another revolution. In Kyrgyzstan, this issue was crucial considering the permanent social mobilization and the failed counter-revolutionary attempts up to 2010. The interpretation of the final moment, developed by Kurmanbek Bakiyev, can be divided into three narratives.

The first narrative denied the very fact of the revolution. Its absence meant the absence of its symbolic end. This version suggested the legal transfer of power – the president became the guardian of law and order, responsible for securing their continuity. In such an approach, the revolution was a dangerous event. “You have to avoid various types of shocks and disruptions in the system of governance, which would inevitably affect the political and therefore economic stability” (2007c). Revolution was a phenomenon full of violence, when “brother stood against brother, the people against the government, and power was the enemy of its people” (2006c). It was a destructive force that could bury the country. This line of argument deprived people of the right to resist; the acceptance of the regime was rewarded with stability, certainty and social gratification.

In the second narrative, the end of the revolution was equated with Bakiyev’s coming to power. This interpretation did not deal with the issue of the expected transfer law from the president to the constitution. “I would especially like to emphasize that henceforth any violation of law, attempts to seize buildings, land, and road closures have nothing to do with the revolution” (2005f). Such an interpretation of the end of revolution limited the revolution to the time of a short carnival connected with political involvement of citizens, social initiatives, debates and other various actions (Matynia 2009: 6-10). But according to Bakiyev, this performative dimension of democracy had aimed only to overthrow Akayev’s regime. After the completion of that task, the people had to put power back in the hands of their representative – the new president.

In the third version, based on the rhetoric of democratic revolution, the question of the end was left open. The revolution was not completed and the authorities were to implement its demands, i.e. changes in the political system. The changes were to be introduced gradually, without haste and not immediately; the ultimate goal for which the people fought was a law-abiding, democratic system respecting the demands of the people expressed during the revolution. Bakiyev often said that 24 March should be a lesson for the authorities: “In order for the revolution not to repeat in this way, this government should draw conclusions and not repeat the mistakes [...] The authorities should not violate the

law. It is not the nation that should serve the authorities, but authorities should serve their people. In a country where authorities serve the people, from a local official to president, such revolutions do not happen” (2005d). The people were to watch over the course of evolutionary transformation and carefully supervise the actions of the new government. The people had the right and even obligation to resist if the government deviated from the slogans it preached and forgot about the nation.

All the three narratives legitimized the position of the president. The first one reduced the revolution to an uncontrolled illegal outbreak, and thus emphasized his position as the guarantor of legality. The second version recognized the value of the revolutionary mobilization of the sovereign (the nation), but its role was limited to a narrowly defined time – the revolutionary carnival. The third narrative equated the revolution with a gradual process of change, in which the subservience of the people was to be obtained with a promise of slow changes aiming at complete transformation of the system.

## Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to reconstruct the ways in which the “Tulip Revolution” was commemorated in the discourses of the former president of Kyrgyzstan, Kurmanbek Bakiyev. An important issue was to show how the mechanisms of commemoration contributed to the legitimacy of his power. The article suggests a tension produced by the narrative of the revolution used as a legitimizing formula by the authoritarian regime. On the one hand, it justified the seizure of power and Bakiyev’s decisions, while on the other it opened the way for criticism of authoritarianism, thanks to the myth of the sovereign people and the right of resistance in the event of usurpation of power. Democratic-revolutionary rhetoric with populist slogans accompanied increasingly limited pluralism, and paradoxically became an anti-system slogan. Reproduced and developed by supporters and opponents of the regime, it solidified the sense of the people as an agent and also their right to protest. Under favorable conditions (such as an accumulation of social and economic problems, corruption, impunity of the ruling family), it inevitably facilitated the symbolic and actual defeat of the regime during the April Revolution of 2010.

Bakiyev’s rhetoric was thus not an expression of more or less systematic and intellectually mature ideology. It was rather a patchwork of random and sometimes conflicting values. On the one hand, the revolution was commemorated as the culmination of a social contract; the moment of democratic re-determination of the role of the people, authority and the state. On the other hand, the memory of the revolution was used to achieve authoritarian ambitions and maintain the status

quo. This analysis is a complex and multilayered image of the March events. This democratic-authoritarian politics antinomy was the result of ongoing maneuvering in changing circumstances. The conflicting contents, ambivalence and lack of definite ideology were functional with respect to the requirements of the current policy. These features of Bakiyev's statements must therefore be seen in the context of a more flexible response to internal and international stimuli, rather than as a long-term strategy and state ideology.



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