Group Identities and Political Conflict in Kyrgyzstan:
A Theoretical Approach

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INTRODUCTION

Many scholars argue that political struggles in Kyrgyzstan can be best explained as conflicts between different groups within Kyrgyz society, struggling for the access to scarce resources. However, the discussion regarding which group-identity actually plays a significant role in political conflict still continues.[1] Some experts refer to regional based group-identities[2], others argue, that only clan-identities are strong enough to engage in long-lasting political contestation.[3] Based on findings from his fieldwork in Aksy region, Scott Radnitz recently stated that only local group-identities possess the force for political mobilization, whereas clan-based and regional group-identities cannot account for the dynamics of political conflict in the Kyrgyz Republic.[4]

In this article I wish to question this static perception of group-identities as producing stable patterns of social conflict in Central Asia. I question the assumption that there is only one group-identity which is able to account for political struggles in Kyrgyzstan. In my opinion, the political landscape is much more complex and needs a more differentiated explanation. Secondly, I doubt that the group-identities in Kyrgyzstan are as static as described by authors like Jones Luong, Collins, or Radnitz. In their theoretical discussions, all authors rely on the constructivist approach for explaining dynamics of identity change. Referring to the peculiarities of the Soviet State, with its institutional setting and its economy of shortages, they describe the power of adaptation that strong group-identities have displayed to changing environments. Having adapted to the Soviet environment, group-identities are considered to

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[1] See Temirkoulov, Azamat, *Tribalism, Social Conflict, and State-Building in the Kyrgyz Republic*, in: Berliner Osteuropa Info, Vol. 21, 2004, 94-100.

[2] Jones Luong, Pauline, *Sources of institutional continuity: the Soviet legacy in Central Asia*, Paper prepared for delivery at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., August 31-September 2, 2000.

[3] Collins, Kathleen, *Clans, pacts, and politics in Central Asia*, in: Journal of Democracy, vol. 13, (3), 2002, 137-152

[4] Radnitz, Scott, *Networks, localism and mobilization in Aksy, Kyrgyzstan*, in: Central Asian Survey, vol. 24(4), 2005, 405–424

be able to adapt to any environment. However, one might question the idea that the adaptive power of group-identities once-proved in Soviet times is still valid for the post-Soviet period. My impression is that, on the contrary, we can observe an ongoing process of group-identity dissolution in Kyrgyzstan since the breakup of the USSR.

Before explaining this idea in length, I will first look in detail into the explanations that have been proposed for political conflict in Central Asia by Pauline Jones Luong and Kathleen Collins. This review is followed by an account on the transformative power of the Soviet state and its legacies for independent Kyrgyzstan. In conclusion, I will propose a change of perspective regarding the relationship between "conflict" on the one side and "group-identity" on the other, and propose further fields of research in Central Asia

KATHLEEN COLLINS: CLANS IN CENTRAL ASIA

Kathleen Collins, in her study on Clan Politics in Central Asia, draws a convincing picture of the dynamics of power struggles in three Central Asian states since the breakup of the Soviet Union.[5] She argues, that pacts made by leading clan-networks at the dawn of independence led to political stability. These pacts themselves granted to a designated political leader the power to pursue a personal political agenda as long as he satisfied the particularistic needs of the other pact members. In Kyrgyzstan, the chosen leader was Askar Akaev, who, according to Collins, strove for the establishment of democratic institutions and pushed the economy of the country to transform into a market-based one.[6] With the time of the early nineties passing by, the needs of those networks which participated in the pact grew, and it became more and more difficult for Akaev to satisfy them. Collins refers in particular to the clan of the first lady, Majram Akaeva, the so called Sarygulov Clan, and the network of Usubaliev. As the system of clan-networks became more greedy, it generated more and more outsiders; in the end, only a few loyal insiders remained, who turned to repressive political means for securing their grip on political resources (most famous is the arrest of Kulov, an early supporter of Akaev's presidency and also identified by Collins as a member of the pact).[7]

The argument of Collins explains many political developments in the Kyrgyz Republic in recent years. Even the so-called Tulip Revolution can be put into the frame of a struggle between clan factions competing for scarce resources: the system endlessly produces outsiders until their number was high enough to seriously challenge the position of the clan in power.

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[5] I refer here to Collins' PhD work, which appeared slightly changed as a book in 2006, Collins, Kathleen, *Clan politics and regime transition in Central Asia*, 2006
[6] Ibid., pp. 48-54, 175-192.
[7] Ibid., pp. 224-250

The argument that is brought forward here is: clan-affiliations are strong. Being a member of a clan binds me to special rules of reciprocity in the course of contact with other members of my kinship group. Though actually based on real and/or fictive kinship ties, these ties nevertheless translate into norms, which oblige every member of a group to use the means of reciprocity. An exchange with a fellow of my own identity-group will cost me less than a similar transaction with a group outsider. In Collins' argumentation, actors in political struggles prefer their kinsmen as allies, because such a preference is distinguished by lower transaction costs (and vice-versa: refusal of this kind of preference can significantly increase the transaction costs of alternative exchange processes).[8]

To put it to an example: if one decides to fill up a vacant position in the state administration, then she will – according to this logic – prefer someone from her clan, and pay less attention to the formally ascribed rule of a merit-based selection procedures, since that will increase transaction costs for her. She will also refuse the pure selling out of the position. A short-sighted one time transaction will cost her more, since clan relations are supposed to be long-lasting and may have an effect on future conflict situations.

JONES LUONG: REGIONAL NETWORKS

A similar type of argumentation – extending from the point of view of identities and the reduction of transaction costs – has been proposed by Pauline Jones Luong. She states that regional identities form the basis of networks, which compete for access to power resources.[9] Jones Luong considers the institutional setting of the Soviet administrative-territorial structure as the main source for the generation of these regional networks. The establishment of very powerful district first secretary positions created new patron client networks, at the same time deminishing the role of traditional social identities, including tribal ones.[10] In her analysis of the conflict between central elites and regional elites for the reformulation of election rules in the early nineties, Jones Luong draws a convincing picture of the powerful position of the latter. She gives evidence to the support her main point: that regional strongmen, representing regional networks which were embedded in a regional group-identities, were the main bargainer in this game.

The logic of her argument is similar to that found in Collins. Belonging to one and the same regional network causes a reduction of transaction costs in the case of exchange procedures.

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[8] For the concept of Transaction Costs in Social Science see Wang, Ning, *Measuring transaction costs: an incomplete survey*, Ronald Coase Institute Working Paper Series, No. 2 (February), 2003.

[9] See Jones Luong, Pauline, *Institutional change and political continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia. Power, perceptions, and pacts*, Cambridge, 2002

[10] Ibid., pp. 51-82

In real life, this assertion means: if one has to fill up a vacant position in the state administration, then she will, according to this logic, prefer someone from her regional network, and pay less attention to the formally established rule of a merit-based selection procedures. Any violation of this informal rule would increase transaction costs, since one has to fear "social" punishments from other members of the regional group. However, they will be reduced if she acts according to the informal rule, being embedded in a network which is structured around a special, in this case regional, identity.

Both authors argue, that identity-groups are the main actors in political conflicts in Kyrgyzstan (and Central Asia). It is stated, that the cohesiveness within a group, which is based either on regional or on clan identity, is stronger than the norms of the formal state or competing identity-groups. Both authors refer to the Soviet past to explain the emergence of the corresponding group-identities. They identify special mechanisms of group-identity reproduction within the structure of the Soviet state and the socialist economy.

THE POWER OF SOVIET TRANSFORMATION

Collins provides her argument for the enhanced role of clan-based identities with good evidence. She retells the story of the transformative power of the Soviet state, showing that the nature of the command economy's machinery of distribution allowed groups based on clan-identity to restructure and reproduce themselves. While confronted with a shortage economy, to be embedded in clan-networks presented a means of compensation for the shortages. Since the Soviet state's machinery of distribution offered many opportunities for compensation, clan-networks grew in importance. History shows, that one group of an extended family, or one clan, occupied sometimes an entire Kolkhoz. The clan leader supposedly became the kolkhoz chairman, and other official positions were distributed according to the informal clan-hierarchy, thus preserving the clan-group's structure.[11] Collins strengthens her argument by showing that clan-based identities were the most reliable ones for members of a society in which competitive identities were never considered to be a real alternative. [12]

Jones Luong also refers to the transforming power of the Soviet state, but shifts the focus of attention. She emphasizes the formal institutional setting in Soviet Central Asia that – in her opinion – allowed for the establishment of strong regional clans surrounding a leading figure which occupied the post of First Secretary of a given district. Since district First Secretaries

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[11] Collins, Clan Politics, pp. 84-96.
[12] Ibid., p. 58.

were provided with the power to distribute material goods and appoint and dismiss officials according to their will under their authority they, managed to gain the loyalty of the people of a given region.[13] People under their authority began to turn to the center of the district for help and solutions in conflict situations, and on the other end, supported "their" First Secretary in conflicts with other districts or with the republican center. The result was strong regional networks, supported by regional group-identities. One should add that those identities existed even before the birth of the Soviet state, according to Jones Luong. However, it was only in Soviet times that they were promoted, whereas alternative identities, including tribal ones, were diminished regarding their impact on politics.

I do partly agree with both authors, and disagree at the same time. I think that the Soviet state had strong transformative power, changing society through formal politics as well as through unintended consequences of the structure of the socialist economy. That clan-based identities were reproduced, Collins account of the history is rather convincing. At the same time, that regional networks were created, Jones Luong's account is convincing as well.

I disagree when it comes to the explanation of the structure and the dynamics of current political conflicts in Kyrgyzstan. I think that with the dissolution of the Soviet Union the institutional setting as well as the nature of the economy has changed rapidly. There are no formal state positions that allow for the reproduction of regional networks anymore. A district governor is governor as long as the president wants to see him in this position.[14] In Akaev's time, the governor of the Osh District changed every one and a half year on average. On the other hand, the all-encompassing compensation opportunities of the socialist economy do not exist anymore. The socialist economy supported the reproduction of clan-based identity networks not only through shortages in the formal economy and the corresponding means of compensation, but also through the lack of money as a reliable control mechanism for transaction costs.

Today, the situation has radically changed. First of all, money is available as such a controlling instrument. Secondly, the shortage has increased, as well as the competition for access to shortage compensation opportunities. Whereas in Soviet times it was a question of living quite well or living fairly well, today it is a question of living impoverished or not.

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[13] Jones Luong, Pauline, *Ethno Politics and institutional design: explaining the establishment of electoral systems in Post Soviet Central Asia*, PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1997, pp. 124-129.

[14] After the November events 2006 this prerogative of the president was hotly debated. Some experts consider this privilege taken away from the president by the new constitution. The president and his advisors however strive for gaining it back, see *Osnovnye momenty novoy redakcii Konstitucii*, Lenta Novosti, Decembre 22, 2006, www.pr.kg (December 29, 2006).

THE PERSPECTIVE CHANGED

Having concluded that the main Soviet mechanisms of identity reproduction do not exist anymore in Kyrgyzstan, the question remains as to what actually shapes group-identities in this society. Based on findings from my own fieldwork in a provincial town in northern Kyrgyzstan,[15] the provisional answer is simple: nothing. My hypothesis is that the Soviet-style mechanisms of group-identity reproduction which are described by Collins and Jones Luong were not adequately replaced in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. The Soviet transformation machinery succeeded in replacing traditional mechanisms of group-identity reproduction without destroying traditional group-identities. Clan-based and regional identity-groups could nest within the peculiar structure of the Soviet state administration and its socialist economy. In addition, the Soviet state, though considered a force of modernization, did not succeed in introducing modern group-identities in Central Asia in the course of seventy years of Soviet power. Today, the states of Central Asia have to face a lack of mechanisms of group-identity reproduction. One might say that the seeds of society-atomization were sown in Soviet times, leaving some of the Post-Soviet states without proper mechanisms to reproduce group-identities. Traditional mechanisms were destroyed in the Soviet period, socialist mechanisms ceased to exist after the breakup of the USSR, and modern mechanisms were never fully established.

Taking this hypothesis seriously means turning away from the search for identity-groups in Kyrgyzstan and their possible impact on conflict. Instead, we should ask ourselves what exactly prevents group-identities from coming into existence. Collins and Jones Luong provide us with an idea of where to look for an explanation. Both refer to the competition between identity-groups for access to scarce resources. It is here where we can probably identify one of the main forces for group-identity formation. It is especially in conflict situations that a person learns about her belonging to a group by identifying allies and strangers. One declares solidarity to a group if she sees, that members of this particular group fight for the same aim. If the conflict is fought again and again, out of solidarity may rise a strong group-identity, be it clan-based, regional, local or modern in the sense of class (or simply occupation).

To understand the political dynamics of Kyrgyzstan, we should therefore concentrate on conflicts and their impact on the processes of group-identity formation. So far, most of the

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[15] See Wolters, Alexander, *Group-Identities and Political Conflict in Kyrgyzstan: Findings from the Field, 2007*, www.src.auca.kg, (forthcoming)

scholars working on conflict in Central Asia do it the other way around. If one agrees with the interpretation of the Soviet legacy given above, and if one wants to understand the lack of identity-groups and the fact that they are not coming into existence in Kyrgyzstan (or even worse, that the vestiges of Soviet group-identities are disappearing), then an analysis of the dynamics of conflict provides a promising direction.[16] I presume that conflict in Kyrgyzstan is non-productive, i.e. it does not allow group-identities to develop. Instead, conflicts are constantly manipulated, blocked, and hindered from entering the public realm and formal political decision-making processes. An explanation for this could be another legacy of the Soviet state: a formal state that seems to be weak, but actually is strong, using its interrelationship with informal institutions for the purpose of controling society.[17] To find out more about the state's role in managing conflicts, and possibly manipulating them, more research is needed, especially into the very nature of the interrelationship between formal and informal institutions. It is probably one of the possible and most promising ways to understand the dynamics of conflict in Kyrgyzstan (and Central Asia) and their possible consequences for the future of the societies in this region of the Former Soviet Union.

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[16] See Coser, Lewis, *The functions of social conflict*, New York, 1956.
[17] For similar findings on the function of state in Post-Soviet Georgia, see Christophe, Barbara, *Metamorphosen des Leviathan in einer post-sozialistischen Gesellschaft: Georgiens Provinz zwischen Fassaden der Anarchie und regulativer Allmacht*, Bielefeld, 2005.