Group Identities and Political Conflict in Kyrgyzstan:
Findings from the Field

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INTRODUCTION

While conducting fieldwork on the dynamics of political conflict in the Kyrgyz Republic I expected to find actors, acting in political struggles according to current theories on conflict and identity groups. These theories argue, that the dynamics are mainly influenced by the nature of the groups, which are involved in the conflict and try to defend their interests. For Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia in general, scholars usually refer to clans, regional identity groups or, recently, local groupings, as the main participants in struggles over political resources. Elsewhere, I discuss these theoretical approaches and question their potential to explain current developments in Kyrgyzstan.[1] In the following text I wish to present empirical materia, that underlines my hypotheses, which are: group identities have weakened in the course of the last 15 years. Soviet mechanisms for reproducing group identity ceased to exist and were not replaced by new ones (1). Less group identities, but more (formal) institutional arrangements have an impact on the development of conflicts (2). What's more, what we see today in Kyrgyzstan is a process of the atomization of society (and this probably holds true for some other Central Asian republics as well) (3).

As evidence for this hypothesis I have chosen to present two short stories about conflicts in Kyrgyz provinces. In the first case the predsedatel'stvo (chairmanship) of a gorodskii kenesh (city council) is contested and in the second, the political struggle takes place against the background of reformulating the rules for power distribution in a rayonnyi kenesh (rayon-council).

The empirical material for these case studies was generated with the help of interviews, which I conducted with local politicians, members of local state administrations and officials of local self-governance institutions. The local arena, in which the described conflicts took place, is a *rayon* in one of the northern *oblasti* in Kyrgyzstan[2]. None of the interviews was taped, but usually notes were taken, although not always. In both cases - with or without notes -I typed a summary immediately after the interview was finished. In addition to the interviews, formal regulations were taken into consideration and the local newspaper studied. After conducting several interviews and having met many people from the region I can say, that indeed there is evidence for many explanations of the dynamics and outcomes of political

[1] Cp. Alexander Wolters, *Group Identities and Political Conflict in Kyrgyzstan: A Theoretical Approach,* www.src.auca.kg (20012007)

[2] Due to the sensitive material presented here I apply very strict rules of anonymity, indicating neither the name or position of the informant

conflicts: some of my respondents mentioned their *zemlyaki* as the main way of getting a job[3], while others mentioned where new nachalniki herald from as a decisive factor in the current (national level) power struggles. A ride in a taxi can end up in a hot discussion about the role of "northerners" and "southerners" in Kyrgyzstan and it is easy to find statements about the role of different elite groupings in the current politics in the Kyrgyz Republic; the interested reader can find a lot of information, if he/she looks up the right places on the internet for example.[4]

However, in general, my interviewees in the provinces rarely referred to the above-mentioned concepts of group identities as their motive for engaging in political struggles. Instead, they mentioned the influence of various forces on the dynamics and outcomes of political conflicts. The following two stories try to throw some light on these forces.

CASE I - CITY COUNCIL

My first case draws on a conflict over the position of speaker (predsedatel') of a city council. One of the main protagonists in the conflict is the head of the executive body of the city administration, the head of the town (competitor 1), who used to be the speaker of the city council before changes were made in the local self-governance legislation.[5] The second protagonist is a director of a high school and the incumbent speaker on the council (competitor 2). The conflict unfolds, because the new speaker actually makes use of the opportunities, the city council has to offer for controlling the executive, i.e. the head of the town (glava goroda), and thus starts to disturb the city administration in pursuing informal deals. After a couple of months of disputes between the two factions, competitor 2 loses his position in an extraordinary and dubious session of the city council and competitor 1 is reinstalled as speaker by a majority of votes.

While the conflict unfolds, it is interesting to notice, that both protagonists are choosing allies at will, disregarding their ethnic or regional background and their clan affiliation. However, at first glance it appears, that ethnic bonds play the main role in the conflict. Competitor 1 is a member of the Korean ethnic minority and makes use of the Korean network in his own interests[6]. In addition, representatives of other ethnic minorities, such as Russians or Uighurs

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[3] Staffing policy is one of the most debated issues in Kyrgyz politics; this holds as true for the centre as it does for the provinces.

[4] Reader's comments on news articles from internet based press agencies are an especially rich source; if cautiously used, they can open up a wide range of very interesting information to a researcher.

[5] These changes were implemented in February 2006; in March the Head of the executive body resigned his position as speaker of the city council and a new speaker from among his own ranks was elected.

[6] Some deputies of the city council are Korean, as is the *rukovoditel' apparata* (head of apparatus/staff) of the executive body

side with him. On the other hand, several Kyrgyz Deputies on the city council are friends of competitor 2, the then speaker of the council who is Kyrgyz. It is difficult to come up with any clear-cut conclusions regarding regional belonging or clan affiliations. All those involved are from the region and there is no difference between northeners or southeners for example and all the Kyrgyz involved are more or less from the Solto *uruu* (clan)[7]. One could expect this common uruu identity would make up the network of competitor 2. However, Kyrgyz followers, and thus members of the Solto uruu, can also be found on the side of the Korean head of the executive body, competitor 1. The initiator of the key session of the city council, where it comes to the decisive vote on the speaker, is a Kyrgyz, representing the higher-level *rayon* council. He is obviously working on behalf of competitor 1 and together with the Korean *rukovoditel' apparata* (chief of staff) of the city administration organises the meeting in such a way, that competitor 2, the current Kyrgyz speaker, cannot make it for the session, which in the end contributes greatly to his loss of the speaker's post. This fact questions the ethnic factor in the conflict as well. What looks like a straightforward conflict along ethnic lines becomes something different, once the background of the conflict is investigated and all involved are considered.

In short, neither regional backgrounds nor clan affiliations play a major role here. All those involved in this conflict come from the same region and clan affiliation among the Kyrgyz involved in the conflict does not contribute to stable networks either. As mentioned above, it might be useful to look at the role of the institutional setting. The network of competitor 1 consists of *nachalniki8* (heads) of public institutions, for example a director of a school, the head of the *ElektroTeploVoda Kombinat* or the deputy director of the public *avtobasa* (transport fleet). They are all more or less dependent on competitor 1, the head of the executive body, who is responsible for the wellbeing of public institutions. The school needs the executive body to pay for its electricity and water[9], the avtobasa could lose its monopoly at any time[10] and the ElektroTeploVoda Kombinat works closely with the executive body, which is regularly not capable of paying its debts, but instead helps the kombinat get rid of the *nalogovaya inspekciya* (tax inspection)[11]. In addition, these nachalniki meet once a week with the head of the executive body to discuss and decide urgent issues; which, according to the

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What is usually understood by the term "clan" is translated from the Russian term "rod" or the Kyrgyz term "uruu"; "rod" and "uruu" refer to real or fictitious kinship groups, based on extended family ties.

[8] "Начальник (nachal'nik)": head of an official institution (from city administration and schools to any other publicly run institution)

[9] Interview with a school director, September 2006

[10] Interview with the deputy head of the Avtobasa, September 2006

[11] Interview with the head of the Kombinat, October 2006; of 21 Deputies (councillors), ten are nachalniki; since most of the bisnemeny need the support of the head of the town for their business and it is easy for the city administration to secure the missing two or three votes for a majority on the council.

participants in this conflict, is a very good opportunity to build ties and organise a network.[12] Additional evidence on the influence of the (formal) institutional setting is provided by the fact, that most of these nachalniki supported the former head of the executive body in the local elections in December 2005[13]; they quickly changed their allegiance once the incumbent lost his position and all turned to the new head of the city.

Above this struggle over a rather meaningless position we can identify even larger-scale organized networks: the "patron" of the Korean head of the executive body, competitor 1, is a Kyrgyz businessman, now a Deputy (Member of Parliament) in the Zhogorku Kenesh, the republican parliament. When he stood for election in the elections of February/March 2005 that resulted in the so called "tulip revolution", he relied on competitor 2 to get votes. After the revolution this alliance somehow broke down, because the patron did not deliver the promised benefits. This spoiled relationship could be seen in the struggle over the position of speaker: the patron did not support competitor 2, who is ethnic Kyrgyz and a member of the Solto uruu, like himself, but competitor 1, the ethnic Korean and his partner in business before he got elected head of the city[14].

The weakness of group identities in providing stable networks in the course of power struggles becomes more evident, if one takes into consideration the pace of the restructuring processes of networks. The school director supported the above-mentioned patron in the elections to the Zhogorku Kenesh in February/March 2005, although her institutional relationship to the head of the executive body then should have made her work for another candidate (who was allegedly supported by the then head of the executive body). She switched her allegiance after the patron lost authority because of the downfall of his powerful brother (who was a minister under Akaev until the March events). In the elections for the Presidency in July 2005 she supported the current president Bakiev (whom the mentioned patron-deputy opposes) and shortly afterwards was allied to the regional representative of the President. However, this new alliance was unstable: on the contrary, the described conflict over the position of speaker of the council identifies her as a member of the network supporting the head of the executive body and thus the patron, again.

Even belonging to the ethnic Korean group is no guarantee of stability of a network[15]. One of the members of the city council, who supported competitor 1, is supposed to have withdrawn

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[12] Interview with a city councillor, September 2006
[13] In a rather non-transparent and strongly influenced and manipulated election the incumbent came second to competitor 1 who became *glava goroda* (head of the city)
[14] He still calls the Kyrgyz patron his boss; interview with a member of the city administration, November 2006
[15] The Korean minority is renowned for being tight knit, with strong ethnic ties among its members.

his support once it came to supporting the patron: he himself is working in a company of the regional representative of Bakiev and more likely to support him than the patron.

CASE II - RAYON COUNCIL

A second example of political conflict in a local Kyrgyz arena presents more evidence about the instability of networks and the weak force of ethnic, regional or clan identities on the dynamics of power struggles. On a rayon council a conflict between the newly elected *predsedatel'* (chairman) and his *rukovoditel' apparata* (chief of staff) over the use of the council's administrative resources runs across ethnic and clan affiliations. Both protagonists are Kyrgyz and from the same region. Both mobilize different networks for introducing or blocking changes in the *reglament* (standing orders) of the council, respectively. The speaker of the rayon council, being at the same time a member of a local aiyl-(community) council, mobilizes members of other aiyl-councils in the rayon, who are in a personal union of deputies of the higher council.[16] The *rukovoditel' apparata* uses connections to committee members of the rayon council, which he is supposed to organize and support and relies on relationships with the local city council, which is also present through its members on the rayon council.[17] Whereas in the case of the newly elected speaker one may find a more or less homogenous network of rural Kyrgyz Deputies, in the latter case the network is mixed and made up of representatives of all ethnicities and clans (once again most people in this region are from the Sol to uruu.

In the decisive session of the rayon council the rukovoditel' apparata and his allies try to convince the deputies not to vote in favour of the changes, that would grant the predsedatel' additional rights. They claim, that such a step would contradict the current legislation. According to witnesses, there was a heated debate, ending in a Pyrrhic victory for the speaker.[18] The majority of Deputies opted in favour of the proposed changes, i.e. 56 out of 85 Deputies taking part in the vote.[19] However, the conflict was not over. According to the rules written down in the reglament he should have gathered at least 53 out of 106.[20] Since the

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[16] **According to the Changes to the Law on Local State Administration and Local Self-Governance dated February 2006 the rayonnyi kenesh consists of all deputies from all the ajyl keneshy and possible gorodskie keneshy, that lay within the borders of the *rayon*. In some of the 40 *rayonye keneshy* the there are more than 200(!), cp. Law of the Kyrgyz Republic N34, dated 6th February 2006 *On the introduction of Supplements and Changes to the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic , On Local Self-Governance and Local State Administration in the Kyrgyz Republic and, On the Status of Deputies of local Keneshy.***

[17] **Interview with a staff member of a rayon council administation, October 2006.**

[18] **Interview with a rayon council Deputy, September 2006**

[19] **110 deputies took part in the session, but 25 of them refused to vote, interview with a staff member of a rayon council administation, October 2006.**

[20] **Standing Orders (SO) state, that changes to the Standing Orders require a simple majority with a quorum of no less than two thirds of the total number of Deputies, i.e. 106 out of 158. The speaker however, ignores the SO**

procedural order had been violated, the rukovoditel' apparata now turned to the *rayon prokuratura* and the *National Agency for Local Self-Governance Affairs* to fight the decision of the rayon council.

In other words: the conflict continues. The National Agency will come up with an interpretation, the prokuratura will draw its own conclusions and perhaps the case will go up the ladder to the Zhogorku Kenesh Committee on Questions of Area Organization, Legality and Constitutional Legislation under its Chairman Iskhak Masaliev. For a long time there will be no clear delimitation of responsibilities on the rayon council and there will be political uncertainty, highly unlikely to contribute to the proper functioning of the body.

It is difficult to explain this conflict development by referring solely to clan or regional identity. Conflict participants rarely refer to concepts of group identities or corresponding networks except perhaps for anecdotal reasons. Local identity possibly has some influence in this case: on the one side is a group of rural aiyl deputies and on the other we find Deputies from the city council. However, as already mentioned above, the speaker manages to gather only 56 Deputies on a rayon council, that has 158 members in total, of which 137 are representatives of aiyl-councils, thus may be labelled as "rurals". If it was the case, that rural stands against urban, and if the theory of localism held true, we would have expected the speaker to mobilize more of the 137 aiyl Deputies.

Apart from this weak force of local group identities the only factor left, which is able to account for - if not stability then at least - predictability in the process of reproducing networks, seems to be the institutional setting. The rukovoditel' apparata tried to mobilize council committee chairmen and deputies from the city council, a body, in whose activities he is often involved and with which he has already been in close contact for a long time. The speaker could not count on such institutional relations and therefore gained only a Pyrrhic victory and actually lost the vote according to the written rules.[21] It is likely, that those deputies, who stood up as his allies are deputies from his own and neighbouring aiyl councils. A few more may have come from relations built recently based on his position as speaker of the rayon council.[22]

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and, together with the majority of the Deputies at that session, decides that the vote is valid and the SO must thereafter be considered changed.
[21] He is new in the administrative system and before that worked only as a rural Deputy on an aiyl council; professionally he is the deputy director of one of the bigger sport complexes in the city.
[22] However, to prove this hypothesis much more research is needed within the villages and with deputies of different aiyl councils.

CONCLUSION

It seems, that no clan or regional identity is strong enough to provide for stable networks in the conflict situations described here[23]. On the contrary, the impression one gets from this part of the Kyrgyz provinces is that networks are rather unstable, can quickly be organized and in the same way, quickly dissolved. Local identities may still have a stronghold especially in rural areas, but one might question their durability in view of increased migration and the rapid impoverishment of Kyrgyz society. This holds even more true for urban areas, where mechanisms for reproducing neighbourhood relations are even weaker.[24] The above-mentioned institutional setting does not guarantee complete stability for the reproduction of networks either. For instance the school director, who allied himself with the representative of Bakiev, did so because the representative promised material support for the school. When the support ran out, the director changed networks and went back to the head of the executive body, himself strongly allied with the main opponent of Bakiev's representative[25]. It seems that in most cases the only reason left for explaining support, i.e. clientele relations, is a shortsighted calculation of the direct possible material benefits. The development of conflicts in the Kyrgyz provinces underlines the impression, that people are engaged in political struggles and thereby rely more and more on financial relations. They give their support to those who promise direct material benefits in exchange. Only a direct payment for delivered services is able to guarantee a successful exchange. Trust, which can be created within stable identity groups, can not control for transaction costs any more. A client gives his support (a vote for example) for a direct payment or other material benefit (material support for his or her own institution, a better position, privileged access to economic resources or just an ordinary bribe). Such developments make sense against the background of ongoing institutional uncertainty. It is possible, that a (formal) institutional setting is still able to account for some stability in network creation, as could be observed in the case of the nachalniki and the head of the town; but what happens, if the institutional setting itself becomes unstable, as happened with the position of the predsedatel' on the rayon council? Since the question of territorial organization of the Kyrgyz Republic has not been finally resolved and since the principles of local self-governance are always heavily influenced by

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[23] That it may be possible in other parts of the Kyrgyz Republic is shown by Scott Radnitz and his strong argument on network reproduction in Aksy region, referring to the concept of localism, cp. Radnitz, Scott, *Networks, localism and mobilization in Aksy, Kyrgyzstan,* in: Central Asian Survey, vol. 24(4), 2005, pp. 405-424

[24] For a detailed description of such mechanisms for reproducing local identity, see Radnitz, ibid., pp. 408-410.

[25] The mentioned "patron".

central agencies' decisions, we can expect to find the situation worsening in the near future. One just has to take into consideration the last changes in the constitution(s), the need to redraft the law on local self-governance and the many contraditions within the existing laws, which have an impact on the functioning of local state administration and local self-governance. Even without the current conflict between predsedatel' and rukovoditel' apparata it is likely that the institutional setting at rayon level will contribute less and less to the stable reproduction of networks (not to mention group identities). The same holds true for the whole system of local self-governance in the Kyrgyz Republic.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

One legacy of the Soviet Union is the lack of strong group identities. Modern group identities (class, profession) have not developed and soviet group identities can no longer be reproduced. What's taking place against such a background is the slow atomization of society that is enhanced through the activities of the state. Using formal and informal institutions for blocking the productive evolution of conflicts, the *state* manages to further atomize society by not allowing the formation of group identities along conflict lines.[26] An open, public dispute between the executive branches of power and the local level controlling bodies, for example over the annual budget, could serve to establish new group identities, if only professional ones. Heads of public institutions could demand more money from the local budget formally (not by delivering informal support in exchange, but through the formal approval of the draft budget), entrepreneurs could fight for tax cuts and better infrastructure (not giving monetary and political support informally in exchange, but through official ways of donating and creating more jobs).

However, the conflict over the position of speaker of the local council will not lead to reforming the rules for holding this position, that would enhance the control capacity (and thus a sharing of power and resources) but is turned down before it gets hot and public (involved in this process are higher-up state agencies). Publicity could have led to protracting the conflict and thus the formation of real interest groups, fighting for new rules. In the end there could at least be some hope of a new set of rules, that enhances control capacities and groups, resolving the conflict in their own interest (at first bound together by pure material interests but in the long run perhaps by new social identities (classes)?) How to make conflicts public? The first step would probably be to generate studies, which would clearly analyse the interrelationship between formal and informal institutions and their

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′ Cp. Wolters, fn. 1.

impact on a given conflict. Small studies should provide development agencies with sufficient in-depth information on selected cases. As a second step, such agencies should perhaps try to concentrate on these cases and follow them for a long time until the identity of the conflict parties stabilizes and an institution (or to put it in more abstract terms: a newer, more effective and perhaps more democratic set of rules) for solving the conflict and subsequent problems has been established.