

The legitimation of Askar Akaev through cultural performance in Kyrgyzstan (1991–2005)

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Abstract

In contrast to existing nationalism studies on Central Asia, I argue that state-sponsored celebrations in Kyrgyzstan were multi-functional and were used to maintain political legitimation based on the politics of Kyrgyz mega-celebrations held during the presidency of Askar Akaev (1991–2005). I propose that in weak democracies like Kyrgyzstan, with widespread electoral malpractice, political legitimacy is shaky and that therefore the political leadership seeks to maintain its legitimacy using various means. Rule by coercion is not a practical option for such regimes because it does not provide them with long-term legitimacy. As I demonstrate in the paper, Akaev's regime relied on the *cultural performance* mode of self-legitimization because it lacked other options for legitimation. Specifically, the mega-celebrations for the 1,000-year anniversary of *The Epic of Manas* in 1995, for the 3,000-year anniversary of the city of Osh in 2000, and for the 2,200-year anniversary of Kyrgyz statehood in 2003 – each of them led and promoted by Akaev – secured his re-election and ensured the political stability and legitimacy of his regime. I conclude that in Central Asia nation-building and legitimacy do not exist as separate processes and that state-sponsored celebrations should therefore be treated as both nation-building *and* legitimation projects.

KEYWORDS

Central Asia, cultural performance, Kyrgyzstan, legitimacy, legitimation, mega-events, nation-building, state anniversaries, state celebrations

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INTRODUCTION

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian republics experienced several waves of celebrations marking the important historical dates or anniversaries of national heroes, ancient cities, and myths. In 1995 in Kyrgyzstan, for example, the 1,000-year anniversary of *The Epic of Manas* was celebrated. In 2000 the Kyrgyz state marked the 3,000-year anniversary of the city of Osh, and in 2003 the country celebrated 2,200 years of Kyrgyz statehood. Similarly, in 1996 the 660-year anniversary of Tamerlane was celebrated by the Uzbek state, and between 1997 and 2007 the Uzbek authorities celebrated a series of anniversaries of several cities. The Tajik authorities likewise celebrated the 1,100-year anniversary of the Samanid Empire, while in Kazakhstan the cities of Turkestan and Taraz celebrated their 1,500-year and 2,000-year anniversaries, respectively, the latter being marked in 2002.

The most important studies on post-Soviet nationalism in the region have emphasized the nation-building role of these state-led celebrations and anniversaries, along with other sports and mega-events (Abashin, 2012; Adams, 2010; Adams & Rustemova, 2009; Denison, 2009; Horák, 2020; Rojo-Labaien, 2018; Thompson et al., 2006). State-sponsored anniversaries in Soviet Central Asia have also been widely analysed as forming part of Soviet nation-building policy (Ubiria, 2016). In line with this tradition, therefore, most post-Soviet studies have examined state-led celebrations as a key ingredient within the nation-building process. For instance, in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, the anniversary celebration of *The Epic of Manas* was viewed as a national identity-shaping event along with its cultural tourism agenda (Thompson et al., 2006). Others claimed that national holidays such as Nooruz and Independence Day in Uzbekistan served to construct a sense of nation (Adams, 2010).

Unlike those studies, this paper argues that Akaev's state-funded anniversaries also served as important devices for securing political tenure and legitimation. Authoritarian Central Asian regimes utilize various strategies in order to appear legitimate and claim self-legitimacy (Matveeva, 2009). Coercion, punitive measures, policing and surveillance cannot function as long-term solutions for maintaining a political regime because they are expensive and can be counter-productive (McGlinchey, 2011). Informed by the key literature on legitimation, I use the term 'legitimate regime' in the article to denote a regime which enjoys public support and obedience. While legitimacy is a static term, legitimation is a term used to denote a process: 'the terms "legitimation" and "delegitimation" imply the more active processes by which legitimacy is created and maintained or eroded and lost' (Ansell, 2001: 8706). Usually, legitimation is achieved by good state performance or efficiency (Lipset, 1959, 1981); however, as the paper illustrates, there are other means to achieving the same goal, such as legitimation through culture.

The paper does not reject the idea that state-led celebrations and anniversaries were important events for representing the Kyrgyz nation both domestically and internationally. Indeed, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was necessary for the newly emerged Central Asian states (like other nations) to claim ethno-cultural roots for their nationhood, and if they did not possess them then they had to invent them (Mellon, 2010; Smith, 1999). However, the aim of the paper is to analyse state-funded cultural and sports projects in the former Soviet space beyond the 'fixed' nation-building framework prevalent in the post-Soviet nation-building literature. The correction this paper proposes is that in contexts like Central Asia, nation-building and legitimacy do not exist as separate processes, because they are closely intertwined. Consequently, state-sponsored celebrations should be treated as both nation-building and legitimation projects.

Based on the Kyrgyz example, I illustrate how Central Asian leaders legitimized their rule through *cultural performance*. In other words, I illustrate how Kyrgyzstan's leaders relied on mass cultural projects to advance their political support. There are a few works which briefly mention the legitimation purposes of these celebrations and anniversaries in the region. For

instance, Erica Marat (2008) notes that the celebration of *The Epic of Manas* in 1995 supported President Akaev's re-election that year, while the project to celebrate the anniversary of Kyrgyz statehood in 2003 was undertaken in preparation for the presidential elections scheduled for 2005. Marat (ibid.) also notes how Tajikistan's President Rahmon similarly misused celebrations prior to the presidential elections in 2006.

Among other examples,¹ Anna Matveeva writes that legitimacy in Central Asia is achieved with reference to 'nation, history and culture' through military parades, national holidays, and other national symbols, and states that national symbols are manipulative (2009: 1101). Nick Megoran (2017: Chapter 2), meanwhile, illustrates how discourses of border tensions and border demarcation with neighbouring countries in post-nomadic Kyrgyzstan shaped Akaev's domestic and international policies and ultimately shattered his legitimacy. The study describes how Kyrgyz intellectuals and politicians used state- and nation-building symbols such as the hero Manas to de/legitimize Akaev (ibid.). Although this body of literature is both helpful and important for understanding political legitimation in the region, it does not examine in detail the socio-economic context behind the celebrations, which is what this paper attempts to do.

In the first section of the paper I review the existing scholarship and elaborate on the concept of cultural performance. In contrast to prevailing works on self-legitimation which point to a foundational myth, nationalism, or national ideology and symbols as separate modes of legitimation (see Gerschewski et al., 2019; Holmes, 2016; von Soest & Grauvogel, 2015), I propose instead a *cultural performance legitimation framework* as a broader frame for conceptualizing legitimation strategies ranging from celebrations and anniversaries to sports and mega-events. Following this conceptual proposition I provide some background information for each mega-celebration. I then move on to examine the political uses of celebrations – namely, their political legitimation function, which is the central argument of the article.

To support my argument, I study the politico-economic situation on the ground and how it affected Akaev's legitimacy, refer to secondary materials, and analyse Akaev's opening keynote speeches at the celebrations. I discuss the country's poverty and unemployment, the failure of Akaev's reforms, the widespread corruption (including the Kumtor and Manas airbase scandals), the imminent presidential elections (in 1995 and 2000), and the incursion by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in 2002 followed by the Aksy tragedy as key factors that contributed to the emergence of mass cultural events. Finally, I conclude with a proposition that cultural performances in authoritarian contexts should be analysed beyond simple 'nationalism' or 'nation-building' frameworks because their purpose is to address complex political issues.

In the paper I analyse the opening keynote speeches at three mega-events delivered by President Akaev which were published in the state newspaper *Erkin Too* as well as his book *Menin elimdin uluulugu – Velichie moego naroda: Tandalmalar, Izbrannye rechi* [*The Greatness of My People: Selected Speeches*] (2003). For my analysis I used various domestic and foreign media articles, newspaper articles, and official data from the centralized database of the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic.² Among other sources, I relied on Osmonakun Ibraimov's book *Istoriya kyrgyzskogo gosudarstva: Postsovetskiy period* [*The History of the Kyrgyz State: The Post-Soviet Period*] (2015) because he was the president's state secretary and one of the key organizers of the three mega-events. These three celebrations were selected as case studies because they were the largest state-sponsored events during Akaev's presidency.

THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF LEGITIMACY THROUGH CULTURAL PERFORMANCE IN CENTRAL ASIA

As Margaret Canovan famously put it (1996), every state needs the support of its population in order to survive in the long term. Rulers need legitimacy in order to exercise authority (Arendt, 1972; Weber, 1978 [1922]). According to Max Weber, legitimacy is a public belief

which allows power holders to dominate and make people obey. In other words, it is ‘a reliable basis for rule’ (Weber, 2019: 339). Power held legitimately is hence more durable and enjoys public support. According to some authors, weak democracies are usually characterized by illegitimate rule (Lemay-Hébert, 2009: 28), while most strong democracies are characterized by legitimate rule (Fukuyama, 2004; Huntington, 1968). The process of legitimation is particularly important when countries experience economic decline (von Soest & Grauvogel, 2015).

The global literature on legitimacy emphasizes ‘economic performance legitimacy’ and ‘performance legitimacy’, which denote legitimacy achieved through economic growth and a state’s capacity to effectively deliver public goods (see Lipset, 1959, 1981). In some of the literature this is referred to as ‘eudaemonic legitimacy’ (see Holmes, 2016). Scholars agree that governments or states seeking legitimacy ‘must [economically] perform well’ (Gilley, 2009: 5). A positive correlation between political legitimacy and wealth was also noted by Lipset (1959) and Merelman (1966). While economic performance legitimacy works for economically stable countries, how then do regimes with weak or no economic performance self-legitimize? Not least, given that previous research has noted the inconsistency of economic performance legitimacy in Eurasia due to poor records (see Holmes, 2016). Others have also found performance-based legitimacy to be a ‘high-risk strategy’ for Central Asian rulers (von Soest & Grauvogel, 2015: 23). Before answering this question, it is important to consider why Central Asian autocracies even bother with self-legitimation.

In the literature, Central Asian states are defined as autocracies based around patronage politics and corrupt elites (McGlinchey, 2011). Therefore, legitimacy claims in Central Asia are important in order to maintain the stability of authoritarian and patrimonial rule (see Brusis et al., 2016; von Soest & Grauvogel, 2015). According to Martin Brusis et al. (2016: 4), in post-Soviet Eurasia fake elections and post-election protests are a concern for state leaders because they fail to maintain ‘the legitimacy function of elections’. Electoral malpractice (Sheranova, 2020) along with bad governance endanger the stability and legitimacy of these regimes (Brusis et al., 2016). On the other hand, coercion is not a workable alternative in post-Soviet countries because it undermines their ‘international legitimacy’ (ibid.). This is especially true for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which are dependent on international donors.

State corruption and patronage politics in the region led to what Pauline Jones Luong (2004) frames as ‘paradoxically strong–weak states’ because of Central Asia’s strong autocratic leaders, on the one hand, and poor governance and performance, on the other. For Madeleine Reeves (2014: 10, 218), these states are also particularly weak in the border regions, where local strongmen prevail. Kyrgyzstan is a soft authoritarian political regime cursed by neo-patrimonial institutions and practices. It lacks sufficient economic resources or public goods and services for its citizens. As the collection of essays edited by Brusis et al. conclude, for post-communist regimes the legal-rational and economic performance modes of legitimation are ‘problematic’, suggesting that these states are ‘in a legitimation crisis’ (Brusis et al., 2016: 242).

Thus, authoritarian regimes are not as strong as they seem. Rather, they are vulnerable, and their leaders tend to shift between various modes of legitimation to sustain their legitimacy (see Brusis et al., 2016). To remain in power, the political leaders deploy several legitimation strategies selected from the ‘legitimation toolbox’ depending on the socio-economic and political context. The legitimation strategies of Central Asian rulers also change over time. For instance, in the early years of Kazakhstan’s independence its leaders relied more on external legitimation practices to maintain domestic legitimacy because they were unable to build legitimacy around the frames of Kazakh identity, the imaginary of pre-Soviet statehood, or economic performance (see Schatz, 2006). A few years later, however, the Kazakh authorities invested in President Nursultan Nazarbaev’s Nur Otan political party as an alternative source of power legitimation (see Del Sordi, 2016).

Returning to the question posed above: how do Central Asian regimes with weak performance self-legitimize? What does the ‘legitimation toolbox’ of Central Asian rulers look like? The current literature on legitimation strategies in Central Asia provides several explanations and elaborates on various types (or modes) of legitimation. In contrast to Weber’s rational-

legal, traditional, and charismatic typology of legitimacy (1922 [1978]: 954), studies on post-Communist regions suggest there are more complex typologies in play. For example, in their study, von Soest and Grauvogel (2015: 6) propose six dimensions of legitimacy, which are: 1) ideology; 2) foundational myth(s); 3) personalism; 4) international engagement; 5) procedural mechanisms; and 6) performance (i.e. the production of certain social and economic results or outputs). Likewise, Holmes (2016: 226) distinguishes eight domestic and three external legitimization modes, as follows: 1) domestic: old traditional, charismatic, goal-rational, eudaemonic, official nationalist, new traditional, contrasting with the past, and legal-rational; and 2) external: formal recognition, informal support, and reliance on an external role model. Taking a more global perspective, in a research paper for the Swedish V-Dem Institute which examines regime legitimization strategies in 179 countries between 1900 and 2018 (including the Central Asian region), Gerschewski et al. (2019) propose the following four types of legitimacy claim: ideology,³ leader, performance, and rational-legal. Under 'performance', the authors denote economic growth, poverty reduction, effective and non-corrupt governance, and/or providing security (ibid.: 9, Table 1).

Although the V-Dem paper by Gerschewski et al. (2019) presents rich data and innovative forms of measurement compatible across time and space, it fails to provide a detailed account of cultural events; nor, indeed, do Holmes (2016), Brusis et al. (2016), or von Soest and Grauvogel (2015), either. The first problem is that these studies create ambiguity by combining (or excluding) in their analysis relative concepts such as foundational myths, nationalist ideology, and official nationalism. This point has also been raised by du Boulay and Isaacs (2019). Second, these classifications of legitimization strategies omit spectacular sports or mega-events, which might not necessarily be nationalist in nature but often feature specific cultures or traditions. Therefore, informed by these key typologies, I suggest using the broader analytical category of *cultural performance legitimization*, which embraces sports and mega-events alongside cultural performances, celebrations, and anniversaries.

The use of culture, sports, and mega-events for political legitimization during the Soviet and post-Soviet era is supported by the existing scholarship. Christel Lane (1984) stresses that Soviet authority was based on socialist rituals and holidays such as the October Revolution and Victory Day, mass parades, and symbolism. Graeme Gill (2011) also notes how Soviet societies relied on myths, heroes, and symbols when seeking legitimization. Others agree that the past and its memories – mass spectacles used in the nation-formation process of post-communist transition countries – had a direct relation to achieving power and maintaining political stability (see Adams, 2010; Mink & Neumayer, 2013).

The literature on sport (particularly sporting mega-events) supports the thesis of a relationship between sport and politics (see Roche, 2000). As recent studies argue, the instrumental use of sporting mega-events is omnipresent in today's autocratic and authoritarian regimes. For instance, Slavomir Horák (2020) narrates how sport in Turkmenistan became a device to portray and cultivate both the leader's image and that of the nation. In a similar way, Richard Arnold (2021: Introduction) describes how the 2018 World Cup functioned as a source of legitimacy and partially contributed to Vladimir Putin's re-election in March 2018. Thus, the interlinkage between cultural performance and political support is quite marked, and the current paper is an attempt to further this argument. Below I pause on each mega-event in Kyrgyzstan to demonstrate the state's enormous investment in them.

AKAEV'S MEGA-EVENTS: ORIGINS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The 1,000-year anniversary of *The Epic of Manas* in 1995

The Epic of Manas is a Kyrgyz oral folk epic about a mythical hero who united opposing Kyrgyz tribes. During the Soviet era, the tale was neither officially banned nor promoted, although

there are views that it was judged as 'reactionary' (Megoran, 2017: 82). Once the country gained its independence, *The Epic of Manas* became a central ideology for shaping the Kyrgyz nation after communism (see Marat, 2008; Megoran, 2017). *The Epic of Manas* was re-introduced into the Kyrgyz national consciousness largely due to Akaev's efforts. Akaev also wrote the 'Seven Lessons of Manas' – rules to be observed by Kyrgyzstan's citizens. In 1995 Kyrgyzstan celebrated the 1,000-year anniversary of *The Epic of Manas*. The year 1995 was also proclaimed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as The International Year of *The Epic of Manas*. Thousands of citizens took part in mass events dedicated to the celebrations and 80 or so foreign delegations arrived in the country. The programme included a series of cultural events, theatrical performances, national sports games, exhibitions, and other educational activities.

Around €8 million were spent on the anniversary celebrations (Thompson et al., 2006: 181). The government built a museum to the hero in Talas, a historical and cultural complex called *Manas Ordo* (settlement of Manas), an ethnographic centre called *Manas Ayil* (village of Manas), the academic foundation *Muras* (heritage), and the state directorate for Manas-1000. The *Manas Ordo* complex itself comprised a museum about the Manas epic, a gallery of the President, two ritual sites, the *Kumbez* mausoleum (the hero's grave), a mosque, a park, a hippodrome, an auditorium for performances, and a hotel for all the guests. The state also promoted the publication of books concerning the epic as well as films about the hero Manas. Key activities were held in the Talas region and 1,500 *boz ui* (yurt-like tents) were installed in Talas to welcome international guests during the celebrations. Around a hundred works about Manas were published in Kyrgyz and other languages, and the epic was translated into 50 world languages.⁴ Although the idea about celebrating the 1,000-year anniversary of *The Epic of Manas* had been suggested to Akaev by scholars from the National Science Academy, the event was presented as being led by Akaev himself.

The 3,000-year anniversary of the city of Osh in 2000

In 2000, the city of Osh was declared to be the oldest city in the whole of Central Asia and celebrated its 3,000-year-long history. On 4 October 2000, Akaev issued a decree which declared Osh as the second capital of Kyrgyzstan, and he presented the city with a new medal called 'Danaker' (Peace-maker). The city's anniversary celebration was similarly supported by UNESCO and was celebrated internationally. Nine million KGS (approximately €200,000) were spent on the celebration day itself.⁵ The gala celebration of the 3,000-year anniversary lasted for two days. On 5 October major festive events took place with official delegations from more than 30 countries and representatives of 25 international organizations. Five hundred decorated *boz ui* in which a special reception programme of traditional dances and songs was performed were installed to welcome the international visitors. Thousands of local students and schoolchildren took part in the mass performance at the city stadium and in the central square, which hosted many parades and concerts.

The 2,200-year anniversary of Kyrgyz statehood in 2003

In 2003, the Kyrgyz Republic's independence day on 31 August was a special occasion because it coincided with the 2,200-year anniversary of Kyrgyz statehood. A presidential decree to mark the occasion stated that the anniversary was crucial to satisfying the growing desire among Kyrgyzstan's citizens to learn about their past, educate the youth, and make them proud of their nation's history.⁶ Similar to the other celebrations, this event was supported by a special resolution of UNESCO. On the day itself, the main square in Bishkek hosted a generous



performance. A military parade opened the celebration and was followed by a public procession in which representatives of different ethnicities and professions in a festive mood held aloft posters with slogans such as 'Unity is our strength', '2,200 years of Kyrgyz statehood', and 'Kyrgyzstan is a state ruled by law'. The event was attended by international delegations and guests, as well as delegates of the Kurultai (Assembly),⁷ which had been assembled on account of the celebration.

With these three spectacular mega-events in mind we now move on to examine the socio-economic and political contexts behind each one of them.

AKAEV'S QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY THROUGH CULTURAL PERFORMANCE

The 1,000-year anniversary of *The Epic of Manas* and the presidential elections of 1995

In contrast to other Central Asian leaders, Askar Akaev enjoyed relatively low political legitimacy at the beginning of his political career (McGlinchey, 2011). However, his promises of democracy and liberal reforms strengthened his position (Huskey, 1997; Ibraimov, 2015). The international community favoured Akaev because of his progressive pro-democratic and liberal policies (Ibraimov, 2015), which fuelled enormous amounts of donor aid (McGlinchey, 2011). Between 1991 and 1994 Akaev carried out the first stage of land reform; the period from 1991 to 1993 was characterized by a wild 'tornado' of privatization (Ibraimov, 2015: 120) and, according to Radnitz (2010: 62), 85% of all state enterprises were privatized by 1994. In 1993 Kyrgyzstan introduced its own currency, became a member of the World Bank, and launched its privatization programme, attracting a total of US \$500 million in investments (Huskey, 1997). International support was hugely important for Akaev because his reforms depended on international financial assistance (Huskey, 1997; Ibraimov, 2015; McGlinchey, 2011).

By 1994 Akaev's legitimacy and reputation had begun to suffer because the economic reforms did not provide substantive results (McGlinchey, 2011: 83). In 1993–94 the state's income decreased by 20% (Huskey, 1997). According to official statistics, the number of unemployed increased from just 136 people in 1991 to 50,409 in 1995, reaching a peak of 77,198 nationally in 1996.⁸ According to a study by the World Bank, poverty in Kyrgyzstan averaged 84% in 1993–94, whereas in 1987–88 the figure was only 12% (Milanovic, 1998: 18).

Akaev's disposition to appoint his friends and relatives to various state positions led to anger amongst the opposition (McGlinchey, 2011; Radnitz, 2010). According to several sources, Akaev and his family either fully or partially ran 42 businesses, including the Kumtor gold mining company (ibid.). Akaev closed down two opposition newspapers and detained several journalists who criticized him (Huskey, 1997). Despite this, the Kumtor scandal became a key discourse for the opposition and eventually shattered Akaev's legitimacy (Megoran, 2017). As McGlinchey (2011: 85) put it: 'his image and his popularity were severely damaged'. This happened especially because of his pressure against press freedom and the freedom to read opposition newspapers (ibid.). In addition, Akaev tried to ensure loyalty in the newly elected Kyrgyz parliament in February 1995 by appointing deputies from the representative chamber of the parliament to his state administration, thus taking control of legislative power to himself (ibid.).

Against the backdrop of these developments within domestic politics and the upcoming presidential elections, Akaev looked to the national anniversary of *The Epic of Manas* as an opportunity to increase his popular support: he needed to stage a mega-project to secure his tenure during the presidential elections of December 1995. Therefore, in January 1994 he launched the First Kurultai of the Peoples of Kyrgyzstan, which was officially presented as a platform for inter-ethnic dialogue where Akaev announced his famous slogan: 'Kyrgyzstan is our



common home'. Following this, he established the Assembly of the Peoples of Kyrgyzstan. The 1,000-year anniversary of *The Epic of Manas* had already been planned in advance of this occasion in 1992, and the application for *The Epic of Manas* to be recognized as an intangible world heritage was filed for approval to UNESCO in 1994.

Both these projects were designed to increase Akaev's legitimacy: through the First Kurultai of the Peoples of Kyrgyzstan he intended to obtain support from the country's ethnic minorities, while the Manas anniversary was targeted more towards ethnic Kyrgyz and the international community. Although in his opening speech⁹ Akaev refers to Manas as the foundation of the Kyrgyz state, he also speaks of him as a sacred soul who empowers the nation during its hardships. Akaev says that Manas is the nation's past, present, and future. The message about national trust for a bright future and Manas as providing spiritual support for development are core aspects of Akaev's speech because of the socio-economic issues the country was facing at the time:

It is fair to say that today by celebrating *The Epic of Manas*, by worshipping the name of Manas the Generous, we remember our nation's 2,000-year history and recall our heroic ancestors who fought for freedom and for the future; we take strength from their spirit and care for the future of our nation.

... for many centuries [Manas] taught the Kyrgyz about themselves, united the people during the hard times in our history, gave us spiritual strength, served as a national motto and a national flag, and played the role of a holy force.

Today we have to directly apply 'Manas' in our life because we acknowledge him as an immense spirit passing from one generation to another to unite the nation, to motivate us for tomorrow and for the future.

Today the descendents of Manas should carry on the example of our Generous Father, they should keep in their hearts a sacred image of the Generous One in order to please his soul ... we believe that they [his descendents] have the honour and the might to preserve forever the banner and the motto of the ancestors. (Akaev, 2003: 13, 15, 30, 33)¹⁰

Throughout his speech, Akaev used the pronouns 'us', 'we', and 'our' in order to underline the unity, common history, common values and traditions, and common duties and responsibilities of the people. He also cited lines from the epic, to make his speech more impressive. This use of the Manas celebration for public persuasion – which can be seen in Akaev's keynote address – was important because Akaev was not sure whether he would be re-elected as president. According to a referendum initiative he introduced, the official term of his presidency was due to expire in October 1996. Akaev therefore decided to hold an early presidential election in December 1995, hoping to benefit from his positive image during the Manas celebrations and the political advantage of being the incumbent. In addition, his celebration of *The Epic of Manas* in 1995 was considered as a major achievement in the country because the event was held on an international stage. As his state secretary wrote, Akaev was radiant during the anniversary, especially because his popularity had been declining beforehand (Ibraimov, 2015). In the eyes of his domestic audience, international support for *The Epic of Manas* was a true indicator of the rightness of Akaev's policies.

In short, it is not an exaggeration to say that *The Epic of Manas* could not be celebrated earlier than 1995 – the year of the presidential election – because Akaev needed some sort of show and performance to present himself as a successful leader and to get re-elected – despite the failure of his reforms, the Kumtor (and other) corruption scandals, and neo-patrimonial rule. As Ibraimov observed, the Manas-1000 event had a positive impact on Akaev's reputation and legitimacy:



A successful world-wide celebration of the 1,000-year anniversary of *The Epic of Manas* significantly affected the moral and spiritual well-being of the population and notably strengthened trust towards President A. Akaev. (Ibraimov, 2015: 152)¹¹

The 3,000-year anniversary of Osh and the presidential elections of 2000

During Akaev's second term as president the international aid programmes and loans he had implemented did not significantly improve the lives of the population. The socio-economic situation was harsh, and as some think-tanks reported: 'poverty remains widespread and the public is increasingly dissatisfied with declining living standards' (ICG, 2001: 1). International aid benefited Akaev's political elites but did not reach the communities (McGlinchey, 2011: 96; Radnitz, 2010: 63). While the number of officially unemployed people had slightly decreased in comparison with the first five years due to labour migration abroad, by 1996 the level of poverty in the country had reached 68.7% (Falkingham, 1999: 19). Because the land reform launched in 1991 did not provide sufficient improvement to the agrarian sector, in 1996 Akaev had to issue a presidential decree concerning the sale of land use rights (Bloch & Rasmussen, 1998: 94). In the end, however, in most cases the privatization of land mainly benefited the directors of collective farms (Radnitz, 2010: 63). Even if privatization did reach local farmers, there were no clear mechanisms for its implementation and many projects simply remained on paper, as noted by Morgan Liu (2012: 156).

Alongside the poverty, Kyrgyzstan was moving towards more authoritarian rule. Shortly after his re-election Akaev initiated various amendments to the constitution, increasing presidential powers and granting personal immunity. The presidential apparatus justified the increased power by stating that 'strong executive powers are needed to deal with pressing security and economic problems' (ICG, 2001: 2).

Akaev's next referendum, held on 17 October 1998, put three important constitutional changes to the vote: 1) land privatization; 2) a move to have 25% of the legislative chamber in parliament elected from political parties; and 3) an end to prosecutions for freedom of speech (except for libel). Freedom of speech was an important issue for the Kyrgyz president and his family because they had hostile relations with the yellow (i.e. sensationalist or gutter) press and had sued some of them for libel (ICG, 2001: 13–14 McGlinchey, 2011: 95). Akaev did not want to lose his image of being 'the only democrat' in Central Asia and therefore decided to include a clause in the new constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech (Ibraimov, 2015: 158). At the same time, he also wanted to stay in his post for a third term. In July 1998, Akaev's request to run for the presidency again in 2000 was ratified by the Constitutional Court.

Opposition leaders blamed Akaev for family-based rule and corruption.¹² For example, Akaev's son Aidar and son-in-law Toigonbaev were involved in companies affiliated with the Manas airbase which provided the US airbase with fuel and various other services (McGlinchey 2011). According to a report released by the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), in 2005 Akaev secured US \$120 million for fuel contracts between 2002 and 2005 alone (see McGlinchey 2011: 98). In addition, Akaev and his family owned almost all the major state enterprises, such as the national gas, electricity, and telecommunications companies, as well as others (ibid.).

Another challenge to Akaev's reputation was his inability to properly respond to the 1999 Batken crisis, when a terrorist group affiliated to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) exploited the weaknesses of Kyrgyzstan's borders¹³ to take several villages hostage in the country's southern provinces of Batken and Alay. The 'Batken events' lasted for more than a year, with a winter break in 1999 and a second offensive in August 2000.

As Ibraimov recalls, the Batken crisis was ‘a serious trial for the country’; the vast majority of the borders remained unpatrolled since independence and were ‘holey’ because of the lack of financial means to maintain border patrols (2015: 177). Megoran notes that the 1999 border crisis and the state’s overall incapacity to provide security challenged Akaev’s regime:

The Batken crisis was an extreme embarrassment to the government from start to finish, exposing the absolute failure of intelligence services, the wretched state of the armed forces, and the lax border control regime. (Megoran, 2017: 110)

Like the attacks on Akaev’s family-based rule and corruption, the border incident also became ‘discursive’ in the hands of the excluded political opposition, not least because of the upcoming presidential elections in November 2000 (Megoran, 2017: 95). The Batken events shattered public trust in President Akaev and his government and in their ability to provide national security. As one Osh-based journalist put it: an ‘ugly reality’ behind the ‘beautiful façade of independence’ was that Kyrgyzstan did not have physical borders (cited by Reeves, 2014: 214). The opposition press depicted Akaev as a weak ruler incapable of providing security and a bad manager:

Water flowed to neighboring states without their paying for it. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were swallowing up sections of the Kyrgyz border area. Chinese herders were penetrating deep into Kyrgyz land for pasture. Uzbekistan was advancing its border posts into Kyrgyz territory. Tajiks were occupying whole areas inside Batken province. (Megoran, 2017: 97)

The opposition press and Members of Parliament (MPs) also condemned Akaev’s multi-ethnic-centred policy with the slogan ‘Kyrgyzstan is our common home’ because they found it a risky strategy for territorial integrity and peace (Megoran, 2017). In a 2019 interview Akaev admitted that the border with Tajikistan was ill-equipped because of the difficult economic conditions.¹⁴

The Batken events re-shaped Akaev’s domestic policy and led to the establishment of a new department for border patrols. The Batken district in Osh *oblast* was reorganized as a separate administrative unit, while Osh city was made the southern capital and Akaev promised to develop the south of Kyrgyzstan.¹⁵ In his re-election speech he announced a special ten-year programme (2000–2010)¹⁶ for the development of Osh and emphasized that the development of southern Kyrgyzstan was and would be a priority during his next term as president (Akaev, 2003). Akaev underlined his role as national leader and tried to convince voters he could offer a better future:

We worked for nine years to willfully build this great idea [Osh–3000], build our politics based on our wisdom.

I considered it my responsibility as leader to pay this sacred debt to the population, to achieve this sacred mission, and so four years ago, in other words, on 25 March 1996, I signed the announcement, the decree for the Osh-3000 event. The important reason for this announcement – and I want to emphasize this, my dear people – was not just to celebrate or hold the event. I want to openly state that the main reason, the main rationale, indeed, was a number of priority strategic objectives directed to the future of independent Kyrgyzstan, optimistic plans. ... If a solid city of Osh is able to prosper, then Kyrgyzstan will become a strong state, the north and the south [of Kyrgyzstan] will develop amicably, and this will give decisive meaning to the prosperity of the whole nation. (Akaev, 2003: 145, 149)

For Akaev, the event to celebrate the 3,000-year history of Osh served as an opportunity to report on recent infrastructural developments and to gain political support:

Today with all my dignity I can report to all Kyrgyzstanis that we have been able to implement most of the mentioned activities [infrastructural projects]. ... The *oblast* philharmonia has been built ... the stadium has been fully reconstructed. Roads around Suleiman mountain have been fully repaired ... the buildings of the Great Silk Road museum have nearly been completed. (Akaev, 2003: 150)

At the same time, Akaev understood that by placing too much attention on the south he might provoke discontent from the northerners. He therefore tried to underline throughout his speech that the development of Osh city represented development of the entire country (using phrases such as ‘the north and the south will develop amicably’, for instance). For the same reason, he made sure to mention the 1,000-year anniversary of *The Epic of Manas* in Talas (in northern Kyrgyzstan) (Akaev, 2003). Remarkably, however, in the whole speech Akaev does not once mention the Batken crisis.

After his re-election and as a tribute to the southerners, Akaev and his family made their first symbolic visit to Osh. They visited the Suleiman mountain and met with citizens in order to thank them for their support and trust in the president. Likewise, in a 2002 article published in the *Osh Zhanyrygy* newspaper, Akaev thanked his southern electorate¹⁷ for their support during the presidential elections: ‘I have expressed my deepest gratitude to the southerners who generously supported me during the presidential elections in 2000 and today too I have the same warm feeling’.¹⁸

To sum up, the Osh-3000 celebrations were crucial to Akaev’s legitimation and re-election in 2000. The celebration and Akaev’s speech persuaded southerners in his favour. Similar to the Manas-1000 celebration, UNESCO’s support of Osh-3000 contributed to increasing Akaev’s domestic legitimacy by creating an image of the international support he enjoyed.

The 2,200-year anniversary of Kyrgyz Statehood in 2003 and the Aksy events of 2002

Akaev’s third term was remembered mainly for the so-called Aksy events. Akaev had to adopt a special programme for improvements in social life and poverty by issuing ‘social passports’. Another response to poverty was an ideological one. In his history of the Kyrgyz state, Akaev’s state secretary Osmonakun Ibraimov describes writing the president’s 2001 manifesto called the ‘Charter for the Future’ (Ibraimov, 2015). In it, he wrote that citizens expected a lot from the president and the government, and that therefore it was important to remind people that the development of Kyrgyzstan also depended on the citizens themselves (*ibid.*).

Like the earlier ‘Seven Lessons of Manas’, the Charter was a formal document intended to inculcate ideals of ‘good citizenship’ into the population, and although it was never actually implemented, it was clearly an attempt by Akaev to evade his responsibility for the worsening socio-economic living conditions. Nevertheless, the first signs of what would later evolve into the Tulip Revolution were already evident in 2000 and 2001 (ICG, 2001) in the form of minor localized protests against high market prices and unemployment. The opposition took advantage of the protests against the government (McGlinchey, 2011), and Akaev’s alleged involvement in the sale of Kyrgyz land to China also became a central opposition theme (Megan, 2017). When Azimbek Beknazarov, an opposition MP, threatened to impeach Akaev, the government launched a criminal case against him in response and detained him. In March 2002 there was a major protest in Beknazarov’s kin-region of Aksy to demand his release which the government violently repressed, resulting in six civilian deaths as well as

several injured.¹⁹ Significantly, the Aksy protest damaged Akaev's reputation of being 'the only democrat' in Central Asia and contributed to his eventual fall in March 2005.

The 2,200-year anniversary of Kyrgyz statehood and the recently established Second Kurultai provided a platform for national comfort and unity following the Aksy events. With its entertaining programme the celebration served to distract the masses,²⁰ although it was criticized for its bad timing, given that by now around half the population (52%) were living in poverty.²¹ The 2,200-year anniversary was celebrated at a time when Akaev's family members had become involved in politics and his public support had declined considerably as a result of the socio-economic issues which remained unaddressed (Marat 2008). Ibraimov (2015), one of the event's key organizers,²² admitted that the celebration itself did nothing to improve people's everyday situation:

But all these efforts did not solve the issue of poverty, the social vulnerability of the population. Poverty remained, problems with the lack of potable water, roads, social infrastructure remained, the consequences of the 1998 crisis were not fully addressed. The country had less income. (Ibraimov, 2015: 200)

Akaev declared that he was optimistic about the anniversary and hoped it would bring about positive changes: 'I am confident that the decision to hold a year [of celebrations] of Kyrgyz statehood will have a positive impact on the socio-political situation within the republic' (Akaev, 2002: 55). In his speech dedicated to the event,²³ Akaev stated that while Kyrgyzstan had few natural resources to be proud of (referring to the oil and gas resources enjoyed by neighbouring Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), nonetheless, Kyrgyzstan was proud of its generous and courageous population, its ancient history, strong national spirit, and the population's high level of education.

To emphasize his point, Akaev cited a wise folk saying: 'One should love a country not when it is prosperous, [but rather] one should love it when it faces difficulties'.²⁴ In this way, he called on the people of Kyrgyzstan to show their patriotism and love of their country despite the economic hardships and poverty. He argued that his reforms had borne fruit, even if they had also been painful. Akaev believed that the country's great national history – 2,200 years of Kyrgyz statehood – would build a strong national spirit that would be able to overcome the economic difficulties and would inspire communities to take the initiative to improve their own lives without grievance, criticism, or protests against the government. In that, however, Akaev was mistaken, and he was quickly swept away by the Tulip Revolution of 2005.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that the state-sponsored celebrations held between 1991 and 2005 in Kyrgyzstan were designed to promote and legitimize Askar Akaev while also serving as nation-building projects. I closely examined the socio-economic and political contexts behind the 1,000-year anniversary of *The Epic of Manas* in 1995, the 3,000-year anniversary of the city of Osh in 2000, and the 2,200-year anniversary of Kyrgyz statehood in 2003. Domestic legitimization was built through cultural performance in the form of these mega-events. Akaev's regime was shaky right from the beginning, as McGlinchey (2011) argues, and his legitimacy worsened as a consequence of failed reforms, increasing poverty, widespread corruption, and neo-patrimonial rule including the elevation of family members to government office.

During this period Akaev lacked any other self-legitimation instruments (such as strong economic performance) because the country experienced serious economic challenges and was totally dependent on international aid. His administration's over-reliance and dependency on international donors made him both vulnerable and resistant. On the one hand, international support for

Akaev's economic reform policies and democratization initiatives (in the form of support from UNESCO and foreign investments) increased his domestic legitimacy by presenting him as an important player in the international arena. On the other hand, Akaev needed these mega-celebrations to demonstrate his domestic support to the international community. Each event was important for Akaev in order to justify his re-election, increase his presidential powers, and secure international financial aid, which was crucial for his continued political tenure.

In the paper, I proposed using the *cultural performance legitimation* mode to illustrate Akaev's celebrations. I argued that this conceptualization of self-legitimation is helpful for analysing the broad range of cultural events that prevail in Central Asia such as anniversaries, celebrations, sports and mega-events. I illustrated how state elites consider the cultural space as an alternative source of political support and legitimation during periods of economic hardship. For Kyrgyzstan's political leadership, it has been a challenge to achieve strong economic performance. Cultural performance, in contrast, with its mass mobilization and spectacular shows, has the capacity to create an image of a 'functioning state' and to establish a public 'imaginary of development'. More than once, these imaginaries of development secured Akaev's re-election, while at the same time the cultural projects indirectly supported the economy by attracting foreign investment and tourism. In sum, this study offers an important correction to the literature by illustrating that in authoritarian contexts nation-building and legitimacy do not exist as separate processes.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The other means of legitimation observed by Matveeva (2009) are: provision of national stability and security, effective governance, and delegitimation of the opposition.
- ² Data available at: www.stat.kg
- ³ In their introduction to the paper, the authors further categorize ideology as nationalist, communist/socialist, conservative/restorative, religious, and/or separatist (Gerschewski et al., 2019).
- ⁴ UNESCO supported a translation of the epic into English.
- ⁵ *Vecherniy Bishkek* newspaper: Ош-3000 [Osh-3000], by M. Khamidov.
- ⁶ Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic in preparation for the year of Kyrgyz statehood, 1 August 2002. Available at: <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/3835?cl=ru-ru>
- ⁷ To mark 2,200 years of Kyrgyz statehood, the Second Kurultai of the Peoples of Kyrgyzstan was proclaimed on 29–30 August 2003 in Yssyk-kol (Cholpon-Ata city).
- ⁸ Source: <http://stat.kg/>
- ⁹ Askar Akaev delivered a keynote speech in the Kyrgyz language on 28 August 1995 as part of the 1,000-year anniversary celebration event of *The Epic of Manas* in Bishkek. The speech was delivered in the presence of international guests and transmitted on television and in print. For the full speech, see Akaev (2003).
- ¹⁰ All quotes from Akaev (2002; 2003) translated by the author.
- ¹¹ All quotes from Ibraimov (2015) translated by the author.
- ¹² Deutsche Welle: Коррупция в Киргизии [Corruption in Kyrgyzstan], 1 April 2003. Available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/3Rw6> (accessed 29 December 2020).
- ¹³ Between 1999 and 2000 around 1,000 terrorists penetrated the southern borders of Kyrgyzstan. The number of internally displaced people ranged between 4,000 and 8,000.
- ¹⁴ Azattyk: Баткен коогалаынын актай барактары (5-блм, соку блм) [Personal papers about the history of the Batken conflict (Part 5, the final part)], 2019. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKXwdBj-xfs> (accessed 25 December 2020).

- ¹⁵ Akaev delivered his keynote speech on 5 October 2000 during the celebratory event in Osh city. For the full text, see Akaev (2003).
- ¹⁶ Among many others, it included a promise to relocate some government ministries to the south and to open a southern presidential residence (Akaev, 2003).
- ¹⁷ According to the 2002 data, southerners made up 55% of the entire population, thus comprising the largest electorate.
- ¹⁸ *Osh Zhanyrygy* newspaper: Кыргызстандын тигтг тарых крлдн. Байыркы Ош. Захеретдин Мухаммед Бабур. Тштк кл бурууну талап кылат. [The southern part of Kyrgyzstan in the pages of history. Zakherreddin Muhammed Babur. The south deserves attention]. Akaev A., № 64, 2002, 7 September, pp. 4–5.
- ¹⁹ See Megoran (2017: Chapter 2) for detailed information about the Aky events.
- ²⁰ Deutsche Welle: 2200-летие киргизской государственности [The 2,200-year anniversary of Kyrgyz statehood], 1 September 2003. Available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/411B> (accessed 29 December 2020).
- ²¹ *Novye litsa*: Год 2003-й: признаки революционных призраков [The year 2003: Signs of revolutionary ghosts], 3 June 2016. Available at: <http://www.nlk.kg/ru/projects/soviet-kyrgyzstan/god-2003-j-priznaki-revolyuionnyx-prizrakov> (accessed 14 December 2020).
- ²² I have indicated that Ibraimov was one of the key organizers because in an interview for Azattyk in 2021 he acknowledged that he was the one who proposed all three mega-events to Akaev. The interview can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7LSOQXsI0>
- ²³ See Akaev's speech on the 2,200-year anniversary of Kyrgyz statehood Элибиздин эркиндиги э башкы, баа жеткис кенчибиз [Freedom of the nation is the most important and valuable wealth] published in *Erkin Too* newspaper, № 67 (1273), 2 September 2003, pp. 2–3.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*: p. 1.

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