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Realities of Transformation

Democratization Policies in Central Asia Revisited

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Contents

Acknowledgements	7
<i>Andrea Berg/Anna Kreikemeyer</i> Introduction: Democratization Policies in Central Asia Revisited	9
Part I: Democratization of Power Structures?	
<i>Paul Georg Geiss</i> State and Regime Change in Central Asia	23
<i>Judith Beyer</i> Rhetoric of 'Transformation'. The Case of the Kyrgyz Constitutional Reform	43
<i>Farkhod Tolipov</i> Power, Nation-Building and Legacy – A Comparative Analysis of Central Asian Leadership	63
<i>Atyrkul Alisheva</i> Kyrgyzstan: The Public and the Authorities	81
Part II: Democratization through External Actors?	
<i>Anna Kreikemeyer</i> Balancing Between Commitments and Co-operation. The OSCE in Central Asia	101
<i>Andrea Berg/Anna Kreikemeyer</i> The ODIHR Human Rights Monitoring and Reporting Training. A Cross-National Analysis	117

<i>Andrea Berg</i> Who's Afraid of George Soros? The Conflict Between Authoritarian Rulers and International Actors in Central Asia	127
 Part III: Democratization of the Judicial Sector?	
<i>Marina Pikulina</i> Power Structures and Problems of Law Implementation in Uzbekistan	143
<i>Sofiya Issenova</i> Reform of the Judicial System in Kazakhstan: Review of the Effectiveness of OSCE Efforts	157
<i>Dosym Satpayev</i> Creating Mechanisms for Social Lobbying in Kazakhstan	179
<i>Sofiya Issenova</i> Quasi-Judicial Institutions. The Ombudsman in Kazakhstan	191
 Part IV: Security through Democratization?	
<i>Andrea Berg</i> All Eyes on Central Asia. Disintegration in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan	211
<i>Anna Kreikemeyer</i> Instability in the Ferghana Valley: International Reactions	227
Appendix: Relations Between Central Asian States and Multilateral Organizations. A Chronology (compiled by John Myraunet and Fausta Šimaitytė)	249
Contributors	265

Acknowledgements

In the era of globalization, democratization has become a universal trend, and this does not exclude Central Asia. However, there is some evidence that many international organizations lack tailor-made democratization strategies as well as in-depth knowledge of the Central Asian states. Furthermore, scholars and practitioners are trying to get to the bottom of the correlation between democratization and security.

The drafting for the project "*Security through democratization? A theoretically based analysis of security-related democratization efforts made by the OSCE*" was initiated in 2001 at the Centre for OSCE Research (CORE) in Hamburg. In January 2003, the research project focusing on developments in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan was started. Throughout the project, the aim was to produce useful comparative analyses that might shed light on individual issues or states, and on regional similarities or differences.

This book is the outcome of the collaborative work by a core team led by Andrea Berg and Anna Kreikemeyer (Centre for OSCE Research in Hamburg, Germany). The team is comprised of the following persons: Atyrkul Alisheva (Institute for Regional Studies in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan), Sofia Issenova (Global Internet Policy Initiative in Almaty, Kazakhstan), Marina Pikulina (S-Monitor Group in Tashkent, Uzbekistan), Dosym Satpaev (Assessment Risks Group in Almaty, Kazakhstan), and Farkhod Tolipov (University of World Economy and Diplomacy in Tashkent, Uzbekistan). Judith Beyer (Max-Planck-Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany) and Paul Georg Geiss (Department of Political Science at the University of Vienna, Austria) provided additional articles. John Myraunet and Fausta Šimaitytė compiled the chronology of OSCE activities in Central Asia.

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Rhetoric of “Transformation”: The Case of the Kyrgyz Constitutional Reform

In this article, the concept of *transformation*¹ is analysed from a new perspective that significantly differs from previous studies on the topic. In the case of the post-socialist republic of Kyrgyzstan, it is suggested that *transformation* should not always be equated with present-day real-life social change, but rather with the powerful rhetoric of Western scientific discourse, which has found its way into the public discourse of the Central Asian states. Moreover, the concept of *transformation* has not only been used in Kyrgyzstan since the country's independence; its roots can be traced back to the socialist era. In this paper, the changing attitude toward the concept of *transformation* within the discipline called transformation studies is reviewed first, after which an anthropological account of *transformation* is given in order to show that long-term field research, an actor-centred approach and a pluralistic conception of Soviet history all help to develop new ways of analysing social change in post-socialist countries. In the following, the local usage of the concept of *transformation* is investigated in the context of the Kyrgyz constitutional reform, which unfolded in 2003. An in-depth analysis of speeches given by the president, as well as newspaper articles from both governmental and oppositional newspapers show that *transformation* is used as a common rhetorical tool and is therefore a powerful instrument in current political debates in post-socialist Kyrgyzstan.

The development of the concept of transformation

The concept of *transformation* was developed in the context of worldwide political changes referred to as the “third wave of democracy”.² These changes include the demise of authoritarianism in South-European states, the end of military dictatorships in Latin America in the 1980s, and the construction of new post-Soviet states following the break-up of the Soviet Union in the 1990s.³ Due to the early and simplified assumption that social change occurs in a linear way, the concept of *transformation* was regarded as a promising analytical tool in the new branch of social science called transfor-

1 In this article, the term “transformation” is viewed as encompassing other terms such as “transition” or “system change” (see also Merkel 1999: 76). The term “transformation” and its by-products has been used in italics throughout the whole article in order to stress the author's disagreement with the general assumptions behind this concept.

2 Huntington 1991.

3 See Schmitter and O'Donnell 1986; Merkel 1999.

mation studies. With it, it seemed possible to analyse and give a prognosis of the future in those parts of the world which had become subject to massive structural mutations.

Overall social change, however, was not only meant to be analysed, but also influenced. For the post-socialist republic of Kyrgyzstan, on which this article focuses, this resulted in a three-fold approach to change: from a planned to a market economy, from Soviet-ruled socialism to democracy and from an instrumentalist appropriation of law during the Soviet period to a de-facto rule of law. *Transformation* as well became quickly recognized and used by the Kyrgyz government itself in its attempts to not only create a national identity from scratch, but to also seek new forms of economic and political governance for the newborn state. Its first president, Askar Akaev, happily accepted international offers of transitologists to initiate and guide the country's process of *transformation*. Transitologists prescribed the treatment of "shock therapy", which included rapid economic stabilization, price liberalization, privatization, and an intense involvement of international organizations and external experts in local state affairs.⁴ The country also relied on outside assistance when structuring the nation-state, privatizing state property and drafting laws.

The willingness of the "patient" to go on with the treatment prescribed by international organizations, such as the World Bank Group, brought Kyrgyzstan the reputation of a particularly reform-oriented country. At the outset of the therapies, the country seemed to be in stable condition, aiming high by claiming to be turning into the "Switzerland of Central Asia". In the years to follow, however, the "island of democracy" – as the country was called back then – also turned out to be just another authoritarian state. Its present problems (poverty, corruption, lack of legal certainty, unemployment and health care issues) are symptomatic of all countries that have been referred to as being "in transformation" and they are treated as such by the international community.

The above-mentioned problems of *transformation* states did not go unnoticed by transitologists. As a result, an enormous amount of literature has been written about why the *transformations* have failed. Reasons for the lack of success were sought in references to the "communist legacy" of those states⁵ and the "passivity"⁶ of its population. In recent years, however, transitologists have stopped looking for failures in the post-socialist states and have started questioning the adequacy of their own theories and models of *transformation*. A good example of a more critical approach toward *transformation* is Wolfgang Merkel's latest publication.⁷ This book is the first volume of a new series called "Defective Democracy", which departs from the early assump-

4 See Sachs and Lipton 1990a, b.

5 King 2000: 165 f.

6 Bernhard 1996: 323.

7 Merkel et al. 2003.

tion that countries "in transformation" inevitably pass through the stages of liberalization and democratization in order to reach the final stage of consolidation in which newly established democratic institutions take root. In light of the fact that this consolidation has taken place in only a few countries, which have been ranked as being "in transformation", the new approach offered by Merkel et al. tries to adapt the model to the realities of post-socialist or post-authoritarian states. In doing so, however, the authors do not question the model itself, but only components of it.

Scholars from outside the branch of transformation studies, however, have different explanations for the incompatibility of the theories with the real-life situations with which the people in those countries are forced to deal. According to the political scientist Thomas Carothers, who has published extensively on the inadequacy of the "transition paradigm", as he calls it, the whole concept has to be discarded as dysfunctional:

"The transition paradigm was a product of a certain time – the heady early days of the third wave – and that time has now passed. It is necessary for democracy activists to move on to new frameworks, new debates, and perhaps eventually a new paradigm of political change – one suited to the landscape of today, not the lingering hopes of an earlier era."⁸

The failure of many reforms, which were being carried out in the name of *transformation*, resulted in a severe loss of prestige of the sub-discipline transformation studies. Carothers' call to discard the paradigm altogether and move on to a new model of analysis of social change can be regarded as a most extreme reaction against transitology. As a result, the sub-discipline is now looking for new ways of dealing with the phenomenon of *transformation*. Within the past years, it has come closer to anthropological ways of analysing social change, for example, in arguing for more actor-centred approaches, or a more differentiated view on the impact of Soviet history on the post-Soviet successor states. This leads us to the question whether anthropology has something to offer to transitology.

Anthropological accounts of transformation

While scholars within the discipline of transformation studies regard countries such as Kyrgyzstan only to be "in transformation" because they are called post-Soviet or post-socialist (indicating that they had been stagnant up until then), anthropological studies hold a different view: change is not confined to a particular period, and history is regarded as inherently transitional. *Transformation*, therefore, can neither be viewed as a post-authoritarian or

8 Carothers 2002: 20.

post-socialist phenomenon alone, but should be seen as referring to any historical period of any state or any group. Thus, the need arises for contextualization. Also, the *transformation* of a given societal entity cannot be analysed without paying attention to what is empirically observable in the supposed *transformation* of that specific entity. Theoretical discussions, models and hypotheses need grounding in observations that are made in real-life situations.⁹ Questions posed by anthropologists include: “What does change mean for the local population experiencing it?”; “What strategies do people develop in order to live in an environment that has been described as transitional by outsiders?” and “How do people react towards foreign models of *shock therapy* and *democratization*?”

A large number of case studies by anthropologists in post-socialist environments has provided answers to these questions, showing, for example, that aspects of market economy, which are being introduced to those countries, may be perceived negatively by the local population. Caroline Humphrey argues that, while production and manpower are aspects, which the local population can compare to components of the socialist economic model, consumption and trade are foreign to them. Trade is especially regarded as “speculative behaviour” since, according to the Marxist ideal, true value can only originate from manpower.¹⁰ By investigating local economic perceptions, Humphrey was able to show why people do not accept the economic models that were intended for them by external experts. She also points out alternative strategies that people develop, such as savings strategies, or a return to subsistence economy, in order to withdraw from the mechanisms of the market.¹¹

Ruth Mandel shows how international organizations unintentionally further increase the brain drain of qualified local experts. Many leave the local job market to work for international organizations. Through their activities, these organizations create what Mandel calls a “para-state”, offering high salaries and interesting working opportunities to pull local experts out of the job market. These actors who lay the foundation for models of *transformation* are thereby unavailable for jobs in state institutions, thus leaving *transformation* to those who do not make it into the more prestigious para-state.

As shown above, an anthropological view on *transformation*, such as that offered by Humphrey or Mandel, succeeds in pointing out the shortcomings of the theories and models of transitologists. Thus, anthropology has much to offer as a discipline; its analytical tools can be used in future discussions as well as in the elaboration of new models and theories argued for by Thomas Carothers and others. Some of its contributions are long-term fieldwork instead of short-term consultation; an actor-centred approach instead of one focusing on institutions; and an understanding of history, not as a legacy,

9 See Hann (ed.) 2002; Humphrey 2002; Verdery 1996.

10 Humphrey 2002: 59.

11 Ibid.: 56.

which is dragged along and hinders progress, but as something that is instrumentalized and actively makes use of the opportunity to position oneself in the present. Last but not least, anthropology offers a pluralistic conception of culture in sharp contrast to the often-deterministic use of the term within transitology. In the context of transformation studies, the term culture has come to be used whenever transitologists have had to describe and explain why the behaviour of local actors deviated from their assumptions. The concept of culture has more or less been regarded as a primordial constant, which is not subject to change and hinders *transformation*.¹²

An anthropological perspective, however, can do more than simply deconstruct assumptions made by others. It may also give an alternative point of view on the phenomenon of *transformation* itself. In this article, it is argued that *transformation* is a powerful rhetorical instrument in Kyrgyzstan. Looking at the rhetorical use of the concept rather than regarding it as a real-life phenomenon enables us to illustrate the instrumental character of the term and the manifold ways in which it is utilized in post-socialist Kyrgyzstan. This is not to deny that states like Kyrgyzstan are experiencing serious problems and have been subject to massive political, economic, legal and social changes since their independence. What is being suggested here is that the analysis of the concept of *transformation* needs to be looked at from a different perspective.

Looking at transformation as a rhetorical instrument – an alternative approach

While scientific theories and models of *transformation* are subject to more and more critique from both outside and from within the sub-discipline, the general use of the concept of *transformation* is increasingly being used. In the course of the past 20 years, *transformation* has become one of the most commonly used terms alongside *good governance*, *democratization*, *sustainability* and *development cooperation*. Like these concepts, it has been converted from a purely scholarly term to a slogan, which is frequently used in the rhetoric of politicians, international organizations and the media. How can this development be explained?

Since the mid-90s, the use of the term *transformation* has been of an increasingly self-evident nature, despite the lack of a proper definition and not knowing what exactly is understood by it. A few practical examples shall explain this argument: since 1992 the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) has been publishing a *Law in Transition*-report in which the current state of legal affairs in transitional countries is described. The World Bank has been publishing a *Transition Newsletter* in which it informs about its activities in transitional countries. For Central Asia, the US

12 See, for example, Brunner 1997: 103 ff.

Agency for International Development (USAID) opened an *Office of Market Transition*, an *Office of Social Transition* and an *Office of Democratic Transition*.¹³ International and national conferences have been devoted to the problem of *transformation* throughout the past decade. Recent examples of such preoccupations are *Transitions and Inequality in the 21st Century* (Utah, September 2004); *Economies and Politics in Transitions: Central Asia and Beyond* (Almaty, October 2004); *Dynamics of Transformation in Central Asia* (Rome, November 2004). Moreover, a large number of research institutions have been established recently, or have reoriented their focus towards *transformation*, for example, the *Frankfurt Institute for Transformation Studies* or the *Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics*. Numerous journals and newsletters, such as the Czech online-journal *Transitions online*, or *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, are committed to the topic. The concept of *transformation* can also be found in an innumerable amount of monographs¹⁴ about social change in post-socialist states, as well as in travel literature and even fiction.¹⁵

The general usage of the term *transformation* did not go unnoticed by anthropologists, such as Chris Hann or Catherine Verdery. While Hann argues for the investigation of how discourses on *transformation* influence social practice,¹⁶ Verdery exposes the ideological meaning behind concepts such as *privatization*, *market*, *rule of law* and *civil society*. She analyses metaphors frequently used in transformation studies, such as *shock therapy* or *big bang* (a synonym for this therapy), and claims that, while the first term envisions Western experts as doctors, the second has turned them into God.¹⁷ Both authors have pointed at the usage of *transformation* as Western rhetoric. The anthropologist Kevin Latham,¹⁸ however, has referred to *transformation* as a rhetorical tool, which has been employed in socialist countries as well. In his research, he emphasizes the use of the term *transformation* in Chinese media discourse and assesses the concept as being highly relevant to the Communist Party. His argument is based on the premise that, through the concept of *transformation*, the party is able to sustain the impression that the country is moving in the right direction. In order to disseminate the rhetoric of *transformation* throughout the country, the party relies on the media. Journalists, however, do not only blindly execute tasks imposed upon them, but also actively shape the concept of *transformation* with their own personal hopes and wishes. While Latham has been one of the first researchers to point out the importance of *transformation* as a local concept in socialist countries, he does not deliver an explanation for the predominance of it.

13 Mandel 2002: 412.

14 Cf. Di Palma 1990; Lijphart and Waisman 1996; Linz and Stepan 1996; Pribán, Roberts and Young 2003.

15 A recent publication of well-known Russian writer Victor Pelewin carries the title *The dialectics of the transition period: From nowhither to nowhere* (2004).

16 Hann 1994: 236.

17 Verdery 1996: 205.

18 Latham 2000, 2002.

In this article, it is held that the concept of *transformation* has become such a widespread phenomenon in post-socialist Kyrgyzstan, because the local population was already familiar with its usage in socialist political discourse. The success of the concept of *transformation* in Kyrgyzstan is not only due to the high degree of familiarity of the country with Western theories and models as propagated through international organizations. Significant parallels can also be traced between the perception of overall social change as developed in transitology and the concept of social *transformation* as first verbalized in the theory of Karl Marx,¹⁹ and, as later reinterpreted and amplified, in statements made by the Soviet party secretaries. Therefore, it was not necessary to export the concept to Kyrgyzstan after the country's independence, because a socialist version of it already existed there.

What Akaev and Marx have in common

Karl Marx's view of social change can be subsumed into his model of stages, according to which society has progressed from a primitive society to a slaveholder society, to feudalism and then to capitalism in order to reach the final stage of communism.²⁰ As in the conception of social change in transformation studies, Marx also viewed social change as a strictly linear development. According to Marx, history unfolds in consecutive or overlapping stages of different levels of production. The achievement of a new stage of social development is envisioned as being always linked with class struggle for access to and the distribution of resources. Inter-class fights lead to the collapse of the old system and to the attainment of a new stage. Only when the final stage of communism has been reached, will all grievances cease.²¹

When the Soviet Union was founded in 1922, the first party secretary, Vladimir Lenin, advanced Marx's teachings, which he declared as "almighty, because they are true",²² by emphasizing the role of the party as the organ responsible for implementing social progress. According to Lenin, only a firmly organized cadre party would be able to guide the proletariat to its victory. He also modified the model of stages as developed by Marx and added the stage of *stamocap* (state-monopolistic capitalism) as a particular form of capitalism to the model. After Lenin, Joseph Stalin again modified the model of stages by proclaiming that one could not wait for a worldwide revolution to reach the last stage of communism, as Lenin had previously argued. Instead, he opted for an immediate intensification of the class struggle; thereby declaring ethnic cleansings, show trials and the Gulag-system as legitimate means to achieve this end. He viewed social change as inevitable

19 See "Die deutsche Ideologie", in: MEW 3: 17 ff.

20 Marx referred to socialism as an economical "transitional stage" which he ranked between capitalism and communism (see Kritik des Gothaer Programms, in: MEW 19: 28).

21 MEW 19: 21.

22 LW 19: 3.

and predestined and described the forthcoming uprising as the “disentanglement from knots of fate”.²³

Lenin and Stalin had almost unrestrained access to the media and both had for a while occupied the position of chief editor of the daily newspaper *Pravda*. Published articles as well as appeals for protest meetings in *Pravda* levered the policies undertaken by the party secretaries. With the media functioning as an instrument of the Soviet revolution from its very beginning, Lenin and Stalin ensured that their activities and vision of the future of communist society were spread throughout all countries and republics of the Soviet empire. Especially Stalin used the media for propagandistic ends.²⁴ The local population, therefore, did not have to read Marx in order to become familiar with the concept of social change as evolving in linear stages. It can be assumed that the citizens already knew of the stages through the interpretation provided by the respective Soviet party secretaries.

Even up until shortly before the break-up of the Soviet Union, the preoccupation with the role of social change as evolving in a linear manner proved to be useful in legitimating actions introduced by the head of the party. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev took up the position of General Secretary of the Communist Party and started a radical political, economic, legal and social reform, following Western-style models. While he broke with almost 70 years of Soviet tradition, he tried to link his undertaking to the Soviet past to show that reforms were still being carried out in the name of the Soviet people. Speaking on behalf of the party, Gorbachev’s protégé, Lukyanov, explained the new approach as follows: “We are constructing a law-based state in a Soviet form, that is, in the form that the people have chosen as a result of the Great October Socialist Revolution”.²⁵ Gorbachev travelled throughout the Soviet Union in order to promote his reforms and his speeches were published in *Pravda*.²⁶ In his speech of 16 February in 1987 in the Kremlin, he criticized the economic, social and moral decay of the country, a situation that left no option other than to initiate radical reforms and far-reaching democratization (Russ.: *demokratizaciia*) of society. According to Gorbachev, the sole alternative, which remained, was that of a “revolutionary transition”.²⁷ He not only demanded this revolutionary attitude from the deputies of the Kremlin to whom he was giving the speech, but also from the general population. In his speech, the people (Russ.: *narod*) were given the significance Marx had attributed them with: Gorbachov refers to them as “the most important factor of the *perestroika*”.²⁸

23 Stalin 1950 [1905]: 160 ff.

24 See Hollander 1972.

25 Cited after Huskey 1992: 34.

26 It had been common procedure to publish speeches of First Secretaries of the Communist Party since the 1930s.

27 See Gorbachev 1987.

28 Ibid.

As pointed out, the original model of stages as developed by Marx has been changed and instrumentalized by different Soviet party secretaries for their own political ends. Although only a few of Marx’s original formulations have made it into the rhetoric of the party heads, a general understanding of social change has taken place in a linear way, and the ability to implement this through revolutionary means prevailed throughout all of the Soviet era. The current rhetoric of *transformation* in the post-socialist state of Kyrgyzstan can therefore be viewed as the continuation of older practices. It is applied in post-socialist contexts because of the relevance it had acquired in the Soviet period. President Askar Akaev, in particular, used the concept of *transformation* as a rhetorical instrument for his own ends. Like the party secretaries before him, he relied on the role of the media as a broker and multiplier of the concept. When instrumentalized in this way, the term *transformation* – as used in the local Kyrgyz context – obtains quite another meaning than the one thought of in the theories and models of transformation studies. Which meaning is involved here will be shown in a case study which was conducted in spring 2003, namely that of the Kyrgyz constitutional reform.

The case of the Kyrgyz constitutional reform

On 2 February 2003, the Kyrgyz citizens were called upon to go to the polls to make two decisions: whether a new version of the Kyrgyz constitution should be adopted, and whether president Askar Akaev should remain in office until the end of his term in October 2005. According to the Kyrgyz Central Election Committee, out of the 86.68 per cent who cast their vote, 76.61 per cent voted in favour of the new constitution, and 78.74 per cent wanted to see Akaev continue his term. The events leading to this referendum are complex and cannot be explained within the limited frame of this article.²⁹ However, it is important to note that the new version of Kyrgyzstan’s constitution did not evolve from serious attempts to reform the state’s structure. Rather, the referendum has to be regarded as a clever move by Akaev to calm down the population, as well as the international community, which was alerted to his questionable motives, when, in March 2002, during a demonstration for the release of an oppositionist, five people were shot dead by police and several injured. The incident became known as “The Aksy-event” and was labelled by the opposition and international organizations as a serious breach of human rights. The new version of the Kyrgyz constitution was referred to by Akaev as a “constitution of human rights”, and its changed content as a compilation of the opinions of all citizens. The second question posed at the referendum can only be interpreted as a direct move against the opposition, which had united in the course of the above-mentioned events,

29 For a detailed account of the constitutional reform, see Kunze 2003; Nelle 2004, and OSCE/ODIHR 2003.

and which began to pose a growing threat to Akaev's integrity, calling for his abdication and general reforms of the state sector. In order to promote the new constitution throughout the country, Akaev made extensive use of the media. In three speeches, held before and after the referendum, as well as through newspapers closely associated with the government, he tried to bias the Kyrgyz population. The concept of *transformation* served him as an important rhetorical instrument. However, the oppositional newspapers also made use of the term.

The concept of transformation in the speeches of Akaev and the Kyrgyz media

The use of the concept of *transformation* in the speeches of the President as well as in Kyrgyz governmental and oppositional newspapers can be illustrated in the case of the constitutional referendum quite clearly. The following analysis shows to what ends the concept of *transformation* has been employed in public discourse. The material analysed consists of speeches held by president Akaev as well as articles from the widely known governmental newspapers *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* and *Vechernii Bishkek* and from the two largest oppositional newspapers *Moia Stolica* and *Res Publica*.³⁰ Within a time frame of six weeks, starting from 14 January 2003 (with the first speech of President Akaev, in which he makes public the decision to hold a referendum on 2 February) until 21 February (with the reaction of the media after the newly adopted constitution had been signed), a total of 335 published articles were analysed and grouped into the following five different categories: coverage, reader's letters, polemics, interviews with local experts, and pleas from local NGOs, veterans and deputies of the parliament as well as the population and the international community.

During the six weeks analysed, a convergence between the time and the course of the event can be observed: the closer the date of the referendum, the more articles were being published. Attention toward this event was particularly strong in governmental newspapers, reaching a climax shortly before 2 February with almost no other topic being presented in the issues debated. The oppositional newspapers also reported constantly about the upcoming

³⁰ *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* is the oldest newspaper in Kyrgyzstan; published since 1925, traditionally it acts as an instrument of the government. In it, Akaev's speeches and decrees are printed in their original version and his picture is often placed on the front page. The newspaper is published three times a week with a circulation of 7,000 copies. *Vechernii Bishkek* was founded in 1974 and is the most-read newspaper in Kyrgyzstan with a circulation of 60,000 copies in its weekend edition. This newspaper is also associated with the government: At the time of the constitutional referendum, the son-in-law of Akaev was the editor in chief. The oppositional newspaper *Moia Stolica* was founded in 2001 and is published five times a week with a circulation of 5,000 copies; its weekend edition encompasses 17,000 copies. The newspaper can be described as very critical towards the government, reporting mainly on political topics. *Res Publica* is a weekly oppositional newspaper. Both oppositional newspapers work closely together, since they are often in danger of being closed down because of their critical coverages.

referendum. Regarding the concept of *transformation*, half of the articles in the governmental newspapers and one-third of the oppositional newspaper articles combined the national referendum with the concept of *transformation*. Besides the word *transformation* (Russ.: *transformaciia*), other words were used synonymously in the local context. These were passage (Russ. *perekhod*), period (Russ. *period*), transition period (Russ. *perekhodnii period*), stage (Russ. *etap*), transition stage (Russ. *perekhodnii etap*), transit (Russ. *transit*), reconfiguration (Russ. *preobrazovanie*), development (Russ. *razvitie, dvizhenie, vozrozhdenie*), mutation (Russ. *izmenenie, peremena*), step (Russ. *shag*) and way (Russ. *put*).

By grouping the articles into five categories, it became clear that, in the governmental newspapers, the concept of *transformation* was used especially in the categories of readers' letters, polemics and interviews, while the oppositional newspapers made use of it in pleas to the local population before the referendum and in their coverage subsequent to the event. In the following, a qualitative analysis of the three speeches given by the president as well as some of the more striking articles out of the above-mentioned categories show how the concept of *transformation* is used in the local context. As will be shown, it serves two purposes: first, to explain the changes in the new constitution; and second, to refer to changes in Kyrgyz society itself.

The transformation of the constitution

The presentation of changes in the new constitution made by Akaev and the media refers to four new legal provisions. These provisions are human rights, democratization, decentralization and judicial reforms. In Akaev's first speech entitled "The people has deliberated and suggested", the president formulated a new national idea for the year 2003, which is supposed to be reflected in the new constitution: "Kyrgyzstan – Land of Human Rights".³¹ According to him, the new constitution not only proclaims to, but also actually puts human rights into common practice. The new provisions were also declared as furthering the processes of democratization and decentralization in the political sector, thus transferring more power to the local regions. He declared that judicial reforms would guarantee the immunity of those judges, who, for a long time, have been subject to critique from within and without the country. In his speech, Akaev also frequently used terms such as *civil society*, *rule of law* and, time and time again, the term *human rights*; he also declared that, should the population accept the new constitution, all these concepts would be realized. When referring to the old version of the constitu-

³¹ It has become almost a tradition for Akaev to formulate a new "national idea" for every year. Interestingly, his ideas are often in stark contrast to social reality. For example, after the inter-ethnic conflict occurring in the Southern part of the country in 1990, he moulded the slogan "Kyrgyzstan – our common house". After the "Aksyi-event" in 2002, his slogan now refers to the supposedly functioning human rights system in the country.

tion, Akaev uses the term “constitution of the transition period” (Russ. *konstituciia perekhodnogo perioda*) and, by comparing Kyrgyzstan’s reforms with those of the other Central Asian republics, he has tried to strengthen the impression that the country continues to be the leader in terms of introducing and implementing reforms.

The governmental newspapers *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* and *Vechernii Bishkek* took up Akaev’s opinions on the new constitution and duplicated them in all five categories with reader’s articles predominantly dealing with the positive *transformation* of the constitution. However, it is doubtful whether these letters actually reflect the opinion of the Kyrgyz population. According to many sources interviewed within the frame of the research presented here, it is likely that these letters were “bought”. This habit would also seem compatible with the practice of Akaev, who, shortly before the referendum, had distributed presents, honorary titles and awards as well as raised the salaries of government officials and promised an increase in pensions.³² On a general note, the governmental newspapers were preoccupied with showing that the new constitution, as well as Akaev’s confirmation as president, was the wish of the population. By assigning reader’s letters and interviews a prominent position in their issues, the newspapers tried to contrive authenticity. After reading through the letters and analysing the interviews, it becomes obvious that Akaev’s statements were never questioned. Also, no other topics or other provisions were ever made the subject of discussions. Thereby, the governmental newspapers tried to show that the Kyrgyz population was united with regard to the referendum – a concept that Akaev had also referred to in his first speech.

However, referring to the new constitution as a *transformation* of the old one was not restricted to the governmental newspapers. In *Moia Stolica* and *Res Publica* as well, the concept of *transformation* was used – although in the opposite way. While the governmental newspapers were eager to show the progress made from the old to the new version, the oppositional newspapers regarded the new version as being more autocratic, as not protecting human rights, as limiting the influence of the population on state politics and as not guaranteeing the independence of the judiciary. In pleas made to the population as well as to the international community, opposition politicians, and NGOs tried to convince the population not to endorse the two questions being posed at the referendum. If adopted, the new constitution would not only have a negative impact on the state sector, but on society as a whole:

“The project for the adoption of a new constitution may cause regressive processes, lead to instability and the continuing polarization of the society as well as hinder the socio-economical transformation of the country”.³³ After

the referendum, the oppositional newspapers, in their coverage, referred to the newly adopted constitution as a regression (Russ. *otkat*) to undemocratic and authoritarian regimes.

Despite these different assessments made by Akaev and the media, it is striking that concepts such as *civil society*, *democratization* and *rule of law* were not made subject of discussions, but rather taken for granted. For example, what is understood by the term *civil society* was never questioned. The subject of discussions only dealt with whether or not these concepts would be realized in the new version of the constitution. This observation applies to the concept of *transformation* as well. Whereas Akaev and the governmental newspapers regarded the new version as guaranteeing the progressive development of the country, the oppositional newspapers saw in it a guarantee for its continuing decay. All of them, however, had an understanding of the concept of *transformation* as developing in a linear way. The direction in which the country was “transforming” was merely disputed. In the same way, both types of newspapers gave an account of the new constitution as the cornerstone of Kyrgyz history. The point, therefore, is not only that the constitution was transforming, but also that Kyrgyz society itself was viewed as being “in transformation”. In Akaev’s speeches, as well as in the media discourse, the event of the constitutional referendum was linked to the development of Kyrgyz society.

The transformation of Kyrgyz society

Already in his first speech, Akaev not only referred to the *transformation* of the constitution, but also extrapolated – out of its possible adoption – consequences for the development of Kyrgyz society. According to him, “The new constitution will guide our country further on its ways to democracy, economic affluence, peace and national unity”.³⁴ In the following weeks, these formulations turned up frequently in the governmental newspapers. Especially in the categories of coverage, reader’s letters and interviews, the referendum was linked to the above-mentioned concepts. In his second speech entitled “Ahead of us lie high goals and difficult tasks” given on 5 February 2003, shortly after the referendum, Akaev iterated the four positions mentioned earlier (human rights, democratization, decentralization and an independent judiciary) and declared them realized. He again emphasized that this result had only been achieved because of societal consensus. According to him, Kyrgyzstan has entered a new stage, which he calls the “period of stable development” (Russ. *ustoichivoe razvitie*). In retrospect, he regarded the strong position of the president – as it was defined in the old constitution – as justified: “The bygone period was hard [...]. Especially in this period a strong presidential power was needed, being able to protect the country from all

32 This piece of information comes from newspaper articles in which Akaev’s behaviour was portrayed in a positive way. See for example the article “Present from the President” (*Prezidentskii prezent*), *Vechernii Bishkek*, 21 January 2003.

33 From “The South and the North raise objection” (*Jug i Sever vyražajut nesoglasie*), 21 January 2003, in *Moia Stolica*.

34 Extract from Akaev’s first speech, 13 January 2003, in: *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*.

possible commotions and warranting a peaceful political and socio-economic transformation of the whole society".³⁵ In the adoption of the new constitution, he saw a sign indicating that Kyrgyzstan was not deadlocked, but actively working towards its *transformation*. In his speech, he linked the adoption of the constitution with the year 2003 and referred to it as the year of "Kyrgyz statehood", which had been recognized as such by the United Nations. He regarded the history of Kyrgyz society, its thousand years of old tradition and its wisdom as a guarantee for the future of the country. These formulations were taken up by the governmental newspapers as well, and were most explicitly duplicated in a letter by some Kyrgyz citizens, which was addressed to Akaev directly and published in *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*:

"We, as deputies of the Kyrgyz society, attach in the recognition of the year 2003 as the year of Kyrgyz statehood by the UN a large importance for our young Kyrgyz state. We are striving to erect a democratic society according to your national idea 'Kyrgyzstan – Land of Human Rights'. The legal basis for the further development of our state will be the new constitution, adopted through the referendum this year. It will serve as a symbol for the striving of our people towards stable development (Russ. *ustoichivoe razvitie*) and growth. We need, now more than ever, peace and national unity in our society".³⁶

After the ceremony for the signing of the constitution on 18 February, Akaev gave his third speech, "Learning to live according to the new constitution". He called it a "historical" day. According to him, the new constitution had already contributed to a new quality of statehood and facilitated the *transformation* of the republic to a "higher orbit of historical development" (Russ. *na bolee vysokuiu orbitu istoricheskogo razvitiia*). Having gone through a period of *transformation*, Kyrgyzstan had now arrived at the most effective and dynamic form of government. In the future, the "spirit of political ascent and societal enthusiasm" would need sheltering. In this regard, Akaev again appealed to overall societal consensus.

It is noteworthy that Akaev creatively plays with the concept of *transformation* in his speeches by describing the old constitution as the "constitution of the transition period" and claims that the country has left this period behind and has reached a stage of "stable development". The new constitution is regarded as an instruction on how to live in this new epoch, and Akaev tries to give the impression that the shady past has been left behind. Instead of succumbing to the Westernized forms of *transformation*, he creates a Kyrgyz version of it: neither *shock therapy* nor *transition politics* are used as slogans in his speeches. By developing his own concept, he rather distances himself

35 Extract from Akaev's second speech, in: *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* 5 February 2003.

36 Extract from the reader's letter "Time for an over-all societal council" (*Vremia obshchenarodnogo soveta*), in: *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 20 February 2003.

from the failed reformative attempts of the international community. In his speeches, the new constitution is referred to as the visible evidence of the successful *transformation* of state and society alike.

In the oppositional newspapers as well, the new constitution was considered more than just a legal document. Opposition NGOs equated the document with the destabilization of the socio-political situation in the country. Many of their pleas made prior to the referendum appealed to the "historical responsibility of the voters for the next generation".³⁷ In the name of "peace" and "unity", they called for the rejection of the new version. Another congruity between the statements made in governmental newspapers and the oppositional newspapers is the voiced appeal to the "wisdom of the Kyrgyz people". In many articles, the Soviet past was made the subject of discussion. Compared to that period, the situation in current Kyrgyzstan was described as being a lot worse: "The Republic has regressed fifty years. The citizens see no hope for their future. Where are our leaders, where is our independent development (Russ. *nezavisimoe dvizhenie*) that can help us progress?"³⁸ The Soviet past was instrumentalized in the oppositional newspapers in positive and negative ways: first, by comparing the former welfare state with the current state, as in the example cited above and, second, by describing the new constitution as "pro-Akaev" and comparing it to the "Stalinist constitution" of the past.³⁹ The oppositional newspapers thereby appealed to the collective consciousness of the older Kyrgyz generation. As done in the governmental newspapers, the oppositional newspapers associated the referendum with the *transformation* of Kyrgyz society. The conception that the development of the society is hindered by the new constitution shows that, also in oppositional newspapers, historical development is viewed in a linear way. In contrast to *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* and *Vechernii Bishkek*, however, the concept of *transformation* ceased to be used immediately after the referendum. The rhetoric of *transformation* in the oppositional newspapers, as having the power to be effective, only aimed at calling attention to the negative changes occurring in the state sector. Although it does not represent a constant feature of reporting, it nevertheless has to be regarded as a tool the government uses. Despite the fact that the oppositional newspapers, including its readers who are critical of Akaev, are familiar with the concept, the governmental newspapers continued to refer to the concept of *transformation* throughout the whole six-week period. As shown, it was Akaev who, most of the time, invented new meanings and made use of them in his speeches. This calls for a more thorough investigation as to how the president personally biased the concept of *transformation*.

37 See article "Dear Kyrgyz citizens!" (*Uvazhaemye Kyrgyzstancy!*) in the oppositional newspaper *Moia Stolica*, 17 January 2003.

38 Excerpt from the plea "Akaev has outwitted everybody once again" (*Akaev provel vsekh eshche raz*), in: *Moia Stolica*, 17 January 2003.

39 See for example the article "Notes of an observer ... or propagandistic trick?" (*Zyametki obozrevatelja: ... ili propagandistskij triuk?*), *ibid.*

Akaev's use of the concept of *transformation* in regard to the constitutional referendum shows significant parallels to the way it was used in the Soviet period. His justification that, during recent years, a strong presidency had been necessary resembles statements made by Lenin who argued for a strong "party cadre" in order to convey the revolutionary consciousness to the proletariat. Furthermore, Akaev also sees himself as a visionary and main initiator of reforms.⁴⁰ His evolutionary historical model of society described in his speeches and distributed by the media can be compared to the way Stalin viewed social change. Like Stalin, Akaev talked of Soviet society and portrayed the development of Kyrgyz society as historically unavoidable and rooted in fate. In the end, he – like Gorbachev – legitimized his proceedings by referring to Kyrgyz citizens as the actual "reform engine". He declared that the Kyrgyz populace was the catalyst for the new constitution. Like the Soviet party secretaries before him, Akaev has unlimited access to the media. Besides the press, most television channels and radio stations are either directly under the control of the government, or in the hands of his extended family. Oppositional media is constantly struggling with repression and false allegations, leading to defamation lawsuits, bans and prohibitions.

By using the concept of *transformation*, Akaev tied in former historical concepts of linear social development as first verbalized by Marx and later significantly shaped by the Soviet party secretaries for their own political needs. By combining the "transformation of the constitution" with the "transformation of society", Akaev linked his own political ambitions with a socialist, historical model of development, which must be considered as still being prevalent in the consciousness of the Kyrgyz population. As in the past, it is the media that has helped distribute this rhetoric, with journalists at the same time buying in to it and thereby actively shaping it.

As the party secretaries before him, Akaev affixed his own seal on the concept of *transformation*. His formulation of "reaching a higher orbit of historical development" can be regarded as stemming from his scientific background as a physicist: he uses terms inspired by the natural sciences in order to explain his model of *transformation*. Since the beginning of his term in office, he has published extensively on this topic. In his first book entitled "The transition economy in the eyes of a physicist" from 2000, he developed his own mathematical approach on how to end the transition period in Kyrgyzstan. One year later, he published the book "A remarkable decade".⁴¹ In 2002, "A difficult way towards democracy" and "Kyrgyz statehood and the

national epos *Manas*" were published. Here as well, the *transformation* of Kyrgyz society is prevalent in his arguments prognosticating the future development of the country. Moreover, Akaev has given his model of *transformation* a national touch. In his speeches, he tried to legitimize his actions regarding the new constitution, by linking the political event directly with the Kyrgyz population: he referred to the people as wise (Russ. *mudryi*) and independent (Russ. *nezavisymyi*). Governmental newspaper articles focused especially on the Kyrgyz mountaineers, who, according to legend, symbolize independence and wisdom. By referring to these qualities, Akaev connects aspects of Kyrgyz identity and national consciousness with the upcoming political event. Both Akaev and the governmental newspapers portrayed the day of the referendum as a "historical" event. He also spoke of the "symbolic significance" of the celebration of the 22-century-long history of the Kyrgyz state in 2003 and the fact that the UN had acknowledged the year as such.⁴² Akaev also deemed the 125th anniversary in 2003 of the capital Bishkek as symbolic.

Eventually, the day of the national referendum was declared a public holiday. Governmental newspapers published articles on how the national rice dish *plof* had been cooked for the eldest, how sporting events and concerts had been scheduled and how throughout the country people were celebrating. An author of the governmental newspaper *Vechernii Bishkek* suggested that the day of the referendum be elevated to an official holiday: "Patriots of the Fatherland Day".⁴³ To understand these statements, one has to bear in mind what role elections played during the Soviet period: elections were regarded as the regular confirmation of the Communist Party's existing state of affairs, which had already been decided on; and they legitimized the continuing existence and rule of the Party itself. The reforms as initiated by Gorbachev in the 1990s did not change this custom very much: the existing system was only modified, but not abolished.⁴⁴ Concerning Akaev's increasingly authoritarian managerial style, it can be assumed that he, quite willingly, accepted this Soviet tradition of regarding elections as an instrument which is used to acknowledge the status quo. The proclamation of "national unity", which Akaev frequently referred to in his speeches, can also be explained in this context: in Kyrgyzstan, elections continue to be viewed as an occasion to demonstrate the unity of society and the people's support for the president.

40 During a conference of the Center for Strategic & International Studies in Washington, DC in September 2002 Akaev declared: "In terms of democratization, among the post-Soviet countries, the Kyrgyz Republic – and I put it quite reasonably – is one of the leading countries. And I do not want to minimize my personal role in this process." Cited in: Regine Spector 2004: 3.

41 Akaev 2001.

42 Akaev and the governmental media ignored the fact that, in the resolution of the UN, the allegedly 2200-year old existence of the Kyrgyz state is not mentioned at all.

43 See the article "Hello, patriot!" (*Zdravstvui, patriot!*), in: *Vechernii Bishkek*, 3 February 2003.

44 See Rose 1998: 39 ff.

Conclusion

In this article, it is argued that the concept of *transformation* can be looked at from quite a different perspective than has usually been applied in the branch of “transformation studies”. Rather than regarding *transformation* as a real-life phenomenon, which is associated with a “third wave of democracy”⁴⁵ occurring in post-socialist countries, in this article the instrumental use of the term, as a rhetorical tool in public discourse, has been explored in the case of the Kyrgyz constitutional referendum. As the result of a qualitative analysis of speeches and newspaper articles on the referendum, one can sum up that the rhetoric on *transformation* constituted a high percentage of the media coverage of the constitutional reform. Following Akaev’s lead, governmental newspapers used the term *transformation* as well as other key terms, such as *human rights*, *civil society*, *rule of law* and *democratization*, and thereby distributed these concepts to the wider Kyrgyz public. Journalists of the oppositional newspapers also framed their pleas and opinions with the help of the concept of *transformation*. As the anthropologist Kevin Latham has argued in the context of Chinese media discourse, it is the creative use of the concept by journalists themselves rather than the simple carrying-out of commands that ensures the successful distribution of the rhetoric.

Moreover, it is argued in this article that *transformation* is used in such a predominant way in Kyrgyzstan, because a socialist version of the concept already existed many years prior to its independence, thereby constituting a part of the historical legacy of the country. However, this legacy is not being handed down unchanged; it is being employed in new ways according to the will of the ruler.

If one distinguishes between the use of the concept of *transformation* and the meanings attached to it, it becomes evident that the concept itself has never been questioned in Kyrgyz public discourse. Regarding the way it was used in the constitutional referendum, according to linguist Georg Stötzel,⁴⁶ one could speak of *transformation* as a *non-controversial* concept. Stötzel maintains that controversial concepts are those linguistic-political conflicts, which are carried out in public, because they carry with them polemic images or certain non-universal ideas.⁴⁷ If one transfers Stötzel’s concept to the way the concept of *transformation* has been employed in public discourse in Kyrgyzstan, it becomes clear that no such linguistic-political conflicts were present. Rather, the meaning of *transformation* was taken for granted and essentially not questioned at all. What was questioned, however, was the way it is supposed to be carried out and whether the country was progressing or relapsing.

45 Huntington 1991.

46 Stötzel 1995.

47 Stötzel, for example, analyses public debates in Germany on the topic of “Gastarbeiter” (foreign workers; literally “guest workers”). Embedded in the term is the assumption that these workers, who came to help rebuild Germany after World War II, at some time have to go home again – as guests usually do.

To sum up, the concept of *transformation* may shape reality, because it is able to legitimize those actions as exemplified in Akaev’s political ambitions. As the term has not only been employed by the president, but also in the media, the rhetoric of *transformation* therefore constitutes an important part of public (and also private)⁴⁸ discourse about the future political, economic, legal and social development of Kyrgyzstan, thereby influencing the activities of the people as well.⁴⁹ However, the concept of *transformation* should not be mistaken for reality itself. Viewing *transformation* as a consciously and unconsciously employed rhetoric has proven to be fruitful in showing the instrumental character of the term and its manifold uses in a post-socialist context. Future research into exploring how social change is experienced in the post-socialist republics in question should take this rhetorical dimension of the concept of *transformation* into account rather than fall victim to it.

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48 Within the frame of the research project described here, interviews with Kyrgyz legal experts such as judges, lawyers and teachers of law were conducted in order to analyse the use of the concept of “transformation” in the local population. Evidently, legal experts frequently used the concept of “transformation” in order to position themselves in a situation they referred to as unstable and unsafe. While the interviewees suspected Kyrgyzstan of becoming an autocracy (with the new constitution being a first step in this direction), their hopes, however, were framed in the rhetoric of “transformation” describing a better future. An important result of these interviews was that, while the respondents viewed their own position in the process of the political “transformation” as insignificant, they did not wait for outside assistance when designing their own personal future.

49 See Wells 1996.

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Farkhod Tolipov

Power, Nation-Building, and Legacy – A Comparative Analysis of Central Asian Leadership*

Introduction

The first leaders of the post-Soviet and newly independent Central Asian states are very interesting phenomena in terms of their roles, images, status and personality. Their accession to and retaining of power, their ruling of the respective countries and their soon-to-be ending presidencies play a crucial role in shaping the political systems of these young states, and will leave a deep trace in the overall process of nation and state-building in Central Asia. Against the background of the very complicated and rapidly changing post-cold war international system and the formation of the so-called *new world order*, the five presidents and their respective states, which at the same time constitute one common region, play an important role in shaping the statehood of their nations. They not only have to conceive and consolidate the sovereignty and cohesiveness of their countries, but must also successfully integrate them into the international community.

The following analysis of the leaders and their respective regimes deals with questions such as: What are the power resources of presidents and their political regimes? What types of leadership exist? Who are those leaders who share a common background that dates back to Soviet period? Do they shape the common future of Central Asia?

Kazakhstan

Power

The Supreme Council of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic appointed Nursultan Nazarbaev, born on 6 July 1940 – former First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan – president on 24 April 1990. In the national elections of 1 December 1991, he was elected president. In the referendum of 29 April 1995, his presidential term was extended to the year 2000. However, on 8 October 1998, the parliament of Kazakhstan decided to end his tenure in 1999 and in the next presidential elections, on 10 January 1999, Nazarbaev was, once again, re-elected.

* This article was written before the political events in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005 and in Uzbekistan in May 2005 took place. The editors decided to publish it as a document which reflects a certain moment in history. For current developments in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, see the articles by Berg and Kreikemeyer in Part IV of this volume.