

Impact of Drug Trade and Organized Crime on State Functioning in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

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ABSTRACT

This article explores implications of drug trade and organized crime on state functioning in post-March 24 Kyrgyzstan and post-civil war Tajikistan. First, the connection between a weak state and rise of competing local authorities profiting from the shadow economy and drug trade is explained. Such authorities flourish in the peripheral and border areas, where state-power is weak. Over time small gangs involved in drugs trade, shuttle trade, and smuggling, have grown into more coherent groups with internal hierarchies and identifiable leaders. Second, illegally accumulated capital by individual actors has permitted them to establish their own micro-political, economic, and security regimes in the peripheries. Besides playing merely an economic role at local precincts, these actors have shifted to the political level, creating a parallel authority to the government. A number of such actors have been able to win overwhelming majority of votes for representation in the parliament, thus entering politics on the state level with some even reaching the ministerial level.

Keywords • drug trade • organized crime • state-building • Kyrgyzstan • Tajikistan

Political changes in spring 2005 in Kyrgyzstan showed how organized criminal groups can pose an open threat to the government, directly participate in state politics, decrease legitimacy of the ruling elite, and escape legal persecution. Likewise, roughly a decade ago, civil war in Tajikistan illustrated how the drug trade rapidly expanded as a result of state weakness and produced lasting effects on the government's functioning in the political, economic, and social realms. The connection between organized crime and the problem of drug trafficking in the Central Asian states has been attracting increasing attention from regional and international scholars as well as policy analysts, who saw an alarming trend in the ability of drug-barons to influence the functioning of the national governments. It has been argued that along with secular

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and religious political opposition to the Central Asian governments, illicit drug dealership creates a direct threat to states' sovereignty.¹

Amid weak state institutions, poverty in rural areas, and chaotic privatization processes in the post-Soviet space, drug dealership is one of the ways to quick accumulation of capital. Drug trade leads to fast enrichment among individual actors and groups of people, especially in areas where state authority is the weakest. Like in other post-Soviet transitioning states, the Central Asian governments have not been capable of reinforcing the Soviet institutes of social welfare, security and economy ever since their independence. The Soviet financial and ideological instruments that used to perpetuate public sphere were no longer in the states' disposal after the communist bloc's collapse.

The historical context of the Soviet past in the Central Asian region is thus important to consider. Decisions made on creation of the Central Asian states by the Soviet leadership in the early twentieth century have enduring consequences on developments today. Processes of Soviet border delimitation, establishment of national governments, building urban and rural infrastructures, as well as forceful shipment of ethnic groups across the states must be taken into account while analyzing the current problems of drug trade and organized crime. Geopolitical factors and geographical conditions play an important role in the rapid expansion of drug dealership in the Central Asian states.

This article examines the link between drug trade, organized crime, and state-building in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Taking these two countries as examples, I aim to illustrate how post-Soviet governments are susceptible to challenges posed by competing local criminal authorities. The article focuses on financially empowered criminal elements, be that organized groups or individual actors, that seek political influence and, sometimes, legitimacy, to reinforce their own status. Political aspirations of such elements instigate corruption among state institutions, border troops, militia, and other law-enforcement agencies. In addition, such local criminal actors also expand ties on a transnational level, creating movements trespassing state borders and therefore require consolidated interstate approaches.

Defining the Link between Drug Trade, Organized Crime, and State Performance

There are various ways to assess the extent of the drug trade problem in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and its impact on political processes in these states. The situation can be observed from the ratio of crimes connected

¹ For example, Olga Olikier and Thomas S. Szayna eds., *Faultlines of Conflict in Central Asian and the South Caucasus. Implications for the US Army* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2003).

with illicit drugs against other types of crime, people detained for cultivating and transporting drugs, people susceptible to drug usage, number of addicts, and the amount of drugs extracted by law-enforcement structures. Since the quantitative data on organized crime and drug trade often contains a great deal of estimates and generalizations, it is important to pay attention to the analyses by Central Asian experts from the NGO sector, mass media, and academic circles. In the following sections I depict the implications of the criminal world on the political life in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan by incorporating analytical material on organized crime and drug trafficking published in local newspapers and expressed by local experts in each country.

It is possible to divide factors leading to the growth of the illicit drugs trade into those based on the analysis of historical context on the one hand, and explainable through geographical traits of the region on the other. Historical factors contributing to the amplification of the drug trafficking problem have roots in the administrative decisions made in the early twentieth century by the Soviet power. Territorial delimitation, planting of large agricultural sectors, and building heavy industries to construct a system of interdependence from the central power in Moscow and among constituencies of the Soviet Union have enduring effects for the independence period. Soviet planned economy, as well as projects on creating administrative units based on ethnic identities inevitably caused multiple cleavages within the region. The Central Asian population was divided along ethnic identities that largely corresponded to administrative borders and along socio-economic that matched geographical conditions across the region.

The economic gap between the small educated urban class and the majority agriculture-based rural population was sizeable in the Soviet planned economy. Although the urban population was dependent on the performance of the agricultural sector during the Soviet times, the picture inverted with independence. The large agricultural sector was severely hit with the cut down of government subsidies after the collapse of the communist bloc. The rural population, which comprises roughly 60 percent of the Central Asian population, was the primary victim of rapid impoverishment. In the Central Asian region, where agriculture, and not industry, was especially developed, farmers, shepherds, and peasants suffered from the dissolution of the socialist economy. The new governments were not able to re-establish transnational economic ties with the former Soviet states or provide the usual subsidies to *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes* (state owned collective farms).

Against the background of disintegration of the Soviet agricultural sector, suspicions were raised with regards to the emergence of a class of neo-businessmen in rural areas and the sources of rapidly accumulated wealth. The governments' inability to provide sufficient welfare to an

impoverished rural population and geographical proximity to Afghanistan created possibilities for fast accumulation of private capital from illicit businesses, including drug trafficking. Growing transnational migration of people and capital, and the increased transportation options in the 1990s created favorable conditions for faster, larger, and more frequent smuggling of drugs. With the massive migration of the Central Asian population to Russia and Kazakhstan in search for better labor markets, Afghan drugs also became predominantly transported to and via Russia and Eastern Europe. Estimates point that about 75 percent of Afghan drugs are smuggled through the Central Asian states.² The production of opiates and marijuana is expanding in Issyk-Kul and Osh oblasts in Kyrgyzstan, southern Kazakhstan, and the mountainous Badakhshan region in Tajikistan. Since the early 1990s the problem of drug trafficking has only been getting worse.³ According to expert assessments, the price for heroin increases between sixty to eighty times after being exported from Tajikistan to European states.⁴ The supply of drugs from Afghanistan and Central Asian states has been growing over the years due to increased demand in Russia and Eastern Europe. The number of drug addicts grew within the Russian population in particular resulting in numerous economic and social problems. As smuggling of heroin and opium from the Central Asian states became relatively inexpensive, they substituted cheaper drugs in Russia.

Drug dealership networks that once had local origins in Afghanistan and parts of South Asia, found their clientele in Russia and East European states. The problem of drug trade has a transnational direction due to mobilization of drug dealers along ethnic identities. Alignment of drug dealers based on ethnic identities secures higher level of trust between them. Several mafia groups strengthened their positions in Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s. According to the analysis by Tamara Makarenko, these groups are identifiable through ethnic traits, namely, the Russian, Afghan, Turkish, Azeri, Chechen and Kyrgyz mafia.⁵ The ethnic Russian bond in this problem is especially strong. Most Russian dealers operating on the Russian territory control drug trade in the Central Asian states.

² "75% of Afghan Drugs Pass through Central Asia," *Interfax*, November 21 2003; "Transit Narkotikov Cherez Kirgiziu Sprovociroval Rost Chisla Narkomanov" [Increase of Drug-Addicts Encouraged Drug-Transit through Kyrgyzstan], *Kyrgyz-Press*, January 16 2004; Albert Bogdanov, "Kto Postavit Zaslou Narkotrafiku?" [*Who Will Prevent Drug-Trafficking?*], *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* 27 (2003).

³ Kairat Osmonaliev, *Developing Counter-Narcotics Policy in Central Asia* (Uppsala: Central Asia Caucasus Institutes and Silk Road Studies, 2005).

⁴ Aleksei Matveev, "Moskva i Dushanbe Pytautsya Ostanoit' Afganskije Narkopotoki" [Moscow and Dushanbe Seek to Stop Narcotics Inflows], *Gazeta SNG*, August 28 2003.

⁵ Tamara Makarenko, "Kyrgyzstan and the Global Narcotics Trade," *Eurasia Insight* (December 8 1999).

The transnational dimension of the drug trade makes it especially difficult for the Central Asian law-enforcement agencies to deal with drug barons operating on foreign territories. The number of detained people from the local population, many of whom act as couriers, substantially exceeds the number of captured narco-barons who mastermind the trade and receive the largest profit from such activities. Against the backdrop of increased transnational flows of money, goods, and people, the post-Soviet Central Asian states have yet to develop corresponding mechanisms to oversee these processes, let alone generate institutional responses. None of the Central Asian states have been capable of advancing a reactive system of investigation and persecution of illegal businesses carried out by organized criminal networks, such as money laundering, trafficking in humans, drugs, and arms. In effect, transnational criminals' smuggling methods gained sophistication much faster compared to the Central Asian states' development of security institutions in the post-Soviet period.

Organized Crime and State Performance

Expansion of organized crime in the post-Soviet space attracted intensive attention of western scholars starting from the 1980s. Most of the analyses then focused on how the Soviet-controlled economy and accumulating budgetary deficits inevitably inspired the black market, the emergence of criminal networks and, eventually, the development of specific, mutually beneficial relationships between criminal elements and state institutes and government officials.⁶ The authors claimed that the exchange of illegal goods and services between criminals and public employees created a group of individuals interested in the continuity of such informal networking.⁷

According to Albini *et al.*, this trend further intensified with the collapse of the Soviet Union as Soviet state institutions lost their social and political control over the population.⁸ When the Soviet central power weakened, criminal networks were able to fill in the political gap at the regional level and increase own activity in localities where the state was not able to exercise its authority because of budgetary constraints or lack of necessary institutional basis. Criminal elements across the post-Soviet space were able to permeate state politics through local elections, recruitment in the government structures, including institutes of state security.

⁶ Mark Galeotti ed., *Russian and Post-Soviet Organized Crime* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002).

⁷ Joseph Albini et al., "Russian Organized Crime: Its History, Structure, and Function," in *Russian and Post-Soviet Organized Crime*, ed. Mark Galeotti (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002).

⁸ *Ibid.*

Involvement of criminal elements in politics further undermined states' ability to cope with organized crime. Not only did local criminal authorities substitute the state in providing social welfare in peripheries, they also served as security providers on a micro-level.⁹ Such security was maintained in parallel with the criminal elements' personal interests. Notably, a number of organized crime networks in northern Kyrgyzstan were able to operate while maintaining cooperative relations with the militia. To give one example, the Kyrgyz parliamentarian Tynychbek Akmatbayev was elected to head a parliamentary committee on organized crime, despite his criminal reputation.

Towards the late 1990s Russia was largely able to crack down on small and medium-sized organized crime networks - who were then distinguished as a separate "social class" of *vorovskoi mir* (thieves' world) - which had undermined the law-enforcement agencies. While such networks still largely exist in Russian cities and regions, their activities have since been forced underground away from the public eye. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the increase and strengthening of criminal networks became noticeable in the late 1990s, early 2000s. Small criminal gangs existed in the 1990s, but significant sophistication in conspiracy, networking, and the ability to operate locally without fearing law-enforcement agencies only developed a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Kyrgyzstan

Most observers of the March 24 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan last year would agree that while criminal networks had a marginal role in the events that precipitated the change of political regimes, they gained unprecedented autonomy as a result of weakened central power.¹⁰ Following the change of political regimes a number of figures with widely known criminal reputation displayed interest in participating in state politics by aggressively appropriating state economic sites, ignoring warnings from the law-enforcement structures, and collecting crowds in protest against the president or prime minister. Furthermore, the Kyrgyz public was shocked by the frequency of political assassinations and increased lawlessness.

Although the former Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev was able to reach a high level of domestic stability, criminal networks were nevertheless active in illegal businesses. Through various means, from

⁹ Frederico Varese, "Is Sicily the Future of Russia?: Private Protection and the Rise of the Russian Mafia," in *Russian and Post-Soviet Organized Crime*, ed. Mark Galeotti (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002).

¹⁰ Presentation by Edil Baisalov, leader of the NGO "Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society," George Washington University, November 7 2005.

imposing a high burden of taxation to direct threatening, legally registered business organizations were under a predominant control by Akayev's family members or his political allies. The government could manipulate legal businesses through the gears of law-enforcement agencies. In contrast, the shadow economy was a more challenging area for the government. Illicit trafficking in drugs, humans, and arms fell outside of state control.

At the same time, Akayev was able to maintain an image of a liberal leader by permitting greater freedom of speech and association compared to other Central Asian states. Akayev's means of regulating the activity of political opposition were not as blunt as, for instance, in Uzbekistan. Akayev dealt with his opponents in a more sophisticated manner by establishing indirect control over major economic resources in the country and barring opposition forces from access to large businesses.¹¹ As a result, political opposition to Akayev's government was economically inferior and therefore politically weaker.

Thus, with the Akayev government unable to oversee the shadow economy but capable enough to neutralize its political opposition, business elites, often with criminal records, were able to penetrate the political arena in the parliamentary elections in February-March 2005. Shortly after the March 24 change of political regimes, the leading "revolutionists", then acting president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, and, then acting prime minister, Felix Kulov, opposed the idea of dissolving the parliament comprised predominantly of pro-Akayev figures. Calling off the parliament formed during the Akayev leadership could entail rapid deterioration of domestic security due some of the lawmakers' connection with the criminal world. In fact, the Tulip Revolution was perceived by most experts to be a mere reshuffle of political elites and not a genuine transformation of the state power because parliament was not dissolved and a strong authority of criminal elements remained in office.

The Kyrgyz parliament elected in 2005 is often referred to as a "criminal parliament" with a majority consisting of well-established businessmen with criminal reputations. At least 18 out of 75 members of the parliament are representatives of the business sector, owners of large industrial, transportation, and private enterprises. About a dozen of the parliamentarians are former government workers from various echelons.¹² These parliamentarians are often suspected by the local experts and mass media in large scale corruption for their ties in the business sphere. To

¹¹ Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2002): 5-21.

¹² Vyacheslav Schekunskih, "Zolotye Gory Issyk-Kulya. V Tenevoi Ekonomike Kirgizii Soperrichali 'Sem'i' Bermet i Askara Akaeva" [Golden Hills of Issyk-Kul. Families of Bermet and Askar Akayev Competed in Kyrgyzstan's Shadow Economy], *Novoe Pokolenie* 14, 358 (2005).

name a few, Jyrgalbek Surabaldiyev, Bayaman Erkinbayev, and Tynychbek Akmatbayev have a reputation of being criminals. All three lawmakers were assassinated within a six month period after the elections.

The course of actions leading to the three parliamentarians' involvement in the state politics is somewhat similar and illustrative of the general relationship between organized crime and state performance in Kyrgyzstan. Each of slain lawmakers gained a majority of votes at their respective electoral districts in the 2005 parliamentary elections. However, neither of them presented a viable economic or political program. Moreover, all three had only vocational training and no university education. But lack of a political program and weak educational background did not prevent them from scoring high electoral support. For instance, Akmatbayev prior to engaging in politics worked as a chef at one of the Issyk-Kul's tourist resorts. Erkinbayev headed a local community of sportsmen before he was elected in the parliament and appointed to chair the National Olympic Committee (NOC). He had served in the parliament since 1995. Jyrgalbek Surabaldiyev had a record of scandalous business affairs. He was openly accused by the Tulip Revolution's major leader, Roza Otunbayeva, for hiring aggressive provocateurs against peaceful demonstrators on March 24 and organizing lootings in Bishkek after the former president Askar Akayev fled Kyrgyzstan. Each lawmaker had ties with local sportsmen communities whom they recruited for mass protests against Bakiyev's government. A number of Kyrgyz parliamentarians spoke against Surabaldiyev, Erkinbayev, and Akmatbayev accusing them of fueling domestic instability to pursue their own economic interests.¹³

There are numerous reports by international organizations, as well as commentaries by local and foreign analysts on Erkinbayev's enrichment from drug dealership.¹⁴ Quite often, Erkinbayev was identified as being the major figure in illicit businesses and in particular drug trafficking in southern Kyrgyzstan. Erkinbayev's family owns a regionally significant market "Khal'mion" in Batken oblast and hotels in southern Kyrgyzstan. "Khal'mion" is an economically and politically important market due to its close location to the densely populated Kyrgyz-Uzbek border. Along with a number of other Kyrgyz political figures, Erkinbayev denied any allegations of involvement in drug trafficking or any other illicit businesses.

¹³ "Neskol'ko deputatov pokinuli zasedanie parlamenta Kirgizii v znak protesta" [Several deputies left parliamentary session to express protest], *Fergana*, March 30 2005.

¹⁴ Svante Cornell and Niklas Swanström, "Kyrgyzstan's 'Revolution': Poppies or Tulips?" *Central Asia – Caucasus Analyst*, May 18 2005; "Drug links to Kyrgyz MP's death," *BBC News*, November 29 2005; "Kyrgyzstan: A Faltering State," *International Crisis Group*, December 16 2005.

A month after the revolution, Bayaman Erkinbayev declared his intentions to run for presidency, thus openly challenging Bakiyev. In return, Bakiyev indirectly accused Erkinbayev for his involvement in the drug trade and expressed concerns that a range of criminal elements, including drug dealers, are striving to acquire presidential power.¹⁵ Almost a year after the change of political regime, the ability of Bakiyev's government to dominate over the criminal networks proved to be weak, while he also lost public approval and his political legitimacy eroded. If this trend continues and Bakiyev is unable to gain authority over criminal elements operating within the state structures, the likelihood of a coup d'état will become dangerously high.

Tynychbek Akmatbayev's brother Rysbek Akmatbayev is the most known mafia chief in northern Kyrgyzstan. Having a criminal reputation among the local public, the appointment of Tynychbek to head the parliamentary committee on security, rule of law, and information policy was controversial. Tynychbek's prolonged conflict with leaders of other criminal groups based in Kyrgyzstan's Chui oblast, made him especially keen on occupying the position related to law-enforcement structures. Tynychbek died during his visit to a prison in Bishkek to calm riots among inmates and his assassination was allegedly organized by the imprisoned mafia-boss Aziz Batukayev. Surabaldiyev's relatives joined the open protests against the government and the Prime Minister organized by Rysbek following his brother's death.

All three parliamentarians gained popularity at their electoral districts by actively contributing to the local infrastructure, supporting Islamic clergy, mosques and religious schools, and financing trips to Mecca. During the Islamic holy month of Ramadan Erkinbayev's family organized a series of charity events. Just like Erkinbayev, another parliamentarian Muratbek Malabayev organized charity events at his electoral district prior to the parliamentary elections in February-March 2005. Malabayev provided computers to local schools, built roads, and financed local orphanages, handicapped, war veterans, students and sportsmen.¹⁶ As a result, Malabayev gained 97 percent of the vote in a 98 percent turnout at his Kara-Suu district. He has previously occupied the top position at the Ministry of Finance's department of custom control. Being arrested for corruption, forgery of documents, and appropriation of state property in 1998, Malabayev was released under amnesty shortly

¹⁵ Arkadii Gladilov, "Kurmanbek Bakiyev: Vybory budut svobodnymi," [Kurmanbek Bakiyev: Elections will be free] *Vechernii Bishkek*, April 29 2005; *Kabar News Agency*, April 29 2005.

¹⁶ "Chem jivet yuzhnyi gorod Kara-Suu" [How the southern city of Kara-Suu lives], *Obschestvennyi Reiting*, January 15 2004.

after the trial.¹⁷ Malabayev's case proves the incapacity of the Kyrgyz law-enforcement agencies to persecute large-scale corruption.

By winning votes through enhancing local communities and thus replacing the functions of the state in rural areas, wealthier candidates undermine chances of their competitors with weaker financial capabilities. In effect, the wealthier is the political candidate in a rural area, the greater are his or her chances to win representation in the parliament or local elections. There have been numerous cases where several members of one family are elected. Only in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek candidates with backgrounds in academia, journalism, or other fields not associated with the private sector are able to win parliamentary seats. The Bishkek residents are more politically active because of higher level of education and greater access to various mass media.

Popularity gained through solving the needs of the impoverished rural population by financial means as opposed to proposing a viable economic and political program has long-term disadvantages. Candidates who "sponsored" their electorates are likely to pursue their own business interests before representing their voters' needs. This is usually reflected in legislations dealing with privatization, energy import and export, and custom control regulations. The laws are designed to enrich the various members of the government or parliament who have a stake in the particular sector. The extent of influence imposed by political figures with criminal ties is reinforced by their ability to dominate over other state institutes, judicial power, and ministries.

Though the March 24 political changes brought hopes for greater democratization of politics, the domestic stability was significantly shaken by the state's weak responses against increased criminality in the country. From the post-March 24 developments it is possible to identify state institutions that were especially susceptible to influence of organized crime. The Ministry of Finance and the parliament were indeed the foremost examples when criminal elements could benefit from associating with the state structures. The NOC in Kyrgyzstan is another common stage for intrigues for figures with criminal backgrounds. Local sportsmen communities' connection with organized crime is peculiar to the post-Soviet states. As explained by Anara Tabyshaliev, a Kyrgyz expert, the sports sphere was highly developed during the Soviet period and represented a strong institution, with many champions on a world-wide scale. Controlling communities of sportsmen in the post-Soviet period became prestigious for two main reasons. First, international success of national sportsmen was a source of vast financial inflows. In

¹⁷ "Golumi rukami tamojnu ne voz'mesh" [You can't take customs barehanded], *Vechernii Bishkek*, October 19 1999.

Kyrgyzstan athletes from wrestling and combative sports were especially successful in international contests.

Second, the sports domain also represents a significant source of money laundering. Local athletes were used in racketeering and contract murders by business and political elites. Erkinbayev and Surabaldiyev mobilized sportsmen communities on March 24 to promote their own political interests, while Tynychbek Akmatbayev chaired the NOC previously headed by Aidar Akayev, the son of the former president Askar Akayev. The chairing of the NOC or various sports federations thus became a symbol of prestige and at the same time corruption. Central Asian sportsmen were involved in many criminal investigations connected with drugs, contract murders, racketeering and ransoms.¹⁸

Tajikistan

There are certain similarities between the processes of gradual, but steady spread of local criminal authorities in Kyrgyzstan's rural areas with the Tajik expansion of the shadow economy in the mid 1990s. Similar trends of criminalization in rural areas and expansion of the drug trade unfolded in Tajikistan, but with a greater intensity and speed, eventually leading to a civil war. The civil war made Tajikistan economically and politically one of the weakest states in the post-Soviet space. Civil war field commanders with strong military authority and access to weapons were the most common actors to gain local authority in rural areas due to their ability to broker drug deals between Afghan and Tajik producers, and interested parties beyond the Central Asian region.

There is a range of viewpoints about the origins of the civil war in Tajikistan in the early 1990s. Intensified rivalry over the state power between the country's northern and southern clans is the most common explanation of the war's origin.¹⁹ A stark divide between communist and religious ideologies is another interpretation. An explanation of the causes of the civil war that sees the Tajik state's lack of sufficient military capacity to establish control over the national territory and borders is less studied. Tajikistan's weak economic capacity in the early 1990s and a virtual absence of state-controlled armed forces after the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a swift criminalization and militarization of non-state actors. After receiving independence in 1991, the Tajik state had no military capacity to form border troops or other security units but weak militia. Unconstrained by government forces,

¹⁸ Anara Tabyshalieva, "Political Violence on the Rise in Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asia - Caucasus Analyst*, January 25 2006.

¹⁹ Shirin Akiner and Catherine Barnes, "The Tajik Civil War: Causes and Dynamics," *Accord* (March 2001).

Tajik non-state armed gangs strengthened and expanded by smuggling Afghan opium.

While Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were able to develop stronger mechanisms to administer national borders and territory in response to the drug trafficking, Tajikistan lacked even the basic instruments to enter its independence from the Soviet regime as a sovereign entity. The interrelation between drug dealership and other forms of illegal activities combined with the fragile security situation in Tajikistan is evident. With more than one million predominantly male population residing in Russia and Kazakhstan as labor migrants, the problem of drug trafficking encompasses all layers of the Tajik society – from the young to the old, males and females. Amid a devastated economy, high rates of unemployment and deficit of convertible currencies in the early 1990s, illicit drugs in Afghanistan and Tajikistan were bartered for clothing, footwear, and household items. Such spontaneous micro-economic activity among the impoverished population increased the influence local mafia chiefs who acted as coordinators of contraband and received commissions.²⁰

By the mid-1990s the impact of the drug trade and organized crime on state functioning in Tajikistan turned from alarming to critical. Involvement of criminal political and military figures in the state politics created competition among drug dealers over control of drug-routes, border areas, means of transportation and local population engaged in smuggling. During the Tajik civil war in 1992-1997, neighboring Central Asian states found their sovereignty vulnerable to Tajikistan's insufficient control of drug trafficking from Afghanistan. Conflicting regional gangs in Tajikistan and increasing turnovers from drug trafficking, in combination with the Tajik government's inability to control most of its mountainous territory made Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan especially cautious about security along their southern borders with Tajikistan. In 1998 the Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev identified three main security problems that Kyrgyzstan faced, all of them connected with the ongoing war in Tajikistan: the expansion of the drug business and trafficking; the increase in Tajik refugees; and the spillover of radical religious groups into the Kyrgyz territory.²¹

A strong and rather decentralized authority of the military structures in Tajikistan obstructs the economic development in the country. Large state expenditures are spent on maintaining the military at the expense of other state sectors such as education, health care, and agriculture. The inability of the state to provide professional training or civilian

²⁰ Aleksandr Zelichenko, *Istoriya afganskoi narkoekspansii 1990h* [The History of Afghan Narco Expansion in the 1990s], (Moscow: Samizdat, 2003).

²¹ Asad Sadulloyev, "Kuda Vedut 'Narkovozhdi?'" [Where Do Narcobarons Lead?], *Centrasia*, November 16 2003, <www.centrasia.org> (January 25 2006).

employment to former militants after the end of the civil war forced many abroad as labor migrants. Largely as a result of the dominance of military structures in management of national borders and loose regulations on import and export, Tajikistan has the highest prices for imported goods, although being the poorest state in the region. Since the early 1990s, the gap between the wealthy class of society and the population living in extreme poverty is by far the widest in the post-Soviet space.

Tajikistan's problem with narcotics has affected the country's relations with the neighboring states, especially Russia. Because of large flows of narcotics to Russia by Tajik labor migrants and individual dealers, the two states' immigration regulations and economic cooperation remain troublesome. Despite the fact that the growing industrial sector in the Siberian Far East combined with decreasing population urgently requires inflows of mid-level specialists that Tajikistan is able to provide, the drug problem associated with the Tajik migrants complicates this arrangement. Moscow suspended the adoption of appropriate legislature that would facilitate legal registration of Tajik citizens in the city. According to Tajik specialists, preventing Tajik labor migrants from attaining legal status in Russia, allows local law-enforcement agencies to follow more spontaneous rules of controlling foreign citizens.²²

For the Tajik labor migrants, the illicit transportation of drugs en route to Russia or Kazakhstan is often only an accompanying factor in their search for jobs in the neighboring states. Labor migrants seek longer term profits from more stable employment, but are forced into smuggling business by organized criminal networks.²³ In fact, the drug trade provides incentives for the illegal trafficking in people. Young men and women from impoverished areas are forced to smuggle and retail heroin and opiates into Russia and the Baltic states. They also are detained more often by militia and border guards.

The Tajik society and government are dependent upon remittances sent by labor migrants. Annually, migrants' remittances comprise roughly the size of the country's GDP, or \$6-8 billion. The remittances fill the gap of social welfare that the Tajik government is not able to provide its citizens. Virtually every household in the country relies on family members working abroad, predominantly in Russia. Checks imposed on the Tajik citizens by the Russian government, border guards,

²² Author's interview with Dilovar Munavvarov, representative of the Open Society Institute in Dushanbe, March 2004.

²³ Aleksandr Zelichenko, *Analiticheskii Obzor Narkosituatsii V Zone Deistviya Mejdunarodnogo Antinarkotikovogo Proekta Oon "Oshskii Uzel"* [Analytical Review of Narco-Situation inside the UN's International Anti-Drugs Project the "Osh Knot" Activity], (Moscow: Samizdat, 2003).

and local militia units in response to the illegal drug trade typically result in the imprisonment and extradition of migrants. In a number of cases known Tajik political, military, and business figures have also been detained by Russian and Kazakh security structures.

Russian border troops along the Tajik-Afghan frontier were accused of involvement in drug dealership in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The Russian military, experiencing internal financial and logistical hardships, was unable to regularly and sufficiently finance its personnel on the Tajik-Afghan border, forcing border guards into corruption. The involvement of Russian troops in the drug trade was suspected not only by the local scholars, but also by Russian analysts. As commented by Muzaffar Olimov, a Tajik political and economic analyst, the Russian side and the international community criticized the Tajik government for its ineffectiveness against narcotics smuggling, however there was little information available on the activities of the Russian troops.²⁴ The Russian military operated autonomously, without reporting to the Tajiks the number or frequency of international air flights with Russia by Russian military personnel located on the Tajik-Afghan border.²⁵

A similar strain of criticism was expressed by the Russian side towards the Tajik government. According to Russian analysts, Moscow carried out an enormous effort in halting the civil conflict in Tajikistan, establishing a legitimate government, and controlling the troubled Tajik-Afghan border. Moscow's presence in Tajikistan entailed vast financial spending and human losses over the years. In return, not only was the Tajik side unable to pay back Moscow's expenditures, but promptly sought to decrease Russia's involvement on its territory.²⁶ As a Tajik expert, Asad Sadulloyev, commented, criticism arose from the fact that the Tajik military representatives' interest to expel the Russian Federal Security Service and Federal Border Guard Service from protecting drug-routes was to increase their own ability to manage the Tajik-Afghan border.²⁷

Several intra-governmental showdowns between the Tajik President Emomali Rakhmonov and influential political figures provoked speculations that money laundering from drug business was the main reason for the confrontation between the president, military and business elites. The case of Gaffor Mirzoyev, General-Lieutenant and former

²⁴ Author's interview with Muzaffar Olimov, director of "Sharq" research institute in Dushanbe, March 2004.

²⁵ Turko Dikayev, "'Absolutnyi Bred' Generala Manilova" [Generals Manilov's 'Absolute Rave'] Vladivostok Center of Organized Crime, May 27 2004, <www.tribune.uz> (January 26 2006).

²⁶ Viktoriya Panfilova, "Voennaya Baza - Za Golovu Salimova" [Military Base - for Salimov's Head], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, February 26 2004.

²⁷ *Ibid.*; Sadulloyev, "Kuda Vedut 'Narkovozhdi?'".

Commander of the President Guard, is illustrative of how organized crime in Tajikistan has a strong leverage over the government structures. Leading governmental troops during the civil war, Mirzoyev gained a reputation as a cruel field commander with strong connections in the criminal world in Tajikistan and Russia. Mirzoyev was known for staging contract murders of political and business figures in Tajikistan and Russia, illegal maintenance of weapons, drug trafficking, and control of prostitution.²⁸ Despite such a reputation, the government was unable to persecute Mirzoyev as at that time he served in the Tajik parliament and was part of a parliamentary committee on legal order, defense and security.

In the summer of 2004 after large stocks of heavy armament were uncovered in the Dushanbe suburbs, Mirzoyev was accused by Rakhmonov of attempting to organize a coup d'état. However, Rakhmonov was not able to strip Mirzoyev of a government position due to the latter's military authority. The accusation led to Mirzoyev's reappointment from the Commander of President Guard to become the head of the State Counter-narcotics Agency. Mirzoyev publicly stated that he accepted this position and would not succumb to the president's intrigues.²⁹ He was also able to choose a suitable government post, by first declining the president's offer to head the NOC. Mirzoyev's legal persecution was stalled for eighteen months until a new round of legal proceedings was set off in January 2005.

Coming from Kulyab, a southern Tajik city close to the border with Afghanistan, Mirzoyev was nicknamed a "Drug Czar" due to his alleged engagement in the drug business.³⁰ As with other Kyrgyz politicians with criminal backgrounds, Mirzoyev was involved in a parliamentary committee dealing with criminal and law enforcement issues and later sought to chair NOC in Tajikistan so as to control the country's sportsmen community. Influential in military circles and having connections with criminal organizations in Russia and Tajikistan, Mirzoyev's legal case was kept confidential as a significant number of Tajik government officials were associated with the investigation. Along with Mirzoyev, 15 people were arrested, however about 60 civil servants, including top governmental officials are reported to appear in his legal

²⁸ Parvina Khamidova, "V Dushanbe Otkrylsya Zakrytyi Sud Nad Generalom Mirzoyevym" [a Public Trial Began in Dushanbe on General Mirzoyev's Case], *Asia-Plus*, January 11 2006.

²⁹ "Tadjikistan: Gaffor Mirzoyev Naznachen Direktorom Agenstva Po Kontrolu Za Narkotikami" [Tajikistan: Gaffor Mirzoyev Appointed a Director of Counter-Narcotics Agency], *RIA Novosti*, January 30 2004.

³⁰ Bruce Pannier, "Tajikistan: What's the Political Message Behind Drug Czar's Arrest?" *RFE/RL*, August 10 2004.

case for involvement in illegal activities.³¹ If Mirzoyev's case is given more transparency, it risks causing a substantial political crisis among state institutes and question the legitimacy of the government.

The former Tajik Minister of Interior, Yakub Salimov, is another example of an aggressive confrontation between the Tajik president and military officials. Salimov, a native of Kulyab clan in southern Tajikistan, headed one of the squads of the Popular Front, the army formation recruited by the Tajik government. In 1993 he was appointed Minister of Interior and later head of the Customs Committee. Starting from 1997, Salimov went into alliance with the opposition parties and was persecuted by the Tajik government. When detained in 2003, Salimov was charged for organized crime, drug trade and homicide, and sentenced for fifteen years.

Similar to Mirzoyev and Salimov, a number of known political figures were scandalously caught by Kazakh, Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Russian security forces. A gang headed by the Tajik president's nephew, Nuritdin Rakhmonov, was caught in Moscow by the Russian security service for drug contraband in October 2003. Former Tajik Ambassador to Kazakhstan, Sadullodjon Negmatov, was detained by the Kazakh security service with 62 kilograms of heroin and \$54,000 in cash in his car in May 2000.³² The Head of the Counter-narcotics Agency of the Zarafshan region, Kholikh Zakirov, was arrested for transporting more than 30 kilograms of narcotics in 2004. Gangs headed by the Mayor of Dushanbe and Parliament Chair Ubaidulloyev Makhmadsaid; General-Mayor Saidsho Shamolov; former field commander Cholov Kurbonali; and deputy Commander of Border Troops Nuralisho Nazarov were intercepted by the Uzbek and Russian security services.³³ There are many other cases of former field commanders and opposition camps engaged in the drug trade.

Weak Regional Responses

The impact of the drug trade is more difficult to assess than other forms of illegal trade. In the latter case, Central Asian experts are able to make better estimates of the impact of such shadow economies on state functioning partly due to relatively easy ways of tracing illegal transportation of goods such as copper, nonferrous metals, automobiles, cigarettes and alcohol. The local non-governmental research institutes

³¹ Nurullo Muhtorov, "'Zasekrechennyi' Komandir Tadjikskoi Gvardii. Rossiiskii Advokat Sedomu Ne Pomozhet" ['Classified' Commander of the Tajik Guard. Russian Attorney Unable to Help 'Sedoi'], *Vremya Novostei*, November 5 2004.

³² Marat Mamadshoyev, "Tajik Drugs in Kazakh Capital: A Victory for the Special Services or for Diplomatic Intrigue?" *Eurasia Insight*, June 15 2000, <www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav061500.shtml> (February 1 2006).

³³ *Ibid.*, Sadulloyev, "Kuda Vedut 'Narkovozhdi?'".

can examine the share of the shadow economy in states' GDPs and the annual amount of natural resources illegally exported. There are also more possibilities to persecute illegal transactions of goods other than drugs *post factum*, when actors involved in crimes, destination or origin of goods are identifiable. However, assessment of the drug trade is a more challenging task as drug smuggling involves greater numbers of people with various backgrounds, from businessmen and political figures to farmers, labor migrants, and border guards. Since the drug trade creates sophisticated networks between different people across states, it requires a coordinated response by national and transnational security structures. Any allegations against specific political figures' previous or current engagement in illegal drug deals are often difficult to prove.

Thus far, regional cooperative measures to counter drug-trafficking systematically are lacking. The Central Asian Community Organization, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and Collective Security Treaty Organization – all define the fight against drug trade as vital to the regional security. However, each Central Asian state has developed its own strategy to cope with the problem. Differences are seen in the amount of funding the states allocate to anti-drug policies, systems for tracking drug addicts, and establishing cooperative links with other states or international organizations. Domestic state institutions influenced by the drug trade in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan undermine interstate cooperative initiatives. Corrupt national counter-narcotics agencies and law-enforcement structures decrease trust between the states. Due to the absence of financial means and mechanisms to implement regional counter-narcotics agreements, organizations such as the Interstate Drug Control Commission of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan lack efficiency in the long run.³⁴

On a domestic level, although the involvement of criminal elements in the political realm in Kyrgyzstan rapidly intensified after the Tulip Revolution, it is now scrutinized by local activists through the mass media and direct participation of NGO representatives in the development of state policy. The Kyrgyz public has greater access to information concerning the criminal and political worlds through a number of local newspapers, wide internet access, and newsletters produced by various political parties. There are many NGOs and activists whose opinions are regularly cited by both local and international media outlets. In such an environment it is nearly impossible for the government to suppress the voices of civil society or fully ignore its critique.

By contrast, in Tajikistan the government continues to impose hurdles for its opposition and mass media, thus preventing transparency

³⁴ *Ibid.*; Osmonaliev, *Developing Counter-Narcotics Policy in Central Asia*.

of the political process. Local NGOs warn about the continued existence of strong ties between the political sphere and organized crime in Tajikistan, but these voices seldom make it to the broader public. But besides a weak civil society, Tajikistan is indeed more dependent on developments in Afghanistan and is more reliant on external help compared to any other Central Asian state. Post-Soviet Tajikistan is simply unable and unprepared to build a state strong enough to resist spillovers of instability, militant groups, and drugs from Afghanistan.

Conclusions

Based on the existing empirical evidence, this article sought to build a link between the drug trade, organized crime, and implications on state functioning. This has been done in two ways. First, the connection between a weak state and the rise of competing local authorities profiting from the shadow economy and drug trade was explained. Such authorities flourish in the peripheral and border areas, where state influence is weak. Over time small gangs involved in drugs trade, shuttle trade, and smuggling, grew into more coherent groups with internal hierarchies and identifiable leaders.

Second, illegally accumulated capital by individual actors permitted them to establish their own micro-political, economic, and security regimes in the peripheries. Besides playing merely an economic role at local precincts, these actors shifted to the political level, creating a parallel authority to the government. A number of such actors were able to win an overwhelming majority of votes for representation in the parliament, thus entering politics on the state level with some even reaching ministerial level.

An open and unprecedented confrontation between known mafia bosses and the Kyrgyz government shows that criminal elements are not afraid of legal persecution. Three assassinated lawmakers and a number of other figures from the national sportsmen community increased public anxiety about domestic stability. In Tajikistan, Rakhmonov accused his former allies who were in control of military troops and involved in drug trafficking for plans of a coup d'état. The Tajik president sought to eliminate influential figures from the political scene through legal charges in organized crime and drug dealership.

In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan criminal elements engaged in drug dealership and other spheres of the shadow economy penetrate state structures, making efforts to combat illicit businesses impossible. However, the main difference between the impact of organized crime on the government's functioning in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan lays in the degree of development of the local civil society. While Kyrgyz civil society activists are perhaps the most successful in terms of impacting the

policy on a state level compared to the Central Asian neighbors and even to the rest of the post-Soviet space, years of civil war in Tajikistan considerably undermined the development and activity of local NGOs.