The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Central Asian Echo of Russian Aggression in Georgia

By Paul Goble

April 23, 2009



About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

One of the reasons the Russian invasion of the Republic of Georgia last summer was so dangerous is that it led to an emphasis on militarization in the minds of leaders in many post-Soviet states, with nearly all governments forced to think about how they would defend themselves and some even contemplating the use of force themselves to promote their own agendas.

An example of the latter, one that has so far attracted relatively little attention, is Uzbekistan's use of military force last Sunday to occupy part of a village in southern Kyrgyzstan near the border of Uzbekistan, an action that has prompted the residents of Chek to appeal to Bishkek for "the defense of their civil rights."

According to the Ferghana.ru portal, the residents of this small village in Jalal-Abad oblast said in a letter to Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev that approximately 50 armed Uzbek "law enforcement" officers had entered their border town, "burst into [their] houses,

and threatened to force [the residents] from [their] homes."

The Uzbek forces "went into each house, conducted a search and told us that from this day forward, this territory belongs to Uzbekistan and you will live according to our laws. In a crude way," the villagers continued, the occupied said they were imposing restrictions on how much food the residents could keep.

"If you like," the Uzbek officers said, according to the authors of the letter, "you can move to the territory of Kyrgyzstan and live there."

After the majority of the Uzbek forces withdrew, some Kyrgyz district leaders arrived, Ferghana.ru reports, and "calmed the people. But the residents of the village decided to write a declaration to the country's president." The heads of 21 families living there signed on behalf of all the Chek residents.

When Kyrgyz journalists in turn sought to investigate the situation, three Uzbeks armed with automatic weapons intervened to try to block their work. That led to a public quarrel between the Uzbeks and the villagers, but the Uzbeks refused either to back down or to give their names, insisting that this was their land and that they had the right to be there.

Kyrgyz officials argued that the exact line of the border was problematic and that people on one or the other side may have moved border posts for their convenience. But one of them said that, "nevertheless, neither they nor we can take such a decision unilaterally until the border questions between the two countries are completely resolved."

Unfortunately for the villagers, Bishkek has not been in a position to react quickly, Raya Kadyrova of the For International Tolerance Group said, adding that "the lack of a timely response has given birth to rumors that are being transformed into dissatisfaction of the people with the authorities."

"Residents and local organs of power should know precisely where and to whom they should turn in such circumstances in order to inform institutions in the [Kyrgyz] capital about such things," Kadyrova said. But in places like Chek, which is 60 kilometers away even from its regional capital, such information is seldom available.

The village of Chek is an especially problematic place, Ferghana.ru said. Both its territory and its people are divided by the international border. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, 24 of its 180 families were left on the territory assigned to Uzbekistan. All of the 24 families were citizens of Kyrgyzstan but most were ethnic Uzbeks.

Prior to 1991, villagers moved back and forth without difficulties, but now that Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are independent countries, such movement is more difficult, since the two countries have not yet reached agreement either on the final demarcation of the border or on a special regime for people living in the border areas.

Yesterday, Kyrgyzstan Prime Minister Igor Chudinov said that the two countries have agreed on 80 percent of the 1375 kilometer-long border, but they have not been able to resolve their

differences on approximately 70 districts, including Chek and enclaves on both sides of the border.

Settling those differences won't be easy: If it were, these questions already would be resolved. But now, as a result of Russia's invasion of Georgia and the apparent unwillingness of the international community to hold Moscow to account, other capitals, including Tashkent, may decide to use force, a trend that could spark more violence across the entire region.

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