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Reports Say Ethnic Violence Rising in Kyrgyzstan

By Paul Goble

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About this column

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.

VIENNA &mdash The Russian embassy in Bishkek has sent a diplomatic note to the Kyrgyz

foreign ministry saying Russian citizens and compatriots have complained in recent days about increasing interethnic tensions in Kyrgyzstan and pointing out that such tensions "not only contradict the interests of cooperation but create a negative image of the country."

The note, the contents of which were described to local journalists today by the embassy's press office, reflects genuine Russian concerns but also, given how Moscow has used the compatriots issue elsewhere, points to the possibility that this could provide the grounds for a Russian intervention in Kyrgyzstan.

One indication of just how much attention Moscow is devoting to this issue is a letter that Larisa Khoperskaya, a specialist on ethnic conflicts who, along with her husband, sociologist Viktor Kharchenko, has been working in the Russian embassy in Bishkek, has sent to a Moscow portal.

Khoperskaya says immediately after the events of April 7, when the old Kyrgyz government was overthrown in Bishkek, people began telephoning the Russian embassy to report "threats and acts of violence on an ethnic basis," although later when queried, they often refused to confirm this, possibly fearing persecution if they did so, she adds.

In the first days after the fall of Bakiyev, Kyrgyz demonstrators broke into stores and enterprises, many of which belonged to Russians or other non-Kyrgyz groups, including Jews. And she cites the Izrus.co.il report about "pogroms in Bishkek" that was posted on April 8.

Over the next few days, more reports of ethnic tensions came in to the Russian embassy, Khoperskaya says, not only fr om Russians in Bishkek but also fr om Russians living in other parts of Kyrgyzstan. In many cases, she says, actions against Russians appear to have been sparked by people associated with the new powers that be.

"Beginning on April 8," she continues, "anti-Russian appeals sounded at the central square of Bishkek at a meeting where the theme of 'the hand of Moscow' was discussed, including on the sites of local information agencies."

That night, in the village of Semenovka in Issyk-Kul oblast, a crowd attacked and attempted to seize a resort camp. The owners decided not to call for help but rather to negotiate, but that did not work because "the guards were beaten." Then, the owners turned to the militia," but according to Khoperskaya, the latter did nothing and the squatters remain.

Other attacks have also occurred in that oblast, she says, and local businessmen, many of whom are non-Kyrgyz, have organized a movement for the defense against marauders. But that effort has not worked. Nor, Khoperskaya continues, has it lim ited what appears to be a drive against Russians as such.

Teachers at Russian-language schools there, she says, have been questioned about their role in falsifying past Kyrgyz elections. They acknowledge that they did that but note that these investigations are not being directed against the Kyrgyz colleagues, an indication that what is going on has more to do with ethnicity than legality.

In the days since, Khoperskaya says, there have been more seizures of Russian property

in Bishkek and elsewhere, seizures that the new authorities have not tried to overturn. And what is especially worrisome is that there have been reports to the embassy that "unknown people are going house to house in order to find out the nationality of those living there."

On Monday, Almazbek Atambayev, first deputy chairman of the Provisional Government, sought to blame such "anti-Russian attitudes" on the actions of the previous regime, a statement Khoperskaya says represents an official acknowledgement of such attitudes without any commitment to counter them.

Since April 7, the Russian language has disappeared from politics, she continues. "only at press conferences wh ere foreign journalists are present do the political leaders speak Russian." All television, "with the exception of five minutes of news" and a few other things is now conducted exclusively in Kyrgyz. And all political meetings are in Kyrgyz as well.

Asked whether Russian would retain its status as an official language, Atambayev responded that that issue "will be connected with the question of the recognition by Russia of dual citizenship for Kyrgyz migrant workers," who number 500,000 to 700,000 and whose transfer payments feed 2.5 million Kyrgyz.

Given that under the Kyrgyz constitution, dual citizenship is available only to ethnic Kyrgyz, Khoperskaya says, if Moscow does not agree to this demand, then "Russian in Kyrgyz will lose its official status," something that will force non-Kyrgyz to use the Kyrgyz language in all official dealings and lead many of them to seek to emigrate.

Many Russians are already seeking to do so, requesting political asylum in Russia or the right to emigrate. And their numbers are likely to grow: "This week, Slavic entrepreneurs want to have a consultative meeting in order to decide how to live" in Kyrgyzstan in the future, given these linguistic and political shifts.

Khoperskaya is hardly the only Russian who is expressing concerns about this, although she may be the best placed to do so. Yury Pushayev has posted an article suggesting that Moscow may have to allow Russians there to come on the Russian military base if their lives are in danger.

But it is worth noting that he suggests that before any such dramatic step is taking, Moscow should use diplomatic channels and push Bakiyev to leave, something that would reduce the tensions in Kyrgyzstan and possibly lead to an ebbing of the current tide of ethno-national hostility.

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