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Could Kyrgyzstan Cease to Exist?

By Paul Goble

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VIENNA &mdash Deteriorating conditions in Kyrgyzstan and increasing evidence that the provisional government is not in control of the situation, especially in the wake of President Dmitry Medvedev's observation that Bishkek must build a new state, are leading some Russians to ask whether Kyrgyzstan as a country could cease to exist.

Tuesday's Vremya directly states that "the provisional government [in Bishkek] is beginning to lose control over the situation in the country," opening the way for actions by its opponents, including "supporters of [ousted president Kurmanbek] Bakiyev, lumpen groups and marauders" who are prepared to take what they can.

Even though there is no evidence that these groups are working together, they represent "a common flow that is striving toward one goal &mdash interfering with the former opposition that has come to power to stabilize the situation" in Kyrgyzstan, thus casting doubt on the future of that Central Asian country.

Medvedev said Tuesday that Kyrgyzstan must "revive the state" in order to be able to enter

into a full partnership with Russia in economic terms, a statement that suggests he does not believe there is an effective state there now.

Some analysts have already raised questions about the survivability of Kyrgyzstan, but these are certain to generate more such discussions. One of the first to suggest that Kyrgyzstan might "cease to exist" was Alexander Knyazev, the head of the Bishkek branch of the Russian Institute of CIS Countries.

In an interview published over the weekend, Knyazev said recent events mean that "the probability that a sovereign Kyrgyzstan will cease to exist are quite high," all the more so because the current leadership in Bishkek calls itself "provisional," a description that the Russian analyst said he completely agreed with.

The reasons for that lie both with the provisional regime itself and with the Kyrgyz population. The former "consists of politicians who have been in conflict among themselves but who have temporarily made an alliance against Bakiyev. Now that he is out of the way, these divisions will reassert themselves."

And the population sees that those in office, once they have established themselves, have done little but steal fr om everyone else. Consequently, Knyazev suggests, the residents of that country views an interregnum as a chance for them to steal. Indeed, he says, it is possible to extrapolate that "thefts are the Kyrgyz curse."

Pressed by his interview about the possibility that Kyrgyzstan could cease to exist as a country, Knyazev said this "is a natural process that has been taking place since the 20th century and up to now &mdash the formation of new states and the withering away of old ones. Remember the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Abkhazia and South Ossetia," he says.

"It is completely possible that the day will come when the territory of Kyrgyzstan will be converted into a source of instability in the region, and the international community will consider the question of its fragmentation" into various component parts in order to prevent the appearance of a new Balkan-type region.

How that might happen, Knyazev conceded, is far from clear. But he suggested that the countries that will play the biggest role are Kyrgyzstan's current neighbors: Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and China, none of which is interested in "permanent instability" or "a new Afghanistan" on its borders.

Meanwhile, in Moscow, some commentators are focusing on what might precede that collapse or even trigger it &mdash the rapid outflow of tens or even hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russians or other Slavic groups. Moscow must be prepared for this, such writers say, and even take steps to lim it the flow.

One indication of just how much some in Moscow are thinking about something that in most capitals is unthinkable is the subject's appearance on the pages of Komsomolskaya Pravda, which has detailed arguments "for" and "against" uniting Kyrgyzstan with Russia.

Among the former are concerns about instability of the possibility that China would absorb Kyrgyzstan, whose "five million Kyrgyz" would be within the "statistical margin of error"

for the People's Republic. Among the latter, the paper says, is a reluctance of Russians to take responsibility for the costs of supporting an impoverished Kyrgyz population.

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