The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Bloody Raid Shows Why Post-Soviet Leaders Hate to Hand Off Power

In Kyrgyzstan, an ex-president is fighting off special forces trying to arrest him. In Ukraine, the former leader is a figure in 11 criminal cases.

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August 08, 2019



Russia's Vladimir Putin and former Kyrgyz president Almazbek Atambayev in St. Petersburg

Events in Kyrgyzstan, a poor nation of 6 million on China's western border, show why post-Soviet leaders are so reluctant to part with power peacefully: It's hard for any of them to get any kind of credible guarantee that his successor won't try to lock him up, or worse.

On Wednesday night, Kyrgyz special forces tried to arrest the country's former president, Almazbek Atambayev, at his residence near the capital, Bishkek. Atambayev, wanted on corruption charges, wasn't easy to take, though. He'd barricaded himself in his house, and he reportedly fired shots at the troopers who'd come for him. He was aided by about 1,000

supporters, who managed to repel the attack; one officer was killed and 80 people were injured.

Atambayev's successor, Sooronbai Jeenbekov, took 12 hours to respond publicly to the events, a sure sign that he hadn't expected this kind of resistance. He chose to pretend he could have overcome the rebels, but not at the cost of more lives. At the time of this writing, the standoff continues; more Atambayev supporters have surrounded his residence, and more special forces have been sent to get him. Internet access has been shut off in the area.

Jeenbekov was Atambayev's chosen successor as president (in Kyrgyzstan, leaders are limited to one six-year term — an exception in post-Soviet Central Asia, where rulers usually remain in office until they die). In 2017, he won an election European observers described as competitive and praised as a peaceful power transfer. This was the first time an elected Kyrgyz leader had left his post without being overthrown.

Problems arose, however, when Atambayev refused to recede quietly into the background and Jeenbekov showed a reluctance to share power with him. A split in the ruling Social Democratic Party followed; Atambayev allies were fired from government jobs and mutual corruption allegations flew. In April, the parliament stripped ex-presidents of immunity from prosecution, clearly a move directed against Atambayev. Criminal cases in which he was officially only a witness escalated; the ex-leader refused to show up for interrogations. The conflict blew up into Wednesday's violence.

Jeenbekov appears to have the upper hand for now since the military, police and special forces are still on his side. But the bigger issue is not who wins the standoff in tiny Kyrgyzstan, one of the 50 poorest countries in the world. It's whether any post-Soviet leader can safely hand off power after an election.

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That's also a question Ukraine's former president Petro Poroshenko must be asking himself. Poroshenko lost an election to former comedian Volodymyr Zelenskiy in April. Late last month, Roman Truba, head of Ukraine's State Bureau of Investigations, said the ex-leader was a person of interest in 11 criminal cases, mostly involving corruption. Zelenskiy has mentioned at times he'd like to hold Poroshenko responsible for misruling the country, and though, according to Ukraine's prosecutor general (a Poroshenko appointee), the ex-president is only seen as a witness so far, the Atambayev case shows that can quickly change.

A peaceful, democratic (or at least relatively democratic) power transition isn't everything. With post-Soviet justice systems largely unreformed and law enforcement agencies serving each master individually rather than the state, a ruler who gives up power is in grave danger, especially if he continues to dabble in politics and speak his mind. There will always be past transgressions for which he can be held responsible.

In Ukraine and in Russia, ex-presidents have usually done their best to keep out of their successor's way. (Current Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, who kept the presidential chair warm for Vladimir Putin between 2008 and 2012, is a kind of exception, but then he's

always faithfully served Putin.) Poroshenko, however, vocally opposes Zelenskiy as head of a parliamentary faction; as a result, an Atambayev-style scene in the future is not entirely unimaginable.

All this has a direct bearing on Putin's plans for 2024, when his last constitutionally allowed presidential term ends. He has few workable options for staying in power without changing the constitution to extend his rule, a scenario he's vowed to avoid. Watching the events in Kyrgyzstan must make him wonder about the feasibility of handing off to a supposedly tame successor, as Atambayev thought he was doing in 2017. Whatever Putin invents for 2024 will have to be less risky for him and his family.

This article was originally published by Bloomberg.

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