

Why the UK should care about what is happening in Kyrgyzstan

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Recent ethnic violence and unrest in Kyrgyzstan have created a flood of refugees into neighbouring countries, and at least one into the UK. [Madeleine Reeves](#) explains why the UK faces serious policy issues as a result.



On the night of Sunday June 13th, Maxim Bakiev, the 33-year old son of Kyrgyzstan's ousted president, Kurmanbek Bakiev, arrived in Farnborough airport in a private jet. In other circumstances, this would hardly be a news-worthy event: Farnborough, in Hampshire, is a favourite landing place of heads of state and members of the jet-owning classes. But the circumstances are far from ordinary, and ones that ought to strike to the heart of how an 'ethical foreign policy' informs UK government.

Maxim Bakiev is the subject of an Interpol arrest warrant for large-scale fraud and of an extradition request from Kyrgyzstan's Interim Government. He is also [alleged](#) by the head of the Interim Government, Roza Otunbaeva, to have played a role in instigating the violence that consumed southern Kyrgyzstan last week, leaving hundreds dead and thousands fleeing for refuge in neighbouring Uzbekistan. The veracity of that allegation, which is widely repeated inside Kyrgyzstan, won't be known unless and until an independent commission is allowed to fully investigate what is at the moment a contested and contradictory chronology of events.

For his part, Bakiev junior has indicated in a press-release issued by his lawyers in the UK that he has been 'forced into exile for fear of [his] life' and that he is being made a 'scapegoat for the chaos in [his] country'. At the moment he has been granted temporary admission to the UK pending his asylum claim, a process that may take several months.

Amidst the mutual accusations and vitriolic attacks that characterise contemporary Kyrgyzstani politics, three things, at least, seem relevant for an informed UK government response. One is that a plausible-sounding, [secretly-recorded phone conversation](#) was posted to the internet in mid-May, purportedly between Maxim Bakiev and his uncle and former head of the security services, Janysh. The talk there indicates a considerable degree of cynicism in regard to the population of his own country and the measures that should be taken to reinstate the "chief" – that is, ousted president Kurmanbek Bakiev – to power. At one point in the recording 'Maxim' muses on the fact that with a reliable-leader and enough hungry young men who are paid to instigate violence, 500 'well-trained and well-equipped thugs' are sufficient to seize power back from the provisional government. If this recording is demonstrated to be true – and the vocal likeness is such as to seem to point in that direction – then at the very least it raises serious questions concerning the kind of role that Maxim Bakiev had in condoning last week's violence.

In refusing Kyrgyzstan's extradition request, the UK government potentially risks transforming its reputation as a safe haven for oligarchs with questionable tax histories into something altogether more damaging. Certainly the timing of the Osh conflict seems far from coincidental: it occurred two weeks before a planned referendum that would legitimise the new provisional government and provide a framework for holding elections later in the year. There is also considerable circumstantial evidence that the violence that consumed Osh was, in the words of the UN, ['orchestrated, targeted and well-planned'](#). The UK government, then, should carefully consider the potential political damage – to UK-Kyrgyz relations as well as to the possibility for a restoration of political order inside Kyrgyzstan itself – that would follow from sheltering Maxim Bakiev from extradition, and thus from a full investigation into his role in recent political upheavals.

Of course, if Mr Bakiev was to be returned to Kyrgyzstan, it would be vital that he should be given a fair trial, to which the media and the public would have access. The Interim Government's record is, as yet, too early to assess. But with a newly-minted constitution after June 27th, a well-conducted trial would be an opportunity for the government to demonstrate a commitment to a serious and full-scale investigation of the former regime and to a restoration of the rule of law. At the same time, it would represent an important opportunity for the international community to hold the government to the commitments that are enshrined in that constitution and to demonstrate its commitment to working with the new government as a legitimate executive power, able to rule by law as well as by decree.

This points, then, to the second prong of an informed UK response, on which the future stability of Kyrgyzstan also depends: to push for an impartial, thorough investigation of the violence in Osh and Jalalabat, together with a detailed analysis of the long-term and proximal causes and an assessment of current humanitarian needs. Although many of the people who fled across the border into neighbouring Uzbekistan have been returning home in recent days, it is clear that this flowback is driven in part by threats and fears (of loss of citizenship and of the appropriation of property) rather than being in any sense 'voluntary'.

Rumours and mutual accusations abound: many Uzbeks see no viable future for themselves in Kyrgyzstan, and many Kyrgyz feel that they have been wrongly demonized in international reporting of events. The Interim Government has been urging that a referendum scheduled for June 27th proceed as planned, but does not seem as yet to have been particularly concerned to discuss – or to facilitate peaceful public discussion – concerning the underlying sources of grievance that exist in all ethnic communities, minority and majority alike. Without an impartial and thorough investigation such resentments are likely only to fester and grow.

The third, and perhaps most significant prong of a UK response should be to argue, internationally, for a shift in the way in which the west has done politics with Kyrgyzstan over the last decade. The violence of the last weeks, whilst triggered by recent conflicts that would seem to be 'domestic', is also in many respects the product of the 'geopoliticization' of relations with Kyrgyzstan. Both at the level of policy and analysis, external countries have shown much more concern about the country's 'strategic partnerships' than in enquiring about the domestic crises that can erupt in a context of grinding poverty, rampant corruption, the ethicization of criminal life and the privatization of security. This is reflected in the 'business as usual' approach that came to characterise international dealings with Kyrgyzstan over the NATO transit base at Manas.

But it is also reflected in a more generalised preoccupation with 'security' in a very narrow sense of the term, which has meant a real lack of engagement with political resentments and their ability to be mobilised along ethnic or regional lines. Kyrgyzstan now faces an urgent humanitarian crisis and, with many minority groups feeling that this once 'common home' is no longer home to them, its viability as a multi-ethnic state hangs in the balance. This is the time to demonstrate an ethical foreign policy: by engaging with the Kyrgyzstani authorities' request for extradition; by demonstrating a sustained response to the UN's flash appeal for funds to meet the colossal costs of reconstruction; and by reassessing the tendency to eclipse humanitarian concerns with strategically-dubious 'strategic interests'.