

**“Environmental Concern and Popular ‘Mobilizability’ in Kyrgyzstan:
Identifying Public Opinion, Elite Perceptions,
Conflict Potential & Political Will”**

I was awarded a 7-month Special Initiatives Fellowship for research in Kyrgyzstan during January-August 2009. I am greatly appreciative of the opportunity afforded to me by American Councils and for the support the Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan and Almaty, Kazakhstan field offices provided me during my stay.

Research Agenda

This is the second stage of a multi-year project intended both to fill a significant gap in policy analysis and extend research on environmental politics to broader issues of theoretical import for academia. The purpose is to shed light on the changing power dynamics of environmental disputes in Kyrgyzstan. The major intended contributions of this study are: to pioneer public opinion polling on environmental concerns in Kyrgyzstan (producing primary data), assess elite perceptions of those concerns, and utilize these data to formulate and test theoretical frameworks for environmental conflict potential and management. Prior work – the first stage of this overall project – began by studying potential influences on public opinion development, focusing on print (electronic) news content analysis of environmental protests in Kyrgyzstan. In subsequent research – third and fourth stages – I intend to connect the news content analysis to the public opinion and elite perspective surveys conducted while in the field, and both to several event case study analyses. Thus, the field research component is the crucial backbone of the whole project explaining public concern and outcomes in Kyrgyzstan.

RESEARCH GOALS

This project’s initial goals were to conduct a public opinion survey about environmental issues in comparable communities across Kyrgyzstan and conduct parallel elite interviews. Together these surveys and interviews allow evaluation of the relationship between public opinion, elite perception and governmental responsiveness. Additional goals added to the project were the continuation of news coverage content analysis (in Russian and Kyrgyz) and preliminary development of event case studies, primarily through initial information gathering.

The project's research questions were the following. How much is public mobilization on environmental issues in Kyrgyzstan, 1) a result of broader political trends, 2) based on latent, localized environmental concerns (or rising salience of them) that now have a public protest outlet, or 3) the result of cooptation of local environmental issues by outsiders as a way to pressure government, businesses, international actors? To what extent has environmental and civic NGO networking on environmental issues affected utilization of the street protest tool? To what extent are elites aware of public environmental concerns and how accurate are their perceptions? Does the public (or publics) in Kyrgyzstan perceive government (local and/or national) will to address environmental concerns? What potential does this increased mobilization surrounding

environmental concerns (co-opted or not) have for increasing the probability of future violent political disputes (conflict)?

Derived from these questions, the study has two working hypotheses. The first is about environmental protest occurrence: Protests have happened and are likely where visible environmental problems exist, the salience of these problems is high, and a mobilizing organization is present. The second hypothesis is about Conflict Occurrence or Likelihood: Conflict (which is distinguished from protests as violent disputes) has happened and is likely to happen under similar conditions as protests, with three exceptions. The organizing agent is likely not to be an environmental organization, prior disputes greatly increase the probability of conflict in the future, and the identifiable blame agent must be present and the opinion about whom to blame must be widely shared in the community.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS & SUCCESSES

I completed the nation-wide public opinion poll in May 2009, and was able to meet and surpass my target number of elite/expert interviews (my target was 60 and I completed 71 interviews). Conducting these interviews revealed some gaps in coverage, where more elites/experts should be interviewed in the future. Thus, while I reached my research goals, I will need to return to conduct an additional 25-30 elite/expert interviews in 2009 in order to ensure that I have adequate and balanced coverage by location and expert/elite group. I chose not to interview international community representatives, but rather to focus on local and national experts from Kyrgyzstan.

Regarding my two added research goals, content analysis and event case study material collection, were also met. I was able to complete my first round of English, Russian, and Kyrgyz language print media content analysis. Also, I collected substantial material on the environmentally-related protest and conflict events, including multiple site visits. This allows me to systematically sample among these events to select case studies for more in-depth analysis.

OBSTACLES & MODIFICATIONS

The concerns with a potentially difficult winter and electricity shortages, and thus tension in government and with the opposition in the early part of 2009 limited my ability to conduct interviews during that time (because of the sensitivity of some questions). Subsequently, the unexpectedly early scheduling of presidential elections in July meant that much of the spring was consumed by a busy election season, additionally limiting my ability to conduct national level interviews leading up to the elections. Logistical issues (weather, road closures, car issues/troubles) and in the difficulty of finding committed, professional local assistants additionally hindered my research, mostly by forcing the adjustment or changing of scheduled field trips. I adjusted to the latter by hiring more assistants to each do separate types of work, rather than concentrating most of the assistant responsibilities on one or two people, in case they were unable to complete the work adequately. Finally, on various occasions, peoples' suspicions about my true motivations – lack of understanding of what an academic researcher is – led to the refusal to be interviewed, or information not being provided, even created difficult situations and forced me to leave some areas earlier than planned.

The high level of interest in the topic I was researching helped many potential interviewees agree to meet with me. Likewise, the topic I researched is a relatively politically safe one, although of high salience, so most people were very open in providing information, agreeing to being interviewed, and networking. My connections in the country allowed me excellent access, and being present for half a year and attending numerous environmental conferences made me visible and gave me additional access to potential interviewees.

Importance of this Field Research

In retrospect, the 7 months of research I was able to conduct because of the Special Initiatives Fellowship was invaluable to the completion of my overall research project as well as to my intellectual growth as a scholar. Not only did I meet my initial research goals, but also I was able to accomplish several more. Incidentally, my Russian language skills improved immeasurably and I began my Kyrgyz language training in earnest. During my time in Kyrgyzstan, numerous events occurred relevant to my research, which I was able to observe first-hand. I was also able to attend a number of conferences and workshops on related topics. In all, the planned experiences and these unexpected ones provided me knowledge that could not be gained through other means.

Insight from this Research

U.S. analysts and decision makers can use this research to develop more effective policies in the region in several ways. This research provides insight into the importance of environmental issues in Kyrgyzstan, especially as the number of issues included under the umbrella of “environmental”, or connected to it, increases. With better insight into the specific concerns of communities, US aid agencies can better target their assistance. Likewise, US analysts can better understand actions taken by the Kyrgyz government on energy and environmental security issues. Finally, prediction of political actions such as protests or more violent mobilizations is important for understanding regional stability and the connection to other security concerns.

Future Plans

I plan to publish several articles on my research results in the upcoming year or two. Prior to submitting articles for review, I will present my results at professional conferences and at public lectures. The first opportunity to present my results is at the Central Eurasian Studies Society conference in October 2009. Second, I will be giving a lecture in the Bucknell University Faculty Symposium Series, in January 2010. As I complete my analysis, I intend to brief U.S. officials and decision makers and potentially meet with officials at the U.S. embassy in Kyrgyzstan about the results upon my planned return, summer 2010. Importantly, many of the experts and elites in Kyrgyzstan interviewed for my research have requested the results; I will therefore write a summary version in Russian to deliver to 70 interviewed experts in Kyrgyzstan, and will likely make a public presentation of these results in Bishkek during 2010.