

Pro and Con Manas: The Discourse about the Use of an Epic for a National Ideology in Kyrgyzstan¹

Hanne Straube

Arrival via Kyrgyzstan Airlines at the airport of the capital city Biškek. The inscription “*Manas-Kyrgyzstan*” hangs proudly above the customs clearance hall. The highway, with a view of snow-covered mountains, leads in the direction of the center, 35 km away. *Manas*-street, the former *Ulica* Belinskaja, goes past the Philharmonic, in front of which stand gigantic sculptures, figures from the *Manas* Epic.² A ten foot high bronze Manas,³ the hero of the epic of the same name, with his lance raised dashes atop his horse Akkula towards the sky, beneath them a twisting kite. Manas, as I had previously read in President Askar Akaev’s comments, was the benevolent father of the Kyrgyz people, the saint of the nation. For Manas, the freedom of the fatherland and the honor of the homeland are holy; today’s Kyrgyz people are his successors.⁴

1. Prologue

The break-up of the USSR brought national independence to the Central Asian Turkic-speaking constituent republics. Among them was the former partial Kyrgyz republic, which, on August 31, 1991 announced its independence and be-

¹ The essay is based on empirical material that I collected through the support of the German Research Foundation (DFG) during several field visits, altogether for five months between 1999 and 2000. The research project “Ethnic-national identity determination and historical sense of consciousness building in the formation of the young Central-Asian republics Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan” was carried out from 1999 to 2002. It was part of the interdisciplinary study group “Sense of consciousness concepts as life and action determining orientation systems,” which took place from April 1st, 1997 to March 31st, 2002 under the leadership of Professor Dr. Klaus E. Müller and Professor Dr. Jörn Rüsen at the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut in Essen, Germany. I was aided in translating literature, interviews and personal communications from Russian and Kyrgyz by my colleagues Mairamkul Sopueva, Šarapat Alieva, Ainura Kapitalova and Dr. Pamira Kadyrbekova. My sister, the cultural anthropologist Doris Stennert, read and critically commented on this text. My brother-in-law, Kurt Jauker, translated it from German to English. To all of them, my sincerest thanks.

² The sculptures were created by the contemporary Kyrgyz artist T. Sadikov.

³ In the above, *Manas* is italicized when referring to the epic. If the hero is described, standard writing is used.

⁴ Travel diary of Hanne Straube.

came a nation-state. Because this national independence was imposed so suddenly (Mangott 1996: 65), the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, in order to establish and preserve internal stability and continuity and acquire an effective integration mechanism as well as a convincing identity ideology, had to find ways to fill the existing vacuum.

In such upheavals, he who determines the starting conditions controls the consequences. As in other constituent republics, the Kyrgyzstan parliament did not elect the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the republic into the newly created office of the President of the Republic, but instead, not least due to pressure from Moscow central, the reform-oriented academician Askar Akaev⁵, who could count on the support of Mikhail Gorbachev.

Originally, the Kyrgyzstan Democratic Movement, representing almost the entire political spectrum of the country and uniting 14 political membership organizations, supported Akaev, with nationalistic Kyrgyz organizations coexisting peacefully with Russian-speaking ones. Among them, however, from the beginning, there existed varying opinions of the national problems and the politics of the government (Trutanow 1994: 213).

In the west, President Akaev was initially viewed as a European-oriented politician because of his attempts at modernization. It was said: "Akaev has really given up on tradition. In the government, there are only his fellow countrymen and cousins, like it used to be. The president is looking for and supports people with new ideas" (Trutanow 1994: 219).

Much like in the other Central Asian Turkic-speaking republics of the former USSR⁶, which became politically unstable after the release into independence,

⁵ Askar Akaev, was born on November 10, 1944 in Kisil-Bairak, studied from 1963 until 1968 at the Institute for Precision Mechanics and Optics in Leningrad, and worked there until 1972. After that, he was a teacher for one year at the Polytechnic Institute in Frunse (the former capital city); in 1973 he was scientific staff member at the same institute in Leningrad, from 1976 until 1987 instructor and chair at the Polytechnic Institute in Frunse. There he was promoted to Doctor of Science and Technology. In 1981 he became a member of the Communist Party, and in 1987 Vice President of the Academy of Science of Kyrgyzstan. In addition, he has headed the Economy Section of the Central Committee of the Communist Party since 1986. Since 1989 he has been a representative and member of the Citizenship Council of the Upper Soviet. Akaev, one-time member, but never party leader of the CP of the Kyrgyz SSR, resigned from the CP in August 1991 and has remained unaffiliated ever since (Mangott 1996: 67).

⁶ In Azerbaijan, after the death of President Gejdar Alijev, who had a KGB career behind him, Alijev's son Ilchan assumed power. The current Turkmenistan, more a confederation of tribes than a modern nation, was governed under the authority of Saparmurat Niyazov from 1991 to December 2006. After his death Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedow became president. The president is both the chief of state and head of government. In Uzbekistan, the governing elite is oriented toward the opinions and authority of President Karimov. Suppression of any opposition began as early as 1992. Today, Uzbekistan is seen as the "Law and Order" state. There, a national integration legend is created through the "cultural rebirth" of nation founder Timor Lenk (Tamerlan 1336-1405). In Kazhakstan, President Naserbaev, former Glasnost proponent, is pursuing a path toward modernization.

the desire to reestablish stability through authoritarian political leadership grew in Kyrgyzstan also. The constitution established the country as a moderate secular, presidential republic. Soon, however, contrary to the October 1990 law regarding the establishment of the office of president, the authority of the president was broadly expanded. As head of state, Akaev became the primary organ of the executive authority (Mangott 1996: 102).

Akaev “slimmed down” the executive authority by means of a government reform in January 1991 and named his own reforms – in allusion to the “velvet revolution” in Czechoslovakia and with reference to the long history of the Silk Road – “silk revolution” (Götz/Halbach 1996: 216). At the same time, in a referendum on 17 March 1991, 94.5% of all Kyrgyz citizens favored a continued participation in a renewed socialist Soviet Union (Trutanow 1994: 213).

Like the other presidents of Central Asian Turkic-speaking republics, Akaev understood cleverly how to present himself as a solicitor of national interests and a champion of national independence. “The emphatic national attitude of the new leadership did, after all, rest in the tactical intent to capture the political momentum of nationalistic movements up front and, at the same time, to effectively legitimize one’s own power” (Mangott 1996: 65). As detailed previously, the *Manas* Epic and the hero of the same name were helpful to Akaev in the creation of a national identification figure (see Straube 2005; Straube 2007). A short abstract of this development follows.

2. *The creation of a national identity with the Manas Epic*

Historical interest, as has been proven, generally grows from critical and conflict-laden situations. Through the look backwards historical experience becomes available for the present and the future. Kyrgyzstan is confronted by two complex problems that threaten to fragment the aspiring internal cohesion. Over 80 different ethnic and religious groups live in the nation. Besides the minority problem, there is also a language issue (Straube 2003).

Integration mechanisms and identity ideologies were mainly supported through the unifying and integrating fallback on common traditions. So too in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. One’s own ethnic tradition, such as folklore, yurt building, equestrian games, etc., which were already encouraged during the Soviet era, were to serve as traditional connection points. Other benefits were offered through one’s own ethnic historical awareness, the local national and cultural history and also the socialist-democratic heritage, because the earlier history of the republic in the alliance with the Soviet Union, which lasted over 70 years, had left behind its own traditions and monuments.

Soon after Akaev took office, Manas, the hero of the epic of the same name was arranged to be the unifying “figure” to help Kyrgyzstan determine its identity and create a national ideology. Approximately ten months after the declara-

tion of independence, the parliament passed a mandate to use the epic as a strategy for gaining a new nation-state ideology (Kumar 1998: 17). In 1995, a 1000-year celebration took place for which historical memorials were erected. For this occasion, President Akaev extracted first three and then seven “heritages,” or rather commandments, from the epic, which were to be considered guidelines for the conduct of all. Contributions about the epic from literature, art, theatre, music and film followed. *Manas* programs for schools and universities were developed which described how the epic was to be didactically and methodically taught. The epic hero is portrayed in Kyrgyzstan as the first ancestor of divine parentage. Manas, so it is said, founded a Kyrgyz state more than 1000 years ago. As can be deduced from the epic, today’s Kyrgyzstan was the ancestral home of the Kyrgyz, and the Kyrgyz, as authorities, thereby have leadership claims in the titular nation. The extent to which this is historically founded can be determined from different papers (see Prior 2000; Straube 2005; Straube 2007). Already then, Manas was able to integrate several minorities in his “state.” And already then, the Kyrgyz exemplified characteristics of democracy, equal opportunity of the sexes, fraternalism, openness and hospitality. Manas showed that the Kyrgyz are unique and superior.

The *Manas*-era is depicted as the golden era. As Manas had already solved the problems of his time in exemplary fashion, the Kyrgyz people could, according to Akaev, view his deeds as a model.

Before we, as an independent country, establish relationships with far and near states, we must research the historical experiences and the spiritual legacy of our ancestors, because we can learn something from Manas (Akaev 1997: 105f).

Today, the Kyrgyz can have a state for the second time in their history. It is Akaev’s obligation to concern himself with problems similar to Manas’ to hold together this second state – “Kyrgyzstan – our common home” (Akaev 1995: 91f) against “internal and external enemies.” Akaev, who acts as administrator of the Manas legacy, thereby legitimizes his presidency and the leading role of the Kyrgyz in the state.

Akaev depicts himself herewith, as do many other leaders in post-colonial states, as someone uninterested in emulating Europeans, but rather committed to contemplating his own origins in order to successfully survive the time of upheaval and a new beginning.

In the populace, the attempt of the political leadership to construct a national identification figure through the *Manas* Epic, is judged very differently. Using interviews and essays, I will attempt to show how the population, in accordance with biographical background and knowledge base, sees and values *Manas* from the various perspectives.

3. *The discourse about the Manas Epic*

The inhabitants of the Talas region claim a particularly close relationship to *Manas*. This is where Manas' tomb is said to be located. Sanasa, a 60-year-old from this area, recounts:

In early childhood, virtually with their mother's milk, the children are told of the Manas legends and his heroics in Talas. Little children are put on horses by their fathers and told, hold on tightly, don't fall off, or you will disgrace the name of Manas.

Despite the fact that Manas is a historical personality, the people today consider him a living person. We know that many doubt his existence and believe that he is a figment of their imagination. However, people like the Azerbaijanis and Turkmens also have their heroes. – My father told me that, in accordance with a party decision, the communists were going to demolish the mausoleum. Two people died during the first attempt. On the second attempt with a bulldozer, the driver died. Thereafter, nobody attempted it again. Today, there are readings from the Koran on Thursdays and Fridays there. One makes a wish and supplicates the spirit of Manas for help. Whoever says Amen, pleads with the Manas spirit for support.

The epic, written in verse form, was handed down orally by bards, who still recite it today. The bard Urkaš Mambetalı Uulu from Biškek told me:

No one can repeat *Manas* like the Kyrgyz. They say it from early morning, with full devotion, with all their souls. All that is inside the bard flows out. God gave him this gift. This gift was also given to me. I'm transported to a different time, when I recite the *Manas* epic. Even when the *Manas* epic is recited in a short form, it touches people.

President Akaev made the memorial cult surrounding *Manas* a personal priority. Nikoscha Suleimankov, in his mid-forties, one-time senior customs officer, today jobless, realizes how the president is using the epic to create a national ideology, but nevertheless supports it:

I heard about Manas in the fourth grade. My older brother read me the Kyrgyz epics two to three times per week during that time. – Manas was a kind of mythology for us youngsters at school. At the same time, it is proven that Manas was a real person who protected the Kyrgyz from the Chinese and Kalmucks. Manas was a leader. During that time, there were few in the population that were as smart and strong. Manas had a lot of organizational talent, the ability to become a hero.

The *Manas* accomplishments did not only have significance then, but also today as educational guidance for the youth, the peoples, and their unification. When you consider global problems, think of the epic. If we want to solve those, one can find many examples. – The development of Kyrgyzstan is not comparable with that of Europe and the United States. The Kyrgyz don't have a national ideology because they stem from a feudal society. Our president, therefore, creates directly from the epic. His attempt to use the epic in the unification of the entire population has shown results.

Whether a different president would have used the epic this way is unknown. It would depend on his intellectual philosophy of life. There is a whole generation of *Manas* researchers making new proposals. The 1000-year memorial celebration made Akaev very successful and reinforced his power. But such a memorial is celebrated only once.

The opinion, that such a memorial celebration was necessary to crown the new national ideology, is shared by Irisbudu Beybutova, in her mid-forties, professor at the Balāsāgūn National University in Biškek:

1995 – that was special publicity for Manas. Whoever didn't know him was now interested. Since then, his significance has grown. 1991/1992 were difficult years for our nation. But 1995 was a good time. The timing for the celebration was correctly chosen. We presented ourselves to the entire world as Kyrgyzstan. It was a good time to show the turning point.

At the universities, many young Kyrgyz are thrilled with *Manas*, even though they may not know much of the content of the epic. Dulat, a 19-year-old student, said:

Manas really existed. If he hadn't existed, there would be no tomb and his name would be unknown. Just the name Manas has great significance for the Kyrgyz. When one travels somewhere, one wishes that his soul and his spirit may protect the Kyrgyz people. When one starts something, one says, may the spirit of Manas protect one. That is why Manas has such significance for everyone.

Numerous examinations of the epic have been publicized since the unification. There were almost 3000 small and large studies available in 1994 (Mussajew 1994: 186). Doctoral and post-doctoral theses were written. Rısbek, 22 years old, also wrote his masters thesis about *Manas*. He said:

The epic will continue to achieve more significance for our national identity. Not a single nation possesses such a literary work.

The essays at the University for Human Research in Biškek also view *Manas* largely positive. A student, Alinar, age 19:

The *Manas* epic has great significance for the people of Kyrgyzstan. That is our history, which we cannot forget. In all schools, students learn the seven commandments from the epic. These commandments influence the students very positively. The past, the present and the future are tightly connected with each other. That is important. – Because I'm Kyrgyz, the epic is very important for me personally. That is my history, my home, my people. I live in Kyrgyzstan and I have to know and respect my literary treasures.

Anara, a 20-year-old student, adds:

Manas led his people to a better, freer life. The commandments from the epic teach us to be more helpful and friendlier to people. They teach us to honor the interests and the freedom of other people. One must be kind-hearted. For the people, unification is important. Unity and agreement will save us. We have to treasure our history, our traditions and customs so that we can pass them on to our people.

The characterization given by the student Alvira, age 19, who reflects the current propaganda, is typical:

I am proud that my people possess such a great epic as the *Manas* epic. This epic is an authentic encyclopedia of the Kyrgyz people. All knowledge in the area of medicine, all nature and environmental ideas are collected here. In the epic, morals, customs, the phi-

losophies of life of the ancient Kyrgyz are collected. Manas, the main character in the epic, was a hero who protected his people from strangers. He was not only brave, bold and strong, but also wise and smart. He wrote seven commandments, which are still relevant today because they teach people to be tolerant. The commandments urge all people to live in peace. In 1995 the Manas-1000 celebration took place. The whole world recognized the Kyrgyz people through this celebration. I find that such a beautiful epic could only be created by a great people. *Manas* is the greatest epic in the world. Even world famous epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata are much smaller than the Kyrgyz epic.

Kyrgyz scholars who researched the epic supported Akaev in the distribution of his national ideology from the beginning. Bolotbek Saparalijev, approximately 35 years old, a university graduate and currently in a leading position, gives his views on *Manas*:

For today's life, Manas is of great significance. Not for nothing did the president extract the seven commandments from the *Manas* epic during the Manas memorial celebration. In them are thoughts that can fulfill the functions of our national identity. Themes are mentioned, such as consolidation of the state, enlargement of international contact, peace with other nations, tolerance, ecology and environmental protection. The seven commandments form the core of the national ideology. They must be developed further, instilled in the people. That is important. – When this is not propagated throughout the people, it cannot develop itself further. Anarchy will evolve. The goal of every ideology is to further develop the society.

Earlier, the epic was presented and read as cultural history and literature. After the 1000-year celebration, the people paid much attention. Every single one of the seven commandments was selected and tested by scientists. The commandments were taught in school. They're displayed in every school; all children should memorize them. They are to be viewed as a call to the creation of a humanistic culture for all. The epic contains general human values, the imagination and culture of people.

Manas is something purely Kyrgyz, national, which is why it is carefully accepted by the minorities. The Russians, Kazaks, Uzbeks, Uigurs and Ukrainians have their own epics. Despite that, I believe that they view the epic positively, since Russian boys and girls also learn to memorize it. Other peoples also have a great interest in *Manas*.

Only now, is *Manas* publicized. There is a *Manas* propaganda center in Biškek. There it is translated into English, Turkish and Hindi. *Manas* is spread by patriotic teachers in the villages. If a city school wants, it is taught there. Honestly though, it is not of a high standard because the teachers don't know it very well. But the next generation will pay the epic more attention.

Scientists, – historians, philosophers, linguists – concern themselves with *Manas*. Health professionals learn from it how to heal wounds, with which instruments to operate, for instance removing bullets, how to staunch blood. Every expert can find something therein.

Every generation contributed to the epic. One can consider *Manas* as a universal encyclopedia. *Manas* is constantly updated and therefore will continuously provide new variants. The Manas of the 21st century will at some time report about our own history. Heroes such as Askar Akaev, Felix Kulov, Yeltsin and others will appear in it.

Manas had great significance as early as the beginning of the 20th century. The Soviet state contributed funds for its research. Many of our scientists have examined it. *Ma-*

nas, Manas, you nourish us' – those were familiar quotations of those times. There was good salary and good work from the research. The first intellectuals of Soviet-Kyrgyzstan were nurtured through Manas. And, honestly, Manas still nurtures us now.

With state encouragement, *Manas* is taught according to *Manas*-programs in the Department for International Relations of the Balāsāgūn National University in Biškek. The teacher Mairamkul, age 35, explained the purpose of the epic:

We educate through Manas, to learn from his mistakes and to adopt his positive traits. When I select a subject, I tell the students how Manas conducted himself and ask what they would have done in his place. That means, we influence their thoughts with him and teach them about life.

The teacher took her class to honor Manas at a sacred memorial and mausoleum in the Talas region. Because of the instruction and such activities, enthusiasm for the epic is growing. Ajnagul, 20 years old, says:

We went through the *Manas* epic in our second year of studies and I liked it very much. After each class, I wanted to continue reading and learning what happens. We, the Kyrgyz nation, number approximately four to five million people. We have to preserve our language and traditions. After we read it here, we try to do as Manas did. Manas assembled a very small group of people and led them to his territory. Other nations can conquer us easily because we are only four million people. What then, if we don't keep our traditions and our language? This objective lies on our shoulders. – If we don't know Kyrgyz history and Kyrgyz literature, we cannot survive as a people.

Another student, Ajbek, 21 years old, declared:

My knowledge of the epic grew this year. I'm of the opinion that the *Manas* epic is our greatest cultural heritage. As it was left behind by our ancestors, so we have to leave it behind for our descendants. That is the first goal that we have to achieve. By means of the positive parts of the epic, we have an example of how the Kyrgyz live and what kind of relations they should have with other people. We have to adopt all that. In my opinion, Manas education should be offered in all schools and universities. The epic is our pride; it contains patriotism and encompasses the traditions of the Kyrgyz people. It teaches us to stick together, to defend our soil, it teaches us not to be inferior to others and to be independent of them.

Even before independence, Kyrgyzstan belonged to the "underdeveloped" union republics deemed poor. This is still true today. In such a country, in the opinion of the student Čibek, age 19, Manas serves as a bearer of hope:

We have to learn and research our history. There are currently many difficulties; for instance, students have great desires to study, but they have no money to buy books. Despite that, our inner world is enriched when we read the *Manas* epic. The epic helps us in that it keeps our hopes alive. We see that our ancestors lived in even more difficult times. They worked partly for others. Our republic is independent and, in my opinion, compared to the difficulties then, today's are simple. We have to consider that, if they were able to overcome those difficulties, we have to ask ourselves why we can not do the same.

Gulia, a 42-year-old sales clerk who was raised in Biškek and attended a Russian school, views the use of the epic for a national ideology critically:

It is the greatest epic, but still an epic. – *Manas*, that is ideology. *Manas* has no significance for me. Concerning nationalism: In my class there were only four Kyrgyz, the rest were all other nationalities. Nationalism is not tolerated in my family. I have friends from various nationalities: Russians, Tatars, Koreans, Jews (...) I find it more important to teach my child pure human values, rather than nationalistic ideas.

Of the nearly five million people living in Kyrgyzstan, 64.9% are Kyrgyz, 13.8% are Uzbeks, 12.5% Russians, 1.1% Dungans, 1.0% Ukrainians, 1.0% Uigurs, 9% Tatars, 9% Tadjiks, 7% “Turkish,” 4% of German origin, 4% Korean and 1.5% other ethnic groups (National Statistical Committee 2000: 26). As early as 1993, the Republic of Kyrgyzstan was renamed the Kyrgyz Republic, a sign of growing ethnification. In January 1994, the president announced a State of Kyrgyz under the motto “Kyrgyzstan, our common home” (Akaev 1995: 91f) and demanded to speak of the “people of Kyrgyzstan” rather than the “peoples of Kyrgyzstan.” At the same time, to ensure interethnic and civic harmony, an Assembly of the Peoples of Kyrgyzstan was created (Elebaeva 1999: 190).

Despite these arrangements, the “Kyrgyzization” of the state is growing. It is accompanied by the exclusion of members of other ethnic groups from important positions. The construction of *Manas* as a carrier of national identity, as an example to all “Kyrgyz,” is viewed by many members of minorities much more critically than by the previously quoted Kyrgyz.

Saituna, a 52-year-old German teacher at the Balāsāgūn National University in Biškek, who is a Tatar married to a Kazakh, adds:

This talk about *Manas*, he is supposed to be a hero (...) Nobody knows if this person really existed or whether he fell from the sky. You see, there was no written language here; the Kyrgyz began only after the October Revolution with the Latin script. Before, there wasn't even an Arabic script. That is why *Manas* was always only communicated orally.

We never heard anything about *Manas*, not even in the Kyrgyz school. The interest in *Manas* didn't begin until Perestroika. In the past, we didn't need it. We had the ideology of communism, which we have now lost. We are atheists. Because we have no ideology, the ruling powers are searching frantically for an ideology. And this ideology is *Manas*.

In the past, *Manas* was not so important, nobody was interested. We have no money, live poorly, and celebrated this expensive anniversary. My god, how unhappy the population was in 1995. There was great dissatisfaction during the anniversary. Do you understand me (...) It is a forced ideology, nothing more.

Sultan, a 25-year-old German teacher at the same university whose parents come from the Caucasus, also remembers the 1000-year celebration:

Many *Manas* books appeared then, during the time of the 1000-year celebration. I saw the celebration on television. The newspapers concentrated on *Manas* because he is a Kyrgyz hero and this epic depicts the culture and tradition of the Kyrgyz people. That is why they pay so much attention to it. The celebration was majestic, but in our city there

is much unemployment. It cost a lot of money to put on this celebration. I think about the retirees who received no money for four or six months. The money went for the celebration. It appeared to me that the common people did not celebrate at all. They didn't know what to celebrate, who that was. The people in the villages didn't hear about it at all. They could not imagine what was being celebrated. The celebration was meant only for the people who lived in the city. Only those that were invited participated: professors, foreign guests.

Tatiana, a member of the Korean minority, is a 22-year-old project assistant with the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) in Biškek; she too does not think much of *Manas*:

I completed school during the 1000-year celebration. We were supposed to go to the Kyrgyz theatre to see the *Manas* piece. I was curious why it was talked about for a whole year. The piece was in Kyrgyz, but even my Kyrgyz friend understood nothing. Despite simultaneous translation, my friends and I were lost and didn't even know what it was about. – Because of the heavy publicity, we, as members of the minorities, wanted to understand why there was so much advertisement for the epic. Some said that it was about national identity: “The Russians have so many heroes and can identify with them at any time. We had nothing. Now we have *Manas*! He is the one who unified all the tribes and created the Kyrgyz state.” Others say: “Identity, identity. We need publicity so the tourists will come. Let them be interested in *Manas*.” – That then was the reason! Only this way can I understand the 1995 campaign today. – In my opinion, *Manas* did not exist.

The student Olga, a 20-year-old member of the Russian minority, was the only one in her class to express a critical opinion in her essay:

I have very little information about the *Manas* epic. I know that *Manas* was very strong and tall and that he is a hero to the Kyrgyz people. *Manas* is loved by the people, but not by me. He is not a god, but the Kyrgyz believe that. I believe that the story about the *Manas* epic is a simple fairy tale.

When we take a look at Akaev's policy, the skepticism of members of the minorities about the use of the epic for a national ideology can be well understood.

4. *The end of an era*

Akaev ruled the country and its five million inhabitants from the “White House” for 15 years. This was only possible through a constitutional amendment allowing him to stay in office longer than was originally permitted. Added to that came the manipulations which gave cause for concern that Akaev planned to hold this office for life.

As early as 1990, the election observer OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) found fault in the presidential election process in Kyrgyzstan. The conviction in the spring of 2000 of the opposition politician and strongest rival of Askar Akaev, Felix Kulov, for misuse of official power stimulated internal protests and external political attention. Kulov's acquittal in the

summer was viewed by the OSCE as a positive sign in the run-up for the presidential elections planned for October 2000 (*Wostok* No. 4/2000: 7). However, at the beginning of 2001, Kulov was finally sentenced by a public military tribunal to seven years in prison. The former confidant of the president and minister of national security was accused of “document forgery.” It came to demonstrations for his release. During altercations with police, several people were killed and more than 60 injured (*Frankfurter Rundschau* 3/19/2002).

An additional rigged parliamentary election in March 2005 finally led to Akaev’s fall. After the vote tally for the new parliament, fewer than 10 opposition candidates had been elected; two of his children, however, were. As the resistance to the Akaev government in the poorer south started to seethe, no one in the capital in the better-off north was prepared to take to the streets, despite repeated vote fraud. Only after several articles in an opposition newspaper about Akaev’s private residence, a white palace at the edge of the city, and the disclosure of the lucrative government positions occupied by members of his family, was there finally an uproar. It led to mass protests against the Akaev clan, not only in the south of the country, but also in the capital city. It is interesting that this opposition newspaper was produced in a print shop financed by the Freedom House foundation, which worked under contract of the US State Department (*Der Spiegel* 47/ 2005: 186f).

Akaev fled into exile. His family was accused of acquiring successful businesses through extortion. With an overwhelming majority, Bakijev, who was already acting president, was elected the new president in July 2005.

It is not yet possible to determine whether the *Manas* Epic as a national identity figure will be of significance under President Bakijev or whether the end of the Akaev era is also to be the end of the *Manas* era.

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