



UPTAKE

Working Paper No. 14/2018

Testing Revisionist Toolkits: Russia in Kyrgyzstan

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Suggested format for citing this paper: Elgin, Katherine K. (2018). ‘Testing Revisionist Toolkits: Russia in Kyrgyzstan’, UPTAKE Working Paper, No. 14.



Editors: Maili Vilson, Kristel Vits
Cover design: Kalle Paalits
Layout: Tiia Ilus, Maili Vilson

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University of Tartu Press
www.tyk.ee

ABSTRACT

It is now commonplace in the West to describe Russia as a revisionist power, seeking to change the international system and regain its status as a great power. This perception became more popular after 2008 in Georgia but only truly solidified after Russian interventions in Crimea and Syria. Russia, however, did not act on its revisionist tendencies overnight. What were the mechanisms that allowed Russia to become revisionist, and how did it test these mechanisms? This paper argues that Russia's revisionism started earlier than many claim – in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia more broadly in the early 2000's. In overlooking these earlier historical developments, we risk misunderstanding Russian revisionist tendencies, the roots of which stem back to the 'Colour Revolutions' in Georgia, in Ukraine, and in Kyrgyzstan. In examining Russian revisionism, most scholars concentrate on the first two, but this focus only tells part of the story. While this paper does not try to understand the relative success or failure of Russian actions in these countries, it does demonstrate that Kyrgyzstan was in many ways a testing ground for Russia as it developed its revisionist toolkit. Through analysing Russian efforts to reduce U.S. influence in Central Asia in the early 2000s, this paper helps us to better understand how Russia developed techniques used in Georgia and Crimea, how Russia conceptualized their own abilities to intervene in other countries, and ultimately how Russia conceives of its ability to revise the international system with minimal external response.

Keywords: Russia; Kyrgyzstan; revisionism; regime change; Colour Revolutions

This paper was presented at the UPTAKE Training School at the Institute of Russian and Eurasian Studies of Uppsala University on 26 August - 1 September 2018.

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INTRODUCTION

When Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula in early 2014, much of the West struggled to understand how geopolitics had changed to allow for long-unseen territorial conquest. The answer that both scholars and policymakers alike seemed to agree upon was that Russian revisionism and great power competition (especially when combined with Chinese actions in the South China Sea) had returned.¹ This suggested, however, that great power competition had even left to begin with or that great power revisionism only started in 2014.² Identifying 2014 as the main point of departure, much scholarship traces Russian revisionism to the 2008 war with Georgia, followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, Russia began testing revisionist policy options much earlier than that and in a different region, and by missing a component of Russia's learning curve, we run the risk of misunderstanding Russia's future trajectory. Georgia and Ukraine were not isolated cases but rather part of a broader trend that accelerated with the so-called Colour Revolutions in Georgia in 2003, in Ukraine in 2004, and in Kyrgyzstan in 2005.³

This paper argues that, while several scholars have analysed how the Colour Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine shaped Russian revisionism in Crimea in 2013, we also need to understand the third revolution – the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan – and its aftermath, specifically another revolution in the Central Asian country in

¹Ivan Krastev, "Russian Revisionism," *Foreign Affairs*, March 3, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-03-03/russian-revisionism>; Andrei A. Piontkovsky, "Putin's Russia as a Revisionist Power - by Andrei A. Piontkovsky," accessed August 12, 2018, <http://www.hudson.org/research/11386-putin-s-russia-as-a-revisionist-power>; Dmitri Trenin, "The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great-Power Rivalry" (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, July 2014), <https://carnegie.ru/2014/07/09/ukraine-crisis-and-resumption-of-great-power-rivalry-pub-56113>; Thomas Wright, "China and Russia vs. America: Great-Power Revisionism Is Back," *The Brookings Institution* (blog), April 27, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/china-and-russia-vs-america-great-power-revisionism-is-back/>.

²Paul D. Miller, "Crimea Proves That Great Power Rivalry Never Left Us," *Shadow Government (Foreign Policy)* (blog), March 21, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/21/crimea-proves-that-great-power-rivalry-never-left-us/>.

³These are the three revolutions most commonly associated with the 'Colour Revolutions.' However, sometimes scholars include other events, such as the lesser-known Cedar Revolution in Lebanon that ended in the assassination of opposition leader Rafik Hariri, the Blue Revolution that sought to bring better women's rights to Kuwait, and the so-called Purple Revolution, a name picked up by George W. Bush for the professed democratic success in Iraq following the 2005 Iraqi legislative elections. This paper will only focus on the most prominent of these revolutions, since it was these that Russia paid most attention to. It should be noted, of course, though, that Russia was watching these smaller revolutions with interest.

2010, to assess Russian revisionist objectives and tools.⁴ Russian efforts in Kyrgyzstan to change what can be seen as an anti-Russian trend line are important to an understanding of Russian intentions around the post-Soviet region. Kyrgyzstan, like Georgia, Ukraine, and elsewhere in the first decade of the 2000s, acted as an experimental foray for future interventions – particularly in Crimea in 2014. Given spatial constraints, the goal of this paper is not to compare the efforts in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan, but rather to outline what happened in Kyrgyzstan in order to develop a better understanding of Russian revisionism throughout the entire CIS region. By recognizing that Russia used and refined its revisionist toolkit in Kyrgyzstan, we can see that the war with Georgia and the annexation of Crimea were by no means isolated actions. Rather, we can begin to develop a narrative of a Russia that began developing and testing its revisionist limits and tools as early as the first half-decade of the 2000s.

RUSSIAN ENGAGEMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA

As the traditional regional hegemon in Central Asia, a history that stems back to the 18th century, Russia has long held significant influence over the region. Having colonized virtually all of Central Asia by the middle of the 19th century and incorporated it into the Soviet Union in 1922, Russia's privileged history in the region is deep – and in many ways, the Kremlin expects to maintain that influence.⁵ Recent Russian leaders have described the region as a “zone of special influence” in which Russia holds “privileged interests.”⁶

In the decade following the collapse of the USSR and the ensuing independence of the Central Asian states, Russia remained the regional hegemon though more by default than through any active policies. In fact, though Russia did intervene in Tajikistan's civil war during the early 1990s, the Eurasian power largely stayed out of Central Asian affairs during the first decade following the break-up of the Soviet

⁴ In this paper, by “revisionism,” I simply mean seeking to change the status quo. For this discussion, “revisionism” refers most immediately to changing domestic environments in target countries to better reflect Russian interests.

⁵ For a history of Russia in Central Asia, see Edward A. Allworth, ed., *Central Asia: One Hundred Thirty Years of Russian Dominance, A Historical Overview*, 3rd edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1995).

⁶ Paul Reynolds, “New Russian World Order: The Five Principles,” *BBC*, September 1, 2008, sec. Europe, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7591610.stm>.

Union, for Russian leaders were focused on addressing domestic challenges and recovering from the economic collapse of the early 1990s.⁷ So long as Central Asia did not interfere with other Russian interests, the region could operate self-sufficiently.⁸

After the terrorist attacks in the United States of America on 11 September 2001, Russian involvement in Central Asia expanded. Vladimir Putin was the first foreign leader to express support to President George W. Bush after the 11 September attacks, and in the coming days and weeks, that condolence transformed into tangible support, including access to airspace over Russian territory but also the coordination of Central Asian support for the American mission in Afghanistan. The basis of this cooperation was primarily seen as a shared desire to combat terrorism.⁹ Both Russia and the United States, in addition to China, worried (and continue to worry) about what one Chinese scholar labels the “terrorist arc belt” that expands from the Middle East through Central and South Asia into Southeast Asia.¹⁰ At first, this cooperation seemed to be promising. There was talk of a future U.S.-Russian relationship, sometimes becoming trilateral with the Chinese, which would be cooperative, based off shared goals of mitigating Central Asian terrorism and ensuring a stable Central Asia.¹¹

However, the tide began to turn as Putin became more certain in his forceful foreign policy stance and began to reassert Russian influence in Central Asia.¹² Since late

⁷ Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, Reprint edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 20.

⁸ Diana Digol, “Russia’s Foreign Policy in Central Asia: From Yeltsin to Medvedev,” in *Russia and Its Near Neighbours*, ed. Maria Raquel Freire and Roger E. Kanet (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁹ See, for example: Fiona Hill, “Putin and Bush in Common Cause? Russia’s View of the Terrorist Threat After September 11,” *Brookings*, June 1, 2002, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/putin-and-bush-in-common-cause-russias-view-of-the-terrorist-threat-after-september-11/>.

¹⁰ Pan Guang, “The Role of a Multilateral Anti-Terror Mechanism in Central Asia,” in *The New Great Game: Chinese Views on Central Asia*, ed. Charles Hawkins and Robert Love (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2007), 107.

¹¹ See, for example: Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*; Jill Dougherty, “9/11 a ‘turning Point’ for Putin,” CNN.com, September 10, 2002,

<http://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/europe/09/10/ar911.russia.putin/index.html>; Fu Yong, “The Common Interests of the U.S. and China, and Prospects for Cooperation,” in *The New Great Game: Chinese Views on Central Asia*, ed. Charles Hawkins and Robert Love (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2007).

¹² Igor Torbakov, “Moscow Aims to Restore Its Influence in Central Asia,” *EurasiaNet*, December 4, 2002, <https://eurasianet.org/s/moscow-aims-to-restore-its-influence-in-central-asia>; Sergei Blagov, “With Eye

2001, American forces had been operating an airbase at Bishkek's Manas International Airport. About 400 miles and 90 minutes by air from Afghanistan, the base had become vital for the supply of U.S. and other coalition forces in Afghanistan.¹³ Though Kyrgyz officials had sought – and received – permission from Russia to host the U.S. troops,¹⁴ Moscow became increasingly negative about the U.S. troop presence and sought to limit both the actual and perceived relative influence of the United States in the region. In 2002, the Russians began discussions with their Kyrgyz counterparts to raise their own airbase in the country – located in Kant, just a 30-mile drive from Manas.¹⁵ Though the purported purpose of the Kant base – in theory connected to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) – was to combat regional terrorism and protect CSTO member-states' borders, it was widely seen as a counter to the U.S. presence.¹⁶ The language coming out of the Russian media that was increasingly anti-American in nature emphasized this view.¹⁷ For example, in 2003, a *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* article wrote, "There are persistent rumours in the [Kyrgyz] republic that the Americans have come here seriously and for a long time, even though the agreement was officially agreed upon for one year."¹⁸ Russian media quoted "experts" who claimed Manas served as an American intelligence gathering sight for Iran, Russia, and China, while others, including Leonid Bondarets, the former deputy commander of the Directorate of Operations of the Kyrgyz General Staff, claimed as early as 2002 that the Americans viewed Manas as a location

on US, Russia Bolsters Central Asia Presence," *EurasiaNet*, June 21, 2004, <https://eurasianet.org/s/with-eye-on-us-russia-bolsters-central-asia-presence>.

¹³ Jim Nichol, "Kyrgyzstan and the Status of the U.S. Manas Airbase: Context and Implications," CRS Report for Congress (Washington, D.C: Congressional Research Service, July 1, 2009).

¹⁴ Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 35.

¹⁵ Sabrina Tavernise, "Threats and Responses: Asian Security; Kyrgyzstan And Russia Sign New Pact," *The New York Times*, December 7, 2002, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/07/world/threats-and-responses-asian-security-kyrgyzstan-and-russia-sign-new-pact.html>.

¹⁶ Jim Nichol, "Kyrgyzstan: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests," CRS Report for Congress (Washington, D.C: Congressional Research Service, August 30, 2013), 10; Tavernise, "Threats and Responses."

¹⁷ For this report, evidence of Russian media largely comes from two sources: *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and *Sputnik*. This is admittedly but a small sampling. However, I believe that I can use these two sources as representation of Russian thinking, carefully. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* is published by the Russian government serving as the official newspaper of record. *Sputnik* was established by the Russian government-owned agency Rossiya Segodnya and has widely been identified as a Russian propaganda outlet.

¹⁸ Boris Talov, "We will not have to pay for the use of the base [Платить за использование базы не придется]," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, September 23, 2003, No. 3303 edition, <https://rg.ru/2003/09/23/Platizaispolzovaniebazynepridetsya.html>.

from which they could stage strikes at threats “all over the territory from East Europe to the Pacific.”¹⁹ While the anti-American stance probably holds some weight and the allegations – though exaggerated – likely have some kernels of truth, others saw the motivations for the Russian base as a tool to garner more influence within Kyrgyzstan, and to influence Kyrgyz politics.²⁰ In the most likely case, it is a combination of the two.

THE COLOUR REVOLUTIONS

However, the testing and revision of the status quo really began after the Colour Revolutions.²¹ Previously, Russian actions to gain influence in Kyrgyzstan were muted, but after the Colour Revolutions across the wider Eurasian space, Russia enhanced its efforts in the Central Asian state, fearful of spill over effects and the general trend of its loss of influence. The events in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan largely surprised Moscow, and the short-term results frightened them. In part, there was fear concerning Russian domestic politics; if it could happen in Georgia, Ukraine, and to some extent Kyrgyzstan,²² efforts to do the same in Moscow may also find some success.²³ Furthermore, the succession of revolutions that seemed to tilt these post-Soviet countries towards the West heightened concerns about a perceived trend that Russia was losing influence abroad – in particular, in its near abroad.²⁴ Alleged U.S. involvement in the revolutions only increased the fear, and as a result, attitudes towards the West further soured.

¹⁹ A. Ignatkin, trans., “Threat from Manas: The Gansi AF Base Becomes an Object of American Political Clout with Central Asia,” *Defense and Security*, May 18, 2007, 53 edition, sec. CIS Defense, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/Inacui2api/api/version1/getDocCui?lni=4NS0-TB80-TX4V-P2K5&csi=270944,270077,11059,8411&hl=t&hv=t&hnsd=f&hns=t&hgn=t&oc=00240&perma=true>.

²⁰ Tavernise, “Threats and Responses.”

²¹ Charlotte Niklasson, “Russian Leverage in Central Asia,” User report (Stockholm: FOI, Swedish Defense Research Agency, April 2008).

²² Relatively speaking, it seems that the revolution in Kyrgyzstan should have posed a smaller threat to Moscow than in Ukraine or Georgia. The reasons for this are numerous, but include a Russian mentality that distances its own culture and history from that of Central Asia, putting Central Asians in a different category of people and state. Russians are more likely to compare themselves to other Slavs and Caucasians than to Central Asians. Furthermore, the regime that took power after the Tulip Revolution was far less unambiguously pro-American than the governments in Georgia or Ukraine. See Lincoln A. Mitchell, “Russia,” in *The Color Revolutions* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 96–97.

²³ Mitchell, “Russia”; Trenin, “The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great-Power Rivalry.”

²⁴ Sergei Blagov, “Russian Leaders Mull Geopolitical Moves in 2005,” *EurasiaNet*, January 3, 2005, <https://eurasianet.org/s/russian-leaders-mull-geopolitical-moves-in-2005>.

The so-called Tulip Revolution was preceded by two others in a series of major popular revolutions played in particular on Russian fears, as Russia had witnessed what had happened in Georgia and Ukraine with pointed concern. In early 2005, then-Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev was ousted from power in the first peaceful (though extra-constitutional) transfer of power that the Central Asian countries had experienced since their independence from the Soviet Union. The Tulip Revolution, spurred by allegations of fraudulent parliamentary elections and dissatisfaction with Akayev, removed the leader from the presidency and replaced him with the leader of the People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan, Kurmanbek Bakiyev.²⁵ Bakiyev was not notably pro-American or anti-Russian (nor pro-Russian or anti-American). Certainly, he was not perceived of as cosy with the West as Mikheil Saakashvili or Viktor Yushchenko had been, but still the Tulip Revolution – particularly in combination with the Rose and Orange Revolutions – rattled the Russian resolve as Moscow could not help but draw connections between the three and predict dangerous trend lines.

It is not evidently clear that the United States was truly behind any of these revolutions or the Kyrgyz revolution in particular. Evidence of supposed American ulterior motives provided by the Russian media is vague and often rooted in claims once- or twice-removed. For example, one Sputnik article reports that a *New York Times* piece confirms that the United States was behind the revolution.²⁶ However, the *New York Times* reportage only describes civil society's involvement in the revolution, and the U.S. government's broad support of these organizations.²⁷ At best, by this logic, the United States enabled the mechanics of the revolution. Other strings of logic claim that the revolution was an American punishment for Kyrgyzstan after Bishkek denied American requests to station AWACS – an airborne early warning and control system – in the country.²⁸ That this connection stems primarily

²⁵ For more on the Tulip Revolution, particularly a discussion about its roots, see: Scott Radnitz, "What really happened in Kyrgyzstan?" *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 17, Iss. 2 (April 2006), pp. 132-146.

²⁶ "Beijing Actively Pushing US Out From Russia's 'Soft Underbelly' in Central Asia," *Sputnik*, September 16, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/asia/201609161045389090-china-us-russia-central-asia-analysis/>.

²⁷ Craig S. Smith, "U.S. Helped to Prepare the Way for Kyrgyzstan's Uprising," *The New York Times*, March 30, 2005, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/30/world/asia/us-helped-to-prepare-the-way-for-kyrgyzstans-uprising.html>.

²⁸ Ella Taranova and Dmitry Yevlashkov, "CIS Problems Persist despite 'Color Revolutions,'" *Sputnik*, March 24, 2009, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/20090324120715630/>; "Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Denies Presence of US AWACS Aircraft," *BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit*, November 30, 2005, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/lncui2api/api/version1/getDocCui?lni=4HP5-BDC0-TX34->

from Akayev should suggest that scepticism should be employed in regards to such claims.

However, for the actions of the Russians, the true cause of the revolutions is not the most important factor; what matters is the Russian perception of what happened. The Russian government seems to believe that the United States was pulling the strings (or at least tugging them along). After the Tulip Revolution, language detailing Russian-U.S. relations, especially in the region, seemed to become more aggressive and more unambiguous about the competitive status of the two nations.²⁹ In addition, following the Colour Revolutions, there seems to be a devoted push to test new strategies in CIS states and Kyrgyzstan. The Russian media in September 2005 described plans from Moscow to increase Russian influence in the mountainous Central Asian state covering a wide range of industries.³⁰

TOOLS OF REVISIONISM AND REGIME CHANGE

This employment of new and re-invigorated tools of influence should not come as a surprise. Russian strategies prior to the Colour Revolution (strategies described by one Russian author as “mediocre”³¹ and a *New York Times* author as “ham-fisted”³²) had clearly not done their job. Previously Russia had in some ways presumed influence in Kyrgyzstan, not doing very much other than keeping up relations with elites. However, the 2005 revolution helped them realize that they needed to do more. New and improved sets of policies and methods, which would become

NOPK&csi=270944,270077,11059,8411&hl=t&hv=t&hnsd=f&hns=t&hgn=t&oc=00240&perma=true; “Kyrgyzstan’s Refusal to Allow US AWACS ‘One of the Reasons’ of Tulip Revolution,” *Sputnik News*, September 16, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/asia/201609161045356341-kyrgyzstan-us-awacs-caused-tulip-revolution/>.

²⁹ See, for example: Vladimir Belousov, “Far without Moscow: The U.S. inspects its bridgehead in Central Asia [Далеко без Москвы: США инспектируют свой плацдарм в Центральной Азии],” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, October 12, 2005, <https://rg.ru/2005/10/12/kyrgyzia-bazi.html>; Pyotr Goncharov, “Rumsfeld Counterattacks in Central Asia,” *Sputnik*, July 27, 2005, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/2005072740981132/>; “No Plans to Expand Military Presence in Central Asia - NATO,” *Sputnik*, March 23, 2007, <https://sputniknews.com/world/2007052365955611/>.

³⁰ Pyotr Goncharov, “Kyrgyzstan: Russia Stages a Comeback,” *Sputnik*, September 8, 2005, sec. Opinion, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/2005090841343267/>; “Moscow Expands Its Influence in Kyrgyzstan - Paper,” *Sputnik*, September 5, 2005, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/2005090541300655/>.

³¹ Goncharov, “Kyrgyzstan.”

³² Michael Schwartz, “Kyrgyzstan Votes for a President, Feeling the Pull of Russia,” *The New York Times*, October 29, 2011, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/30/world/asia/as-kyrgyzstan-votes-some-consider-a-turn-to-russia.html>.

especially relevant in 2014, emerged during this period. In the latter half of the first decade of the 2000s, Russia evolved its methods to include a wider breadth of alternatives, targeting not only the elite but also broader society.³³ These policy options include economic packages, security cooperation, Russian military presence, an emphasis on a multilateral and regional approach, cyber tools, and – perhaps the biggest indicator of adaption – regime change itself using media campaigns and targeted actions towards the people alongside support of existing opposition groups. These tools gained more attention in the West in the aftermath of the 2014 annexation of Crimea. However, we see all of them in practice in Kyrgyzstan prior to 2014. In particular, the period between 2005 with the Tulip Revolution and 2010, when Kyrgyzstan experienced a second revolution, demonstrates that Russia developing and testing new influence-building techniques.

Though Russia has limited economic incentives to leverage, especially in comparison to other actors in the region (namely China), Moscow was still able to put together economic packages to support its attempts to gain broad influence in Kyrgyzstan. Debts were cancelled and infrastructure projects – particularly in energy – promised.³⁴ Political analyst for *RIA Novosti* Pyotr Goncharov describes a discussed 2005 agreement in which Moscow would write off half of Kyrgyz debt to Russia and simplify procedures for employment and residence of Kyrgyz guest workers. He draws a clear connection between Russian revisionism – changing the status quo – and the economic package: “Needless to say, all these steps by Moscow call for Bishkek’s reciprocity. In all probability, Moscow will sooner or later raise the issue of the American air force base in Manas.”³⁵ Other economic incentives include plans to increase trade, and investments in the defence and energy industries.³⁶

At the same time, Russia further developed its bilateral security cooperation with Kyrgyzstan. Russia currently has four military facilities in the Central Asian country:

³³ Schwirtz.

³⁴ Cancellation of debt is a seemingly powerful tool that the Russian government can pull from, that requires little withdrawal from its (struggling) economy. This tool has been used repeatedly. For example, see: “Kyrgyzstan: Russia Cancels Debts, But Credit Pile Remains High,” *EurasiaNet*, May 4, 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/s/kyrgyzstan-russia-cancels-debts-but-credit-pile-remains-high>.

³⁵ Goncharov, “Kyrgyzstan.”

³⁶ Sergei Blagov, “Russia Pledges Economic Aid, May Get Stake in Kyrgyz Defense Industry,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 4, no. 194 (October 19, 2007), <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-pledges-economic-aid-may-get-stake-in-kyrgyz-defense-industry/>.

the airbase at Kant, a naval test centre in Karakol, a military communications at Karabalt, and a radio-seismic lab in Mayly-Suu.³⁷ However, rumours have abounded of a discussion on establishing a second Russian base in the south of the state since just after the Tulip Revolution.³⁸ Russia has furthermore provided Kyrgyzstan with upgraded air defence systems, Russian weapons, and combat hardware at reduced prices, in addition to cooperation on anti-terrorism and related missions through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

While developing bilateral ties, Moscow was also careful to frame many of its activities as part of a regional or multilateral framework.³⁹ Russian media and political language constantly stressed the role and interests of the CSTO and the SCO when discussing military assets and activities in Kyrgyzstan and has tried to draw distinctions between this approach and that of Washington. The U.S. relationship with the Central Asian states is painted as consisting of a series of bilateral relationships instead of one that brings together the entire region. For example, Goncharov writes, "Washington believes that the future of its bases in the region, primarily in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, should be determined exclusively at bilateral talks. This means that, according to Washington, the future of the bases is not in the competence of the governments of other regional states or the six-country organization, the SCO."⁴⁰ This emphasis on multilateralism speaks to an attempt to appear more legitimate than the United States and to play on the United States' own habit of using multilateral forums to make actions more digestible to multiple audiences, including the international community.⁴¹

³⁷ "Russia: 'No Plans' to Close Kyrgyz Airbase," *Sputnik*, 5/17/12 edition, accessed August 11, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/world/20120517173509695/>.

³⁸ Catherine Putz, "What About That Proposed Second Russian Base in Kyrgyzstan?," *The Diplomat*, March 7, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/what-about-that-proposed-second-russian-base-in-kyrgyzstan/>.

³⁹ Blagov, "Russian Leaders Mull Geopolitical Moves in 2005."

⁴⁰ Pyotr Goncharov, "What Will U.S. Reply to SCO Offer of Leaving Central Asia?," *Sputnik*, July 21, 2005, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/2005072140946316/>.

⁴¹ Andrei Korbut, "Kant AF Base and Central Asian Security," trans. Aleksei Ignatkin, *Defense and Security*, December 19, 2008, sec. CIS Defense,

<http://www.lexisnexis.com/lncui2api/api/version1/getDocCui?lni=4V5X-18T0-TX4V-P08X&csi=270944,270077,11059,8411&hl=t&hv=t&hnsd=f&hns=t&hgn=t&oc=00240&perma=true;>
Alexander Thompson, "Coercion Through IOs: The Security Council and the Logic of Information

The SCO has also played a role in asserting anti-U.S. policies. Most famously, in the summer of 2005, the SCO released a joint declaration requesting that the United States-led Operation Enduring Freedom and anti-terrorism coalition forces set a date for leaving Central Asia, fuelling speculation that the SCO was evolving into an anti-NATO organization.⁴² The declaration, signed by the presidents of the SCO member-countries, was a response to American criticism of the Uzbek government's actions in May 2005 in Andijan, during which some 700 protesters were killed. The declaration reads:

“Given the completion of the active military phase of the antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan, the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization deem it necessary for the relevant participating states of the anti-terrorist coalition to set a deadline for the temporary use of said infrastructure and presence of their military contingents in the territory of the SCO member states.”⁴³

Shortly after the release of the joint declaration, the Uzbek government announced it was terminating its basing agreement with the U.S. and demanded that the U.S. vacate Karshi-Khanabad, a base key for resupply in Afghanistan, within six months. Many, however, saw the declaration not as a homegrown Central Asian desire but deriving instead from pressure from Russia and China.⁴⁴ The Russian government vigorously denies this claim.⁴⁵

Transmission,” *International Organization* 60, no. 1 (January 2006): 1–34, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818306060012>.

⁴² For example, see: Bates Gill, “Shanghai Five: An Attempt to Counter U.S. Influence in Asia?,” The Brookings Institution, May 4, 2001, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2001/05/04china-gill>; “Shanghai Cooperation Organization: An Anti-Western Alignment?,” CSS Analyses in Security Policy (Zurich: Center for Security Studies at ETH-Zurich, December 2009), <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-security-studies/pdfs/CSS-Analyses-66.pdf>; Fred Weir, “Russia, China Looking to Form ‘NATO of the East?’,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 26, 2005, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1026/p04s01-woeu.html>.

⁴³ Shanghai Cooperation Organization Secretariat, “Declaration by the Heads of the Members States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” July 5, 2005, eng.sectsc.org/load/197543/.

⁴⁴ Notably, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, later attributed the Karshi-Khanabad eviction to pressure on the SCO brought on by Russia and China. Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 82.

⁴⁵ Sergei Ivanov, who was Minister of Defense at the time, told reporters: “We did not put any pressure on CIS member countries in Central Asia over this issue, and the signing of a declaration at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit on July 5 in Astana by their governments was their decision

The most obvious military and influence push, however, was a sort of *quid pro quo* negotiating of the status of the Manas airbase through a series of economic incentives and media pushes. In the summer of 2005, after the signing of the SCO joint declaration, Moscow seemed to do more than the other member-states to convince Kyrgyzstan to close the Manas airbase in conjunction with the message of the organization's pronouncement. Russian and pro-Russian Kyrgyz media appear to have increasingly claimed that the airbase contributed to environmental damage, that U.S. personnel threatened the safety of civilians, and that those living and working on the base were involved in illegal activities, while praising the benefits of Kant.⁴⁶ Bakiyev took the opportunity to ask the United States for increasing amounts money in exchange for keeping the base open, and in July 2006, the Kyrgyz and American governments reached a deal to keep the U.S. base operational. The United States would provide Kyrgyzstan over \$150 million in total assistance and compensation over the following year, and the rent rose eight-fold from \$2 million to \$17 million.⁴⁷ As early as 2007, Kyrgyz officials recognized Russia's desire to close Manas and began to try to strike a deal with their powerful neighbour. After a new Russian law on migrant workers went into effect in 2007, Kyrgyz parliament speaker Marat Sultanov visited Russia and reportedly urged the Russian government to facilitate movement of Kyrgyz migrant workers (including by granting them dual citizenship) in exchange for a boost in Russian military presence in Kyrgyzstan and the closing of Manas.⁴⁸

In 2009, Russian pressure to close the American airbase nearly succeeded as competition between the two world powers peaked, with both sides offering Kyrgyzstan *quae pro quibus* to get their way. After a meeting with then-President Dmitry Medvedev in Moscow on February 3, 2009, the Russian leader promised Bakiyev \$2.15 billion in aid and the Kyrgyz president declared that he would be closing the Manas airbase. As part of the package, Russia also assumed control of a number of Kyrgyz defence industries, including a 48 percent controlling stake in the

alone." "Russia Did Not Pressure Central Asian Governments over U.S. Bases," *Sputnik*, July 28, 2005, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/2005072841050339/>.

⁴⁶ Nichol, "Kyrgyzstan: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests."

⁴⁷ For a good summary of the 2005-06 price discussion, see: Alexander Cooley, *Base Politics: Democratic Change and the U.S. Military Overseas* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 233–34.

⁴⁸ Nichol, "Kyrgyzstan and the Status of the U.S. Manas Airbase," 5.

Dastan torpedo manufacturing plant near Lake Issyk-Kul.⁴⁹ On February 19, the Kyrgyz legislature voted overwhelmingly to support Bakiyev's announcement and close the airbase.⁵⁰ U.S. Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan Tatiana Gfoeller wrote in a diplomatic cable, "It is clear that Moscow purchased Kyrgyz President Bakiyev's decision to close Manas."⁵¹ However, the United States reportedly offered Bakiyev \$100 million to back out of the agreement with Russia to close Manas, and in late June, the United States and Kyrgyzstan signed a new arrangement for the use of Manas. The agreement came with a swath of other packaged benefits to Kyrgyzstan, including a rent increase from \$17 million to \$60 million.

The move from Bakiyev enraged Russian leadership.⁵² Nevertheless, not closing the U.S. base was not the only *faux pas* that the Kyrgyz leader committed. \$300 million of the \$2.15 billion Russian loan was explicitly charged with supporting the construction of a hydropower station. However, Bakiyev spent the \$300 million on projects that were meant to build up Bakiyev's domestic support and that were controlled by his own son.⁵³ He also allegedly entered into discussions with the U.S. about opening up a training centre where the Russians had wanted to place a second base in Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁴ In response, the Russians ceased support for the hydropower

⁴⁹ Ellen Barry, "Value to Big Powers May Not Save Kyrgyzstan," *New York Times*, June 18, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/19/world/asia/19memo.html?ref=kyrgyzstan>; Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 124.

⁵⁰ It should be noted that while the vote was overwhelmingly in favor of closure, there was opposition within the Kyrgyz government to the termination of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). Bakyt Beshimov, the leader of the opposition Social Democratic Party, opposed closing the airbase, saying, "Both the Manas Airbase and the Russian base at Kant ... were opened with the aim of countering terrorism and religious extremism... Guided exclusively by the national interests of Kyrgyzstan, [we] believed that the decision on the closure of the U.S. airbase is premature. We urge the Kyrgyz leadership to pursue a balanced foreign policy, jointly with the United States, NATO, Russia, the ShOS [Shanghai Cooperation Organization], and our friends in Central Asia to strengthen the collective security system" (Sergey Rasov, "Yankee, Go Home!" *BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit*, 25 February 2009). Human rights advocate Topchubek Turgunaliyev also opposed the closure, stating that relations would worsen not only with the United States, but also many other Western countries. Additionally, it was not only the SOFA with the United States that was threatened to be dropped: in April 2009, Bakiyev also signed legislation to cancel airbase access agreements with Australia, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, South Korea, Spain and Turkey. However, most of the rhetoric was aimed towards the United States. (Nichol, "Kyrgyzstan and the Status of the U.S. Manas Airbase.")

⁵¹ Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 125.

⁵² Alexander Artemyev and Ekaterina Savina, "Manas Is Not Going to Fight [Манас Не Будет Воевать]," *Gazeta.Ru*, January 11, 2011, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2011/11/01_a_3819030.shtml.

⁵³ Stephen Blank, "Moscow's Fingerprints in Kyrgyzstan's Storm," Analytical Article (Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, April 14, 2010), <http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12033>.

⁵⁴ Blank.

station. Putin also travelled to Kyrgyzstan and told then-Prime Minister Daniyar Usenov in a later-leaked conversation that the loan had been explicitly for the purpose of the hydroelectric facility and was conditional on closing Manas.⁵⁵ According to Bakiyev, in a conversation with Putin, the Russian leader expressed his and Medvedev's disappointment about Manas, allegedly saying, "This annoys us."⁵⁶

While drawing a direct connection is not currently possible, many believe that Russia had a hand in what followed: a revolution that overthrew Bakiyev's government.⁵⁷ In April 2010, protests broke out in the capital of Bishkek and other cities in Kyrgyzstan. Fuelled by frustration with Bakiyev's government, rising energy prices, a struggling economy, and more, after two days of large-scale unrest, Bakiyev fled to Kazakhstan and resigned. Kyrgyz politician Omurbek Tekebayev later told reporters, "Russia played its role in ousting Bakiyev. You've seen the level of Russia's joy when they saw that Bakiyev was gone."⁵⁸

Anti-Bakiyev sentiment had been brewing for some time, but it seems that Russian actions provoked these tensions further. Russian mass media staged an attack against Bakiyev in the weeks prior to his overthrow, inciting claims of corruption.⁵⁹ Russian online news sites posted a series of hard-hitting exposés accusing members of Bakiyev's family of skimming money from public coffers.⁶⁰ State-controlled Russian media outlets also spread rumours about nefarious activities at Manas, including claims that the airbase served as an American-sponsored hub for smuggling heroin, prostitutes, babies, and body parts.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Blank.

⁵⁶ "Bakiyev Blames Russia for Overthrow," *Al Jazeera*, April 23, 2010, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2010/04/20104239494248838.html>.

⁵⁷ Lauren Goodrich, "Kyrgyzstan and the Russian Resurgence" (Stratfor, April 13, 2010), <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/kyrgyzstan-and-russian-resurgence>; "Russia: Unrest as a Foreign Policy Tool," Assessments (Stratfor, April 28, 2010), <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russia-unrest-foreign-policy-tool>.

⁵⁸ Yuras Karmanau, "Russia Helped Rout Leaders: Kyrgyz Rebels," *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 10, 2010, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/russia-helped-rout-leaders-kyrgyz-rebels-20100409-ryuv.html>.

⁵⁹ Erica Marat, "Russian Mass Media Attack Bakiyev," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 7, no. 63 (April 1, 2010), <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-mass-media-attack-bakiyev/>; Blank, "Moscow's Fingerprints in Kyrgyzstan's Storm."

⁶⁰ Andrew E. Kramer, "Before Kyrgyz Uprising, Dose of Russian Soft Power," *The New York Times*, April 18, 2010, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/19/world/asia/19kyrgyz.html>.

⁶¹ Clifford J. Levy, "Kyrgyzstan: At the Crossroad of Empires, a Mouse Struts," *The New York Times*, July 25, 2009, sec. Week in Review, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/26/weekinreview/26levy.html>.

While increasing the distribution of media with a clear anti-Bakiyev, anti-Manas message, the Russians simultaneously defended freedom of information, something they are not wont otherwise to do. When Kyrgyz authorities blocked web sites that incited anti-Bakiyev sentiments, complaints came not only from non-governmental organizations and civil society but also from the Russian Foreign Ministry. This open support for opposition elites and free media could be a mimic of Western policies during the Colour Revolutions.⁶² It could also be a tactic to ensure that their message remains heard.

At the same time, there were also significant cyber-attacks in Kyrgyzstan prior to the so-called April Revolution of 2010.⁶³ While the source of the attacks is ultimately not determinable, many say that Russia was the culprit. In 2009, as much as 80 percent of Kyrgyz internet traffic to the West went offline due to a distributed denial of service attack.⁶⁴ The traffic for the attack came almost entirely from Russian networks controlled by former members of the Russian Business Network, a St. Petersburg-based internet service provider known to have freely rented network capacity to cybercriminals.⁶⁵ The direct draw is impossible to make, and some claim that Bakiyev himself ordered the attacks.⁶⁶ However, it is notable that Russia has been involved in other, similar attacks. For example, Russian hackers staged denial of service attacks on Georgian government websites during the Russo-Georgian conflict and in Estonia in 2007.⁶⁷

Moscow was also reportedly establishing contacts with the opposition forces that ultimately succeeded Bakiyev. In July 2009, the same month that Bakiyev concluded the base renewal agreement with the United States, Kyrgyz opposition leaders

⁶² Kramer, "Before Kyrgyz Uprising, Dose of Russian Soft Power."

⁶³ It should be noted that there appeared to be cyber attacks during the February 2005 Kyrgyz parliamentary election that stemmed from Ukraine, but there is no indication who ordered them ("Election Monitoring in Kyrgyzstan" (Open Net Initiative, April 15, 2005), <https://opennet.net/special/kg/>).

⁶⁴ Danny Bradbury, "Danny Bradbury Investigates the Cyberattack on Kyrgyzstan," *The Guardian*, February 5, 2009, sec. Technology, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2009/feb/05/kyrgyzstan-cyberattack-internet-access>; Nathan Hodge, "Russian 'Cyber Militia' Takes Kyrgyzstan Offline?," *Wired*, January 28, 2009, <https://www.wired.com/2009/01/cyber-militia-t/>.

⁶⁵ Bradbury, "Danny Bradbury Investigates the Cyberattack on Kyrgyzstan."

⁶⁶ Bradbury.

⁶⁷ Andrzej Kozłowski, "Comparative Analysis of Cyberattacks on Estonia, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan," *European Scientific Journal* 3 (February 2014): 9.

began to get audiences with leaders in Moscow, according to Aleksandr A. Knyazov, then director of a Russian-backed NGO in Bishkek, the CIS Institute.⁶⁸ This could be seen as a lesson learned from Georgia and Ukraine, with supporting evidence from a 2005 *Sputnik* article that points out that Russia keeping in contact with Akayev's opposition during the Tulip Revolution was a direct result of watching failure in the other two Colour Revolutions.⁶⁹

On 1 April 2010, just two weeks before Bakiyev's flight from the country and subsequent resignation, Moscow ended the preferred customs duties that Kyrgyzstan had been receiving on Russian gasoline and diesel exports. This had originally been scheduled as part of strengthening the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan Customs Union, but it easily could have been deferred or exempted. The conclusion of these preferred customs duties contributed to a hike in heating and electricity costs, one of the apparent triggers for the protests that led to Bakiyev's overthrow.⁷⁰ There were also reports⁷¹ of Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) agents on the ground prior to the revolution.⁷²

We do not have clear evidence that Russia was ultimately behind the ouster of Bakiyev, and it is unfair to only present the negative about Bakiyev. Overall, Bakiyev was not seen as uniquely pro-American or pro-Russian. Rather, he played both sides.⁷³ Both Russian and U.S. officials denied any Russian wrongdoing. At a press conference, Putin told reporters, "Neither Russia nor your humble servant, nor Russian officials have anything to do with these events." He continued, with language reminiscent of Chinese and Russian shared principles of non-interference in other nations' sovereign territories, "No matter what is going on there – it's

⁶⁸ Kramer, "Before Kyrgyz Uprising, Dose of Russian Soft Power."

⁶⁹ Vladimir Simonov, "Kyrgyzstan: A Piece in Central Asian Game of Domino," *Sputnik*, March 30, 2005, sec. Opinion, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/2005033039700822/>.

⁷⁰ David Trilling and Chinghiz Umetov, "Kyrgyzstan: Is Putin Punishing Bakiyev?," *EurasiaNet*, April 5, 2010, <https://eurasianet.org/s/kyrgyzstan-is-putin-punishing-bakiyev>.

⁷¹ Goodrich, "Kyrgyzstan and the Russian Resurgence."

⁷² It should be noted that the Russian government announced an official presence of FSB in the fall of 2010 to combat drug trafficking. (Ryskeldi Satke, "Russian Intelligence in Kyrgyzstan, Cold War Redux," *The Diplomat*, December 7, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/12/russian-intelligence-in-kyrgyzstan-cold-war-redux/>.)

⁷³ Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*.

Kyrgyzstan's domestic affair.⁷⁴ Medvedev also commented on the revolution, blaming it not on outside powers, as Russia had done in previous revolutions, but on the desire of the people: "In relation to the possibility of similar scenarios in ex-Soviet states or other countries— everything is possible in this world, if people are not happy with the authorities, if the authorities do not make efforts to support their people. This scenario could repeat anywhere when the authorities lose their connection with the people."⁷⁵

However, evidence points to Russian involvement, and whether or not Russia was the ultimate factor contributing to the revolution, it still clearly played some hand in the government change. What we see in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 is a Russia that tests an additional tool in its toolbox, revolutionary change, the means for which resides primarily in the media and support for the opposition – tools which Russia has accused the West of using continuously in other revolutions.⁷⁶ Following a sort of Western model of regime change, many of these same tactics would come back in Ukraine four years later. Moreover, these covert policies are still in practice today. There are reports of increasing media attacks on Kyrgyz political figures uncooperative to Russia.⁷⁷ Before the 2010 elections, for example, Russian-sponsored NTV showed a video of a sexual nature featuring a man that looked like the leader of one of the parties seen as pro-western, Ata-Meken. NTV claimed that man was Omurbek Tekebaev, and that he forced an employee of the Finance Ministry to participate in the sexual act.⁷⁸ In 2011, reports emerged of Russian intelligence (falsely) accusing the leader of the Ata-Zhurt party of running a drug trafficking ring.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ "Russia Not Involved in Kyrgyz Events - Putin," *Sputnik*, April 7, 2010, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/20100407158472404/>.

⁷⁵ Sputnik, "President Medvedev Hopes 'negative Scenario' in Kyrgyzstan Averted," accessed August 11, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/world/20100416158604224/>.

⁷⁶ "Russia," April 28, 2010.

⁷⁷ Chris Rickelton, "Kyrgyzstan: Russian 'Information Wars' Heating Up," *EurasiaNet*, April 16, 2014, <https://eurasianet.org/s/kyrgyzstan-russian-information-wars-heating-up>.

⁷⁸ "Russian media actively help Kyrgyz voters decide [Российские СМИ активно помогают киргизским избирателям определиться]," *Deutsche Welle*, October 6, 2010, <https://p.dw.com/p/PXSk>.

⁷⁹ Satke, "Russian Intelligence in Kyrgyzstan, Cold War Redux."

CONCLUSION

In Kyrgyzstan, then, we see Russia using a combination of tools to attempt to change the status quo. These include economic incentives, security cooperation, Russian military presence, an emphasis on a multilateral and regional approach, targeted efforts at the nation's popular opinion, media campaigns, support of existing opposition groups, and, perhaps, regime change. These tools tested in Kyrgyzstan cannot be directly tied to Russian actions that have been uncovered in Crimea. Furthermore, one of the questions is if this is different from previous Russian reactions or any great power attempts at gaining influence. The exceptionality of Russian tactics is a worthwhile conversation, and one better served elsewhere. This paper does not attempt to address this question. Instead, this paper has proven that the revisionist tactics that the world paid attention to in Ukraine began not in Georgia but earlier. Kyrgyzstan is an important case study in understanding Russian revisionist strategies and procedures.

When we discuss Russian actions in its near abroad, and in particular actions that seek to change the status quo to force countries into Russian influence, we cannot ignore Kyrgyzstan. Clearly, some of the tools used in Kyrgyzstan were also used in Crimea and elsewhere. If we fail to recognize for how long and in how many different locations Russia has been trying out tools that are meant to change the status quo in a country towards a more pro-Russian stance, we run the risk of seeing Crimea as a one-off revisionist event instead of a trend of Russian revisionism.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ I would like to thank UPTAKE for the opportunity to present this paper, and to the participants of the August 2018 UPTAKE Training School for their generous feedback. I also recognize the efforts of my friends and colleagues at the Institute for Security & Development Policy for their support and comments, and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation and the Swedish Women's Educational Association for their financial support.

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