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KYRGYZSTAN: Time to honour our commitments

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News from Southern Kyrgyzstan is getting worse and worse. As the world tries to figure out what to make of the revolution that overthrew the government headed by Kurmanbek Bakiyev, and that was born out of the ‘Tulip revolution’ - Central Asia’s own democratic revolution - the situation in the South of the country is deteriorating rapidly. Agitation by Bakiyev loyalists in the Kyrgyz areas of the Fergana Valley seem to be descending rapidly into all-out ethnic violence, mainly targeting the Uzbek minority community. As the new government struggles to consolidate its position, Kyrgyzstan may be on the brink of collapse, with potentially huge regional implications.

The new government’s leader, Roza Otunbayeva, has publicly called on Russia to help re-establish peace and security in the south of the country. Hundreds of Uzbeks are thought to have died and tens of thousands are reported to have crossed the border into Uzbekistan as refugees. The Kyrgyz government has so far shown restraint, despite the mounting pressure from its own public opinion. Russia, meanwhile, has not jumped into the crisis lightly and has instead tried to appease the parties involved and offered moderate support for the struggling government in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. The situation, however, is getting seriously out of control and foreign intervention might, in the end, be the best option to provide security for the thousands of people in southern Kyrgyzstan and beyond.

The crisis in Kyrgyzstan might very well prove a timely opportunity for the European Union to take an important step in its relations with Russia. Crisis management and the possibility of launching joint missions are two of the topics that are repeatedly brought up whenever EU-Russia security cooperation is discussed. These debates have, so far, focused on crises of the past (Kosovo for Russia, South Ossetia for the EU), rather than on the potential crises of the future. The current situation in Kyrgyzstan might well be the opportunity to take work on these issues beyond speculation – and the sooner the talks start, the better. The fragility of Kyrgyzstan’s institutions and its weak but relatively vibrant democracy together with the not-so-distant precedent of a bloody civil war in Tajikistan and the complex mix of populations in a complex territory - the Fergana Valley spans three countries (Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) - are important considerations, but human suffering in the current crisis should be the deciding factor for an immediate international reaction.

Russia is the best placed actor to intervene, the one with the capacities and the one that has already been invited. By joining a mission led by Russia, the EU would acknowledge the status and unique capabilities of this actor, and show a spirit of equal partnership. Since Russia has already participated in NATO-led (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and EU-led (Chad and the Indian Ocean) missions, it is now high time for the EU to prove its willingness to act under Russian command where Russia has the resources and the willingness to take the lead. Rather than letting Russia go it alone and then criticising it for trying to maintain its own 'sphere of influence', the EU should pre-empt any unilateralist tendency by offering co-operation as soon as possible. Other countries could be invited, in particular Ukraine, with its extensive peace-missions experience, its obvious advantages in interoperability and language skills, and its willingness to play a new role in European and Eurasian security issues as proved, for example, by its bid for the 2013 OSCE Chairmanship. The United States should also be a component of any international response: it has an interest in the region as a whole and already has a military base at Manas where an important part of its air operations for Afghanistan is based.

An ideal framework for such an operation would be the OSCE, an organisation that has been demonstrating its Central Asian dimension more than ever this year under the chairmanship of Kazakhstan. Having rightly criticised the Central Asian states' failure to adhere to their commitments in the field of democracy and human rights – with poor results, indeed – the OSCE must now show that it can still carry out its original task of providing security to even the most remote of its members. The track record in implementation and rapid reaction of the OSCE is not very impressive, nor are its efforts in conflict solving. But a concerted action between Russia and the EU with the support of the Central Asian governments and the push of the Kazakh chairmanship, might overcome these difficulties. Alternatively, the EU could join forces with the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Russia-led equivalent to NATO in Eurasia that also includes Armenia, Belarus and, crucially, Kyrgyzstan and its three direct Central Asian neighbours: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Given the Kyrgyz government's appeal for external help, other international forums, such as the UN, or an ad hoc arrangement accepted by the Bishkek authorities could also be workable.

Spain, presently holding the Presidency of the EU, has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to respond to Russian calls for a renewal of the security order in both Europe and Eurasia. Rather than simply keeping to general and speculative issues, it might now, in its last weeks in office, encourage the other EU member states, as well as the High Representative to prepare an offer for cooperation with Russia and other willing countries for a swift intervention in Kyrgyzstan under an OSCE or UN mandate, or as a joint operation (EU – Russia, EU –CSTO, or any other formula) with the consent of the government in Bishkek. Kyrgyzstan should not sound too remote to a European Union that has sent missions to places such as Aceh in Indonesia or to Central Africa - much less, considering that as OSCE member states, all EU member countries are committed to contributing to the security of all 56 OSCE members, including the Central Asian republics. Beyond our interest in bases for operations in Afghanistan and our greed for their energy resources, its time for Europeans to honour our security commitments with the Central Asian governments and citizens. Helping Kyrgyzstan restore stability will do exactly this, and might at the same time be the first step towards a new approach to security in Europe and Eurasia and a less confrontational relationship with Russia, that, in the end, will be of benefit to all European nations.