



EVALUATION OF THE 2017 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN KYRGYZSTAN

On October 15, 2017, Kyrgyzstan held its second peaceful power transfer leading to delegation of authority between the members of the Social Democratic Party, which continues to be the ruling party holding the most parliamentary seats. The competition between the two main candidates running for president resulted in a resounding first-round victory of Sooronbai Jeenbekov, the former prime minister and the chosen candidate of outgoing President of Kyrgyzstan Almazbek Atambayev, while his main opponent Omurbek Babanov, the former prime minister and the leader of the opposition Respublika Party, came second. In fact, despite accusations of foul play from both sides, arrests, pressure on the media and other campaign violations, the recent elections in Kyrgyzstan offered a real political struggle and choice, which made it hard to predict the election results. There was no guarantee that the ruling party's candidate would win the elections with an overwhelming majority. Both leading contenders, until the last minute, expected to obtain a majority of votes, which is an unprecedented situation for Central Asia. Indeed, Kyrgyzstan has had a turbulent political history since becoming independent in 1991. First Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev was overthrown in the 2005 Tulip Revolution, while his successor Kurmanbek Bakiyev was ousted in 2010. As a result, until recently, the only example of a peaceful power transit in the country was the post-revolution elections won by Almazbek Atambayev in 2011 following the brief interim presidency of Roza Otunbaeva.

According to the new Constitution developed under the interim administration and approved by the referendum in June 2010, any Kyrgyz citizen who is above the age of 35 and under the age of 70, fluent in the state language and has been living in Kyrgyzstan for at least 15 years in aggregate has the right to run for presidency (Article 62). The same person cannot be elected as the president twice to serve a six-year term (Article 61). As a result, incumbent President Almazbek Atambayev was barred from running for a second term. Since the number of candidates for president is not limited (Article 62), and the right to nominate candidates belongs to both citizens through self-nomination and political parties, there were 59 people who had declared their intention to run for presidency. However, after the completion of the necessary registration process, which includes the state language exam and the submission of at least 30,000 signatures in support, the Central Election Commission (CEC) shortened the final list of candidates to 13 people, including three former prime ministers. For comparison, in 2011, 83 candidates submitted applications to run for presidency, but only 16 were

approved by the CEC. Two candidates, namely Kamchibek Tashiyev and Bakyt Torobayev, withdrew from the elections by submitting applications of their own volition. Since their withdrawal occurred after the ballots were printed, in accordance with Article 30 of the constitutional law on presidential and parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan, their names were crossed out from the ballots. In fact, presidential candidate Azimbek Beknazarov also announced his withdrawal from the 2017 presidential race, leaving 10 candidates to run on the election day. However, his name remained on the ballot since he did not submit an official application.

It was expected that there would be a close runoff between Sooronbai Jeenbekov and Omurbek Babanov. However, according to the preliminary results of the presidential elections published by the CEC, Jooronbai Jeenbekov, a 58-year-old political ally of incumbent President Almazbek Atambaev, gained 54.28%, or 919,654, of votes, while his main opponent Omurbek Babanov, a 47-year-old wealthy entrepreneur, was the second leading candidate with 33.41%, or 566,188, of votes. Nevertheless, the gap between the top two leading candidates appears to narrow in comparison with the 2011 presidential election results with Almazbek Atambaev achieving an almost 50% advantage (62.52% vs. 14.77%) over his nearest rival. Other three leaders among the candidates include Adakhan Madumarov (6.42%, or 110,174, of votes), Temir Sariyev (2.54%, or 43,157, of votes), and Talatbek Masadykov (0.63%, or 10,728, of votes). The "against all" option received nearly 0.72%, or 12,114, of votes.

The turnout during the presidential elections reached 55.93%, meaning that 1,692,423 voters out of 3,025,770 million people who were eligible to vote took part in the elections at 2,375 polling stations. It appears that despite the growth of the population from 5.5 million in 2011 to 6.1 in 2017 the voter turnout, as the percentage of those registered, was lower than at the 2011 presidential elections where 1,858,632 out of 3,032,666 registered voters participated in the voting process. This may be due to the introduction of the technology of biometric verification of voters, which was approved in 2014 and tested during the 2015 parliamentary elections.

According to the current Kyrgyz election legislation, citizens could not be included in voter lists without passing the biometric registration in the Unified State Population Register (Article 14). After a voter's identity is verified by polling officials, he/she gets a special printed cheque, which should be given to another polling official in return for a ballot. If his/her identity is not confirmed, a voter is not allowed to

vote (Article 31). Ballots are automatically counted by precinct count optical scan (PCOS) machines. During the recent parliamentary elections, there were cases when voters could not find themselves in the lists or could not vote because of technical failures of identification equipment. According to the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe report, in 3% of polling stations ballot scanners had to be replaced due to equipment failures. Moreover, a significant number of Kyrgyz citizens, mainly those residing abroad, did not undergo the biometric registration and was therefore unable to exercise their right to vote.

According to Almaz Asanbaev, Deputy Chairperson of the State Migration Service of Kyrgyzstan, in 2017 over 710,000 Kyrgyz citizens work abroad, including 616,000 in Russia, 30,000 in Kazakhstan and Turkey each, and 15,000 in South Korea. However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan informed that only 18,580 of voters staying abroad were registered at the consulates. As a result, the vast majority of labor migrants working in Russia and other countries could not vote because they did not submit biometric data and failed to register with a relevant Kyrgyz embassy or consulate in time.

It is worth mentioning that despite intense competition neither of the leading candidates showed intention to change Kyrgyzstan's geopolitical course, with the country firmly in Russia's political and economic orbit combined with the membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. In fact, the recent changes made in the constitution have weakened the office of the president in favor of the Parliament and the prime minister. Therefore, presidential powers in influencing the country's foreign policy and determining priorities in trade and defense will be limited by the Parliament, which makes it difficult for President-elect Jeenbekov to significantly change the geopolitical landmarks shaped under Atambayev's six-year term even if he wanted to.

It should be concluded that the incumbent president invested great efforts in Jeenbekov's victory and even accused Kazakhstan of attempting to influence the elections results, which led to the rise in tensions with Astana. As a result, it could be expected that the incoming president together with recently appointed Prime Minister Sapar Isakov would carry on in Atambayev's footsteps searching for opportunities to improve relations with the closest neighbor. However, there is still a risk that the political tandem of Jeenbekov and Isakov will not work properly being influenced by some third power and creating potential for competition and conflict.

Politics, Foreign Affairs and Security

- During their official visit to Tbilisi, Defense Minister of Azerbaijan, Colonel General Zakir Hasanov, and Chief of the General Staff of Turkey, General Hulusi Akar, discussed with Chief of the General Staff of Georgia, Major General Vladimer Chachibaia, the development of cooperation in the trilateral format and the role of armed forces in ensuring regional stability. The sides also exchanged views on the implementation of practical activities in ensuring the security of regional projects.
- During his official visit to Astana, Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan Sapar Isakov discussed with his Kazakh counterpart Bakytjan Sagintayev border issues, including transport, phytosanitary and veterinary control, customs and tax administration. The sides also agreed on creation of a working group co-chaired by the first deputy prime ministers of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to prepare a joint road-map for bilateral economic relations.
- During his official visit to Tehran, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan Abdulaziz Kamilov together with his Iranian counterpart Javad Zarif signed a cooperation plan between the Foreign Ministries of the two countries for 2018-2019.
- During his official visit to Ashgabat, State Secretary and Deputy Foreign Minister of Russia Grigory Karasin discussed with Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov prospects for further cooperation in the political, trade, economic and cultural spheres. The parties also expressed their commitment to further expanding relations within the framework of international organizations.
- During the fifth meeting of the Ministers of Justice of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization member states held in Tashkent, the parties discussed further intensification of cooperation to ensure rule of law, protect the rights and legitimate interests of citizens, as well as exchange of relevant experience.
- According to Defense Ministry of Kazakhstan, about 1,500 troops, 200 pieces of armament, military and special hardware and over 25 aircraft from Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan

took part in the Unbreakable Brotherhood-2017 military exercises of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) at the Ilyisky training ground in Kazakhstan. The drills are aimed to practice the post-conflict settlement involving CSTO peace-keeping forces.

- According to the spokesman of Russia's Pacific Fleet, Captain 2nd Rank Nikolai Voskresensky, the Indra-2017 Russia-India drills took place in Vladivostok. It was noted that the 2017 joint Indo-Russian military drill included army, navy, and air force elements for the first time.

Economy, Finance and Energy

- According to the state-owned Russian gas producer, Gazprom, more than 1,095 kilometers of the Power of Siberia natural gas pipeline, or 50.7% of the total length from the Chayandinskoye gas field to the city of Blagoveshchensk, has been constructed.
- According to Federal Service for Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance of Russia, Rosselkhozadzor, the country announced about its plans to authorize deliveries of agricultural products from 24 pomegranate and 7 aubergine planting companies from Turkey, which conform to Russian requirements, starting from October 30, 2017.
- According to Finance Ministry of Azerbaijan, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) allocated a \$500 million loan for the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) project development to the Azerbaijani state-owned company, Southern Gas Corridor. The loan is issued for a period of 18 years, and is guaranteed by the government of Azerbaijan.
- According to the new draft law on the state budget for 2018 of Azerbaijan, the revenues and expenditures of the state budget in the country are forecast at 20.127 billion manats (\$11.85 billion) and 20.905 billion manats (\$12.31 billion), respectively. The maximum deficit of the state budget was determined at the level of 778.7 million manats (\$458.48 million).
- According to the Government of Azerbaijan, in 2018 the country's real GDP growth is forecasted at 1.5% or 69.4 billion manats (\$40.86 billion). At the same time, 47.6 billion manats

(\$28.03 billion) of the GDP will account for the non-oil sector, which will grow to 2.9% next year.

- According to the Kazakh national railway company, Kazakhstan Temir Zholy, the first million tons of cargo was sent to the Azerbaijan's port of Baku from Kazakhstan's port of Kuryk on the Caspian coast. It was noted that Kazakh grain, coal, oil products, fertilizers, chemicals, as well as transit cargo coming from China, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, were exported via the Kuryk ferry complex.

Society and Culture

- According to Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies of Azerbaijan, the country is negotiating with relevant authorities of Turkey, Iran, Qatar and Ukraine on the mutual recognition of electronic signatures. It was noted that currently, work is underway to develop e-services and e-commerce in the country with the support of the European Union (EU), and as part of this project, standards are being prepared in the field of the EU regulation on electronic identification and trust services.
- According to Igor Komarov, the Head of State Space Corporation of Russia, Roscosmos, the Russian side received an agreement in principle from National Aeronautics and Space Administration to jointly develop the Deep Space Gateway lunar program with is intended to create a near-Moon platform in 2024-2026.
- The United Nations Development Program together with the government of Uzbekistan launched a \$1.2 million project on public administration reforms and digital transformation for 2017-2020 aimed at assisting Uzbekistan in carrying out reforms in the field of public administration and providing quality public services.
- According to the Statistics Committee of Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan, as of 1st September 2017, the population of the country amounted to 18.741 million, which is 232,500 people or 1.3% more than as of 1st September 2016. It was reported that the urban and rural populations reached 10,367,400 (57.4%) and 7,706,700 (42.6%) people, respectively.