

# Discourses of danger and the ‘war on terror’: gothic Kyrgyzstan and the collapse of the Akaev regime

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**Abstract.** Critical international relations theory has given too little attention to regionally specific manifestations of discourses of the ‘war on terror’. Using Richard Devetak’s concept of a ‘gothic scene of international relations’, this article considers the final months of the regime of Kyrgyzstan’s former President, Askar Akaev. Akaev evoked a gothic fantasy of a gloomy Kyrgyzstan terrorised by monsters recognisable from President Bush’s nightmares, peculiarly Kyrgyz monsters, and obscene hybrids. That America was portrayed as a monster by an undemocratic regime fighting a desperate rearguard action highlights ironies both in Devetak’s theory and in the international relations of Central Asia. We therefore suggest that attention needs to be paid to a gothic *geography* of international relations.

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## Introduction

The labeling of George W. Bush’s hyper-militarised foreign policy as ‘the war on terror’ re-imagines the terrain over which US policies and a host of cognate conflicts are contested.<sup>1</sup> However, whilst critical analysis has, quite properly, focused on the outcomes of these processes in terms of the legitimisation of unsavoury foreign policy methods or objectives, geopolitical modes of fantasy themselves have received too little scholarly consideration.

In a provocative and original essay published in this journal, Richard Devetak has proposed that George W. Bush’s ‘war on terror’ is a revival of the ‘gothic scene of international relations’, an imagination of the world as haunted by ineffable yet potent monsters and ghosts existing in the shadows of Enlightenment. We suggest that former President Askar Akaev of Kyrgyzstan, in the months leading up to his ouster in the ‘tulip revolution’ of March 2005,<sup>2</sup> evoked a gothic scene in his

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, ‘Are we in war? Do we have an enemy?’, *London Review of Books*, 24:10 (2002).

<sup>2</sup> For a summary and analysis of the events leading up to Akaev’s fall, see Erica Marat, *The Tulip Revolution: Kyrgyzstan One Year After* (Washington D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, 2006).

country. This was a fantasy of a darkening Kyrgyzstan, terrorised by monsters and ghosts recognisable from Bush's nightmares, as well as peculiarly Kyrgyz monsters, and obscene hybrids of the two. Although Bush's post September 11 rhetoric had facilitated the imagination of a gothic scene in Kyrgyzstan, ironically, the spectral presence shadowing all Akaev's phantoms was the US which, according to Akaev, had, in hunting monsters, become one itself.

This article is not an attempt to document the political shenanigans of the regime as it tried to cling to power,<sup>3</sup> but rather a consideration of the discursive particularities of this effort. It thus has two purposes, one theoretical and one empirical. The first is to contribute towards a greater theoretical understanding of how this 'gothic scene' translates into non-Western contexts.<sup>4</sup> Critical international relations theory has largely been derived from Western case studies, and tends to present discourses of danger as stable over time. However, danger operates in different ways at different times and in different places, and Kyrgyzstan provides a fascinating and unusual example of this that refines the general theoretical understanding. We thus suggest that there is a gothic *geography* of international relations. The second purpose is to use this approach to provide new insights into the final months of the Akaev regime. It examines how representations of danger were produced, circulated and contested within Kyrgyzstan, and shows how they worked in domestic struggles.<sup>5</sup>

## **Background – critical theories of international relations**

It has been well established within critical international relations theories that 'foreign policy' is not merely the external orientation of pre-established states, but, as David Campbell has argued, is a set of boundary-producing practices central to the constitution, production and maintenance of political identity.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, whereas the realist paradigm assumes the state as a given entity and asks 'how can it be secured?', critical security studies take 'discourses of danger' and inquires, 'what do they do, how do they work, for whom, and with what consequences?'<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> As Wilson does in his insightful study of attempts to prevent Ukraine's 'Orange Revolution', Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (London: Yale University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> This article focuses on government discourse; for a consideration of the appropriateness of the application of critical security studies to Kyrgyzstan with reference to anti-government movements, see Claire Wilkinson, 'The Copenhagen School on tour in Kyrgyzstan: is securitization theory useable outside Europe?', *Security Dialogue*, 38:1 (2007), pp. 5–25.

<sup>5</sup> For this reason, and due to the constraints of space, the article is restricted to a discussion of the period up until the fall of President Akaev. Further light would no-doubt be thrown on this period if post-revolutionary discourse was also investigated, but that is beyond the bounds of this study. It is hoped that the authors, or other researchers, will attempt this in the future.

<sup>6</sup> David Campbell, *Writing Security: US Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); see also Simon Dalby, *Creating the Second Cold War: The Discourse of Politics* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Jutta Weldes, Mark Laffey, Hugh Gusterson, and Raymond Duvall, 'Introduction: Constructing insecurity', in Jutta Weldes, Mark Laffey, Hugh Gusterson and Raymond Duvall (eds), *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 1–33.

Although this approach has largely been developed with reference to the US, it has been applied to other countries, too.<sup>8</sup>

The form of critical international relations theory associated with the above work is illuminating, powerful, and flexible. However, its sober approach and utilitarian assumptions about discourse risk obscuring the fact that danger is compelling, palpable, dramatic, and the abode of the imagination. Therefore, we find Devetak's approach here to be a refreshing departure. Devetak contends that George W. Bush's post 11 September 2001 discourses of 'terrorism' and 'rogue states' are a marked revival of the gothic narrative in US literature and politics.<sup>9</sup> Examining political, philosophical and literary texts of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, he considers the gothic as a reaction to rationalism, as Enlightenment's 'other' lurking in the space of shadows created by the light of reason, a space haunted by terror and the sublime.

For Bush, Saddam Hussein was a 'monster' and 'madman', who had turned Iraq into a 'house of horrors', a 'mansion of gloom'. Devetak contends that this description of set is reminiscent of classic gothic novels such as Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, set in decaying, ruined, mansions heavy with fear, fatality, and dread.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, his 'ghost' was Osama bin Laden and his *Al-Qaeda* group. More than a criminal or terrorist network, they were known only from recorded messages or video-clips, lacked corporeality, and were characterised by power, shapelessness, and darkness.<sup>11</sup> Bush's 'worst case scenario' that was central to his justification of war on Iraq in 2003 was of Saddam Hussein supplying Osama bin Laden with 'weapons of mass destruction' a gothic scene of a hybrid monster and ghost.<sup>12</sup>

Devetak ends with a warning. Speaking three years after the publication of Mary Shelley's archetypal gothic novel, *Frankenstein*, where the eponymous scientist pursued his bloody invention around the world, future USA President John Quincy Adams admonished America to 'not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy.'<sup>13</sup> In 1996, neoconservative writers William Kristol and Robert Kagan, recalling Adam's admonition, said that America must not 'leave monsters on the loose, ravaging and pillaging to their hearts' content'. No, 'America has the capacity to contain or destroy many of the world's monsters, most of which can be found without much searching', and has a moral responsibility to do so.<sup>14</sup> This mood, suggests Devetak, informed President Bush's aggressive foreign policy, but with disastrous results: the abrogation of international law, the chicanery and deceit in the deliberation about invading Iraq, and the scandals of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.<sup>15</sup> Devetak concludes that whilst Bush's Gothic narrative on international relations was intended to reinforce an image of American moral

<sup>8</sup> For the application of this theoretical approach in Asian contexts, see Roland Bleiker, 'Divided Korea: Toward a Culture of Reconciliation' (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Sankaran Krishna, 'Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the Question of Nationhood' (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Simon Philpott, 'Fear of the dark: Indonesia and the Australian national imagination', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 55:3 (2001) pp. 371–88.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Devetak, 'The Gothic scene of international relations: ghosts, monsters, terror and the sublime after September 11', *Review of International Studies*, 31 (2005), pp. 621–43.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 625, 634–36.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 636–37.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 639.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, p. 640.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 641.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 642.

purpose, it has merely demonstrated the validity of Nietzsche's insight that 'He who fights monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster.'<sup>16</sup>

### *Discourses of danger in Kyrgyzstan*

Although realism remains the dominant paradigm in which Central Asia's international relations have been considered, a body of literature that critically examines discourses of danger has recently begun to emerge.<sup>17</sup> These studies have included examinations of the portrayal of Central Asia as dangerous by foreigners, including academics,<sup>18</sup> development agencies,<sup>19</sup> think tanks,<sup>20</sup> and film makers.<sup>21</sup> Traditional topics such as resource and ethnic conflicts<sup>22</sup> and peace-building<sup>23</sup> have also been considered. The intersection of international discourses of danger generated by the US's 'war on terrorism' with local articulations of danger has also received attention.<sup>24</sup> Other inquiries have highlighted discrepancies between discourses of danger and both genuine threat levels<sup>25</sup> and the actual policing of threats by states.<sup>26</sup>

Megoran has argued that in the 2000 presidential elections, whereas discourses of danger were the staple of both opposition forces within Kyrgyzstan and the leaders of neighbouring states, Akaev eschewed using them.<sup>27</sup> Instead of presenting his state as radically threatened, Akaev claimed that it was experiencing a cultural and economic renaissance, and was safe from external attack.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, what

<sup>16</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, p. 643.

<sup>17</sup> An excellent place to start is the special edition of *Central Asian Survey*, Chad Thompson and John Heathershaw (eds), 'Discourses of Danger in Central Asia', *Central Asian Survey*, 24:1 (2005), pp. 1–96.

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Bichel, 'Contending Theories of Central Asia: The Virtual Realities of Realism, Critical IR and the Internet', *Ph.D. Dissertation*, Political Science, University of Hawaii.

<sup>19</sup> Nick Megoran, 'Preventing conflict by building civil society: post-development theory and a Central Asian–UK policy success story', *Central Asian Survey*, 24:1 (2005), pp. 83–96.

<sup>20</sup> Nick Megoran, 'Calming the Ferghana Valley experts'. A review essay of Nancy Lubin, Barnett Rubin, and the Centre for Preventative Action, *Calming the Ferghana Valley: Development and Dialogue in the Heart of Central Asia* (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 1999); *Central Asia Monitor*, 5 (2000), pp. 20–25.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Bichel, 'Air Force One: The cinematic erasure of Central Asia', *Central Asia Monitor*, 2 (1998), pp. 16–19.

<sup>22</sup> Christine Bichsel, 'In search of harmony: repairing infrastructure and social relations in the Ferghana Valley', *Central Asian Survey*, 24:1 (2005), pp. 53–66; Madeleine Reeves, 'Locating danger: *konfliktologiya* and the search for fixity in the Ferghana Valley borderlands', *Central Asian Survey*, 24:1 (2005), pp. 67–81.

<sup>23</sup> John Heathershaw, 'The Paradox of Peacebuilding: Peril, Promise, and Small Arms in Tajikistan', *Central Asian Survey*, 24:1 (2005).

<sup>24</sup> Stuart Horsman, 'Themes in official discourses on terrorism in Central Asia', *Third World Quarterly*, 26:1 (2005), pp. 199–213; Nicole J. Jackson, 'The Trafficking of Narcotics, Arms and Humans in Central Asia: (Mis)perceptions, policies and realities', *Central Asian Survey*, 24:1 (2005).

<sup>25</sup> S. Neil MacFarlane and Stina Torjesen, 'Distortions in the Discourse of Danger: The Case of Small Arms Proliferation in Kyrgyzstan', *Central Asian Survey*, 24:1 (2005).

<sup>26</sup> Nick Megoran, Gaël Raballand, and Jérôme Bouyjou, 'Performance, representation, and the economics of border control in Uzbekistan', *Geopolitics*, 10:4 (2005), pp. 712–42.

<sup>27</sup> Nick Megoran, 'Contested geographies of globalisation in Kyrgyzstan: de/re-territorialisation?', *Journal of Central Asian Studies*, 6:2 (2002), pp. 13–29; Nick Megoran, 'The critical geopolitics of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley boundary dispute, 1999–2000', *Political Geography*, 23:6 (2004), pp. 731–64; Nick Megoran, 'The critical geopolitics of danger in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 23:3 (2005), pp. 555–80.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*; see also Nick Megoran, 'The critical geopolitics of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley boundary dispute, 1999–2000', *Political Geography*, 23:6 (2004), pp. 731–64.

Akaev touted as his 'Silk Road Doctrine', basically a statement of a forward looking, multicultural, Kyrgyzstan benefiting from slotting itself into processes of economic, cultural, scientific and geopolitical 'globalisation', was the mainstay of his bullish assessment of the security of the state.<sup>29</sup>

The so-called 'coloured revolutions' that took place in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004 had profound implications for Kyrgyzstan in 2005. Crucial parliamentary and presidential elections were scheduled in an atmosphere of mounting political animosity and confrontation. The increasingly beleaguered government of then President Askar Akaev saw the 'coloured revolutions' as sinister Western-backed unconstitutional coups deceitfully dressed up as 'democracy', a crisis of statehood and national security that he railed against in his book *Thinking of the Future With Optimism*.<sup>30</sup> Opposition politicians, however, began to moot the possibility of Kyrgyzstan staging its own 'tulip revolution' if the constitutional court did not act, as they saw it, to create the conditions for fair elections.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, in March 2005 Akaev fled the country after weeks of protests at perceived election irregularities culminated in a dramatic mass storming of the White House in Bishkek. As the tension grew, the government increasingly resorted to the language of *danger* to delegitimise its opponents with what we can, with hindsight, see as its increasingly desperate and ill-fated attempt to remain in power. This was a wholesale reversal of his rejection of such a rhetorical strategy at the previous election. Furthermore, in contrast to the more recognisably ex-Marxist ideologically-loaded discourses of danger favoured by Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov,<sup>32</sup> Akaev's was, as we shall now go on to argue, markedly Gothic.

Before proceeding, it is fitting to consider whether it is in fact appropriate to use a literary form that emerged in eighteenth century Northern Europe to discuss politics in twenty-first century Kyrgyzstan. There are two ways this move can be legitimised. The first is by considering the historical geography of the Gothic form. Devetak demonstrates the interconnectedness of the reading culture of England and the US that ensured familiarity with the gothic amongst American publics. Can the same be said of Kyrgyzstan? The Kyrgyz novel, as such, is a twentieth form as the Kyrgyz were largely non-literate until that period: their flowering achievement was the oral epic *Manas*, claimed to be the longest poem in world literature.<sup>33</sup> Thus it is unlikely that any direct Gothic evidence can be traced in the Kyrgyz literary tradition. However, as Simpson has argued, the Gothic made an enormous impact in Russia and on the Russian literary scene – to the extent that the perceived nineteenth century habit of Russian authors of copying the English gothic style was regularly decried – although one that is scarcely recognised

<sup>29</sup> Nick Megoran, 'Contested geographies of globalisation in Kyrgyzstan: de-/re-territorialisation?', *Journal of Central Asian Studies*, 6:2 (2002), pp. 13–29.

<sup>30</sup> Askar Akaev, *Dumaia o budushem s optimizmom (Thinking Of the Future With Optimism)*, (Moskva: Mejdunarodnye otnoshenia, 2004). For a similar analysis by Uzbekistan's President, Islam Karimov, see Islom Karimov, *O'zbek Halqi Hech Qachon, Hech Kimga Qaram Bo'lmaidi (The Uzbek Nation Will Never be Dependent upon Anyone)*, (Tashkent: O'zbekiston, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> In particular, they petitioned the court to bar Akaev from running for a fourth term in office. The constitution mandated two terms maximum, but Akaev had already served three.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew F. March, 'From Leninism to Karimovism: hegemony, ideology, and authoritarian legitimation', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 19:4 (2003), pp. 307–36; Andrew F. March, 'State ideology and the legitimation of authoritarianism: the case of post-Soviet Uzbekistan', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 8:2 (2003), pp. 209–32.

<sup>33</sup> See below, footnotes 72 to 82.

today.<sup>34</sup> That enduring lack of recognition is evidenced both by the almost complete absence of the discussion of the gothic in general texts on the history of Russian literature,<sup>35</sup> and likewise in accounts that present themselves as general studies of the 'Gothic' to overlook Russia.<sup>36</sup> For example, Hogle's *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* not only considers the English novel, but has chapters devoted to French and German, Scottish and Irish, American, and Caribbean Gothic – but not Russian.<sup>37</sup> The highly Sovietised elite around President Askar Akaev, as well as a substantial section of the educated Kyrgyz population, would almost certainly have been familiar with classical Gothic themes and styles through Kyrgyzstan's incorporation into the Soviet Union. However, the lack of basic research about the English-Russian movement of ideas highlighted above, let alone the onwards movement to Central Asia, means that this cannot be answered definitively at the moment. Nonetheless, there is significant potential for specific histories and geographies of contact to be identified.

On a second level, the exact form of Devetak's appropriation of the Gothic should be observed. He pays little attention to the historical geographies of the genre,<sup>38</sup> and does not discuss other literary forms that could have informed the political imaginations that he identifies, such as the Fantastic or the Byronic. It appears that that whilst his discussion began with the specific tradition of the 'Gothic', it was carried on at a more general level of the 'gothic' as a set of sensitivities and imaginations that can be said to have characterised the Gothic novel but today have a more general purchase. Devetak could be criticised for this lack of specificity, but his usage of the term in this way is not without precedent and is arguably illuminating. For both of these reasons, we thus consider that it is legitimate to use Devetak's term in the Kyrgyz context.

### **Discourses of danger in the government press**

This article considers how discourses of danger were 'managed'<sup>39</sup> by the government between December 2004 and the ouster of Akaev on 24 March 2005. It is largely based on a study of the pro-government press, particularly the newspapers

<sup>34</sup> Mark S. Simpson, *The Russian Gothic Novel and Its British Antecedents* (Ohio: Slavica Publishers, 1986). See also Neil Cornwell, *Gothic-Fantastic in Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999).

<sup>35</sup> For example, John Fennell (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973); Malcolm V. Jones and Robin Feuer Miller (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to the Classic Russian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998); Charles A. Moser (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature. Revised Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Neil Cornwell (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>36</sup> Such as Fred Botting, *Gothic The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 1996); Jerrold E. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> Jerrold E. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>38</sup> A move typical of discussion of the Gothic, as argued by Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>39</sup> Galip Isen, 'Discourse of Evil: Speaking Terrorism to Silence', *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture*; 3:3 (2003), p. 2. See also Martha Feldman, *Strategies for Interpreting Qualitative Data* (London: Sage, 1995).

*Kyrgyz Tuusu* and *Erkin Too*.<sup>40</sup> The articles considered include both editorials and news pieces, published in organs that receive state funding and represent the government line. The former paper provides extensive coverage of government activities and contains the texts of new laws and presidential decrees, and the latter runs more intellectual analysis of Kyrgyz politics. They were selected for a number of reasons. They act as mouthpieces for the regime and fully supported the former President and government. They are published in the Kyrgyz language and so are accessible to precisely those people who represented the greatest threat to Akaev, politically engaged first-language Kyrgyz (rather than Russian) speakers who may have been participating in the protests that were mushrooming around the republic. They are also national in reach, primarily political, and subsidised to give an advantage over private or commercial independent/opposition press in their accessibility to the poor. The government-affiliated press constantly reported and elaborated the main themes of speeches made by the then president.

The period covered by this study, December 2004 to March 2005, was dominated by voting in rounds of the parliamentary elections. Following the elections, there was speculation that the country was 'on the verge' of an uprising similar to Ukraine's Orange Revolution of December 2004. The opposition alleged that the government had prevented prominent politicians, including leading opposition figure Roza Otunbayeva, from running in the elections.<sup>41</sup> In direct response, on 4 March protesters began to assemble in Jalalabad to denounce the elections and voice frustration over Akaev's policies. Demonstrators proceeded to peacefully occupy the city's main administration building, where they remained for the time being. These initial protests focused on local issues and were conducted by supporters of particular candidates who were reportedly suffered from fraud during the February elections. The runoff elections of 13 March brought more cases of corruption. Fierce disputes arose as candidates unfavourably disposed to President Akaev found their registrations rejected, or alleged that polls they lost were rigged in favour of pro-Akaev candidates, including two of Akaev's own children.

Candidates from 40 of the total 75 electoral districts who did not win a majority in the first round on 27 February returned for a runoff.<sup>42</sup> Among the more notable candidates were Bermet Akayeva, Askar Akayev's daughter and informal leader of the pro-governmental *Alga Kyrgyzstan* party, as well as well-known representatives from the opposition, including Adakhmad Madumarov and Omurbek Tekebayev. Akaev's son, Aidar Akaev, secured his seat in the first round and did not stand on 13 March. A number of violations in Bishkek's University district (Bermet Akayeva ran this constituency) were reported, which

<sup>40</sup> We have restricted analysis to the pro-government press for two reasons. Firstly, Megoran's study of the same theme at the previous elections (1999/2000) highlighted the government's steadfast refusal to adopt discourses of danger, an entirely different strategy to the opposition, and also an unusual example in the literature on discourses of danger elsewhere. It was thus considered appropriate and interesting to focus on the government story five years on. Secondly, the volume of data generated makes it impossible to adequately consider both government and opposition press in the same article. Further research is necessary to elucidate the opposition's counter narratives, but that is beyond the scope of this text.

<sup>41</sup> Matthew Fuhrmann, 'A Tale of Two Social Capitals. Revolutionary Collective Action in Kyrgyzstan', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 53:10 (2006) pp. 16–29.

<sup>42</sup> Erica Marat, *The Tulip Revolution: Kyrgyzstan One Year After. March 15, 2005–March 24, 2006*. (Washington D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, 2006), p. 9.

were committed by competing candidates and Central Electoral Commission members. In particular, people were transported to polling stations in groups, making it nearly impossible for independent observers to inspect their documents. Many students were ordered to vote for Akaev's daughter, who was a candidate for parliament, under the threat of expulsion.<sup>43</sup>

Foreign media sources covered the elections closely. Exit polls were conducted and election procedures were observed by foreign and local monitors, whose reports were often critical of officialdom. Election observers from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) declared that the election was not conducted in a just manner. As disputes about procedures and results spilled out from the courts into the wider public sphere, pickets, demonstrations, and road-blockades became commonplace.

On 15 March opposition figures in Jalalabad convened a *kurultai* (congress) that lasted for three hours and was attended by more than 1,000 delegates and roughly 10,000 supporters.<sup>44</sup> Kurultais were also planned for Osh and Talas provinces. By 18 March the protests had spread to Osh, Kyrgyzstan's 'southern capital'. In Osh, demonstrators stormed the city's administration building after peacefully demonstrating outside for ten days.

In the meantime in Uzgen, a city of 40,000 people located 20 miles south-east of Jalalabad, protesters peacefully seized the city hall, forcing the authorities to reinstate an opposition member of parliament, Adakhan Madumarov.<sup>45</sup> Within a few days, protesters had seized the buildings of the National Security Service, the provincial internal affairs administration, the city prosecutor's offices, and the local airport. Police refrained from using force, reportedly to avoid causing casualties.

By 23 March, the demonstrations reached the northern part of the country, which was typically regarded as Akaev's 'stronghold'.<sup>46</sup> In the town of Kochkor, located in Naryn oblast, roughly 400 demonstrators took over the post office, the telegraph office, and the district administration building. Similarly in the northern city of Talas, 2,000 people gathered in front of the provincial administration building. In each case, the people had the same demands as protesters in Osh and Jalalabad – the resignation of Akaev and his government and the formation of a government of 'popular trust'.

Around the same time, the demonstrations spread to Bishkek. Between 500 and 1,000 people gathered in the centre of the capital to stage an anti-Akaev rally.<sup>47</sup> Initially, protesters did not know what to expect. Many simply planned to remain in the streets of Bishkek until Akaev stepped down. His eventual successor, Kurmanbek Bakiev, later admitted that political leaders of the opposition had no idea that the protests of 24 March in Bishkek would end with the collapse of Akaev's administration.<sup>48</sup> On that day, in less than an hour, a crowd of demonstrators seized the Kyrgyz White House in Bishkek, opposition leader Felix Kulov was freed from jail and President Askar Akaev reportedly fled the country. Taken together, these three events signified the collapse of the Akaev regime.

<sup>43</sup> Matthew Fuhrmann, *ibid.*, note 41.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

For the first time, the government simultaneously suppressed several newspapers in Kyrgyzstan, meaning state-financed mass media dominated the election coverage. The only independent radio station broadcasting throughout the country, Azattyk, was closed on 24 February. Two opposition news websites with servers located in Kyrgyzstan, Moya stolitsa novosti and Res publica suffered from massive hacker attacks that temporarily blocked access.<sup>49</sup>

Talk of whether Kyrgyzstan would experience its own 'coloured revolution' was rife, although protestors could not agree on the colour – both lemon yellow and tulip red were touted.

Clearly the authority and rule of the president was coming under great threat, and government discourse during this period was dominated by danger. However, this was presented not as a danger to the Akaev administration, but to Kyrgyzstan itself. This danger was portrayed as coming from a range of sources, from terrorists and religious extremists to those plotting anti-constitutional coups. These were all framed not as authentic domestic movements for change, but as threats inspired and backed by shadowy 'outside forces' who had seduced and perverted those Kyrgyz who were involved. Indeed, they were intrinsically opposed to everything that was authentically Kyrgyz. These discourses of danger cleverly melded global discourses (such as 'terrorism') with local ones, and can, following Devetak, be analysed in two types: monsters and ghosts. Together, they depicted Kyrgyzstan as a gothic scene pervaded by terror, dread and fear.

### **Confronting monsters: terrorists and coloured revolutions**

The notion that the majority of the countries in the world are engaged in a 'war on terrorism' is familiar to the people of Kyrgyzstan. Indeed, since 2001, an American air-base has existed outside Bishkek to support the US military action in Afghanistan. The government press routinely identified 'terrorism' as a threat to Kyrgyzstan. Very much like President Bush, this began with an identification of Islamist groups who supposedly wanted to overthrow Kyrgyzstan's secular constitution and establish an Islamic state. Akaev mentioned in particular Hezb-ut Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. The latter, reputedly linked to *Al-Qaeda*, launched armed attacks on Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000. It was one of only 3 actual groups named by President Bush as terrorist in his speech before both houses of congress on 20 September 2001, a key speech that defined the contours of the 'war on terror'.<sup>50</sup> Akaev was locating his own actions as being within the 'global war on terror' against threats acknowledged by all states as dangerous.

So far so Bush, but Akaev took this further by indicating that this monster was subtly more multisided than President Bush's terrorist monster. In a speech to the Security Council of Kyrgyz Republic, 'On Measures Strengthening the Fight against Extremism and Terrorism', Akaev, identified a second form of terrorism, 'ideological terrorism'. This, the most threatening type of terrorism, was

<sup>49</sup> Erica Marat, 'The Tulip Revolution: Kyrgyzstan One Year After. March 15, 2005–March 24, 2006' (Washington D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, 2006), pg. 9.

<sup>50</sup> President Bush delivers 'Address to Joint Session of Congress and the American People', 20 September. Available at: {<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20020920-8.html>}, accessed on 1 September 2004.

characterised by an ‘ignorance of the law and the state’ and was an ‘ideological attack against public order and security’. It involved the ‘aggressive circulation (by certain groups, organisations and media involved in the political fight) of their understanding of the country’s development, social justice, democracy, freedom of speech and demonstrations, which is projected onto society’. It was manifest in hunger strikes, road blockades, marches, ‘murders, arson and attacks against governmental bodies’,<sup>51</sup> and had the ultimate aim of destabilising the country and seizing power in the chaos.

These terrorists were paving the way for another monster to devour Kyrgyzstan: coloured revolutions. The events in Georgia and Ukraine, as well as the overthrow of President Milosovic in Serbia following American military interventions, presented a sinister threat to the peace and stability that was said to exist in Kyrgyzstan under the wise rule of President Askar Akaev. They evoked the ghosts of Central Asia’s past:

We remember how the Osh events divided us and our youth, and I hope very much that those who are organising meetings and pickets will not involve our children. Who can guarantee that there will be no ‘small’ wars and no bloodshed during a ‘tulip’ revolution? Thanks to the enlightened leadership of our president, we were saved from the Osh events developing into something like the Tajikistan and Afghanistan tragedies. We have seen what it is like to be at war, and it is for this reason that we do not wish anything like this for independent and prosperous Kyrgyzstan.<sup>52</sup>

The Osh events were bloody ethnic riots between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the south of the country in the dying gasps of the Soviet Union,<sup>53</sup> and have become a byword for the danger facing the country when lacking good oversight. The civil wars in Tajikistan and Afghanistan are likewise juxtaposed to Kyrgyzstan’s prosperity, due to its independence, international recognition and the rule of law. However, the stability of the country was presented as being under threat from the extremism of ‘tulip revolutions’ that would lead to civil war, bloodshed and instability.<sup>54</sup> According to this narrative, the activities of demonstrators are not crimes or political participation as they might be defined ordinarily, nor do they represent grievances of ordinary people, but rather are part of a dastardly plot. Likewise, the specificities of different processes in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine are ignored. Instead, they are part of a sinister process, a terror bearing down on Kyrgyzstan which, like Frankenstein’s monster, is crossing the world leaving havoc and bloodshed in its wake.

### *Mankurts*

If Akaev depicted the sinister march of terrorists towards Kyrgyzstan by using the conceptual language of George Bush, he summoned a peculiarly Kyrgyz hybrid monster to further de-legitimise the idea of revolution: the ‘mankurt’, which was

<sup>51</sup> ‘Extremismu-nadejnui zaslon’, (A reliable block against extremism) *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* (26 October 2004).

<sup>52</sup> ‘Joogazyn revolutsiasynyn ozgocholuu kesepetteri’, (The special misfortunes of the tulip revolution) *Erkin Too* (18 February 2005), p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> Abilabek Asankanov, ‘Ethnic conflict in the Osh region in summer 1990: Reasons and lessons’, in Kumar Rupesinghe and Valerii Aleksandrovich Tishkov (eds), *Ethnicity and Power in the Contemporary World* (Paris: UN University, 1996).

<sup>54</sup> ‘Extremismu-nadejnui zaslon’ (A reliable block against extremism) *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* (26 October 2004).

said to be threatening the cherished stability of Kyrgyzstan. 'Mankurt' is a literary creation of Chingis Aytmatov's novel, *One Day Lasts Longer Than a Century*, which has entered the everyday lexicon of the Kyrgyz. According to the story, during Chingis Khan's invasion of Central Asia, a tribe called the Naiman was enslaved. The Mongols tortured the captives and turned them into working 'machines'. They 'deleted' the memory of men by putting a hot camel stomach on their head, which would then squeeze the head as it dried. The only son of a Naiman mother becomes one such slave. In the story, he kills his mother when she comes looking for him. He thus lost his memory and his identity, and in doing so murdered his mother, rejecting his nationality and genealogy. This word is used widely today to designate somebody who is faithless and who has forgotten his national history.

An early February edition of *Kyrgyz Tuusu* wrote that some forces wanted to turn the people into 'mankurts'. It made references to certain groups which were supported by outside forces and planning to make a 'tulip' revolution.

Imposing somebody's will on others is a violation of sovereignty. In a wider sense, it is a method of turning people into *mankurts*. By imposing their own ideas on the people, and deciding the results of the elections, outside forces are introducing, on a large scale, the creation of *mankurts*.<sup>55</sup>

Dangers to the sovereignty, identity, and ethnic authenticity of the Kyrgyz are thus combined in the spectre of wealthy and powerful Westerners seeking to enslave the Kyrgyz and deform them by turning them into hideous monsters.

### Identifying ghosts: spectral presences

As argued above, the government affiliated Kyrgyz press articulated a drama of a stable, peaceful and prosperous Kyrgyzstan under mortal threat from the monsters of terrorism, coloured revolutions, and 'mankurts'. As indicated, however, these monsters had a sinister mastermind. The danger emanated from 'external forces'<sup>56</sup> behind the coloured revolutions in Serbia, Ukraine and Georgia, forces that wanted to make Kyrgyzstan into a neo-colony in the 21st century. Sometimes these forces were identified directly as the US, sometimes as individuals, sometimes as non-governmental or international organisations, other times they were unnamed. They were thus like ghosts, of indistinct identity and lacking genuine corporeality. *Kyrgyz Tuusu* and *Erkin Too* published articles explaining what the 'coloured revolutions' were, where they came from and who was behind them. According to an article published in December,

the scenario was worked out by the US ambassador, first in Serbia, and, at the time, each ambassador was trying to implement it in his or her country. The US was funding the preparations for such revolutions, directly or indirectly, through NGOs such as the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, the Carnegie Fund, and the Open Society Institute. For this reason, the Kyrgyz state was forced to ask whether Mr. Young, the US ambassador to the Kyrgyz Republic, was a diplomat, or an instructor who was interfering in the domestic affairs of the country and exceeding his competence.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> 'Airymdar bizdi mankurtka ailandyruuga arakettenishuudo' (Certain people want to turn us into Mankurts) *Kyrgyz Tuusu* (2–3 February 2005), p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> *syrtyky kuchtor*.

<sup>57</sup> 'Myrza Young, diplomatby je instruktoryby?' (Mr. Young, is he a diplomat or an instructor?) *Kyrgyz Tuusu* (18–21 December 2004).

In other articles, the independent Soros Foundation, as well as USAID and the State Department, and unnamed election monitors, were included in this list. Previously, all of these organisations had been welcomed, respected and recognised by Akaev. His government had quoted these organisations and referred to them as reliable institutions. However, due to the special political situation created by the parliamentary elections, as well as the events in the world regarding coloured revolutions, the government changed its rhetoric. Akaev's government rejected the assertion that the demonstrators on the streets were just ordinary people, and instead presented them as 'agents of the external forces' who were paid hourly rates and were provided with food and places to sleep. If a 'coloured revolution' did occur, then it would mean that Kyrgyzstan had been subjected to the status of a neo-colony of the 'West' and its money. The newspapers blamed Ukraine's former opposition for what was seen as the present 'misfortunes' of that country (*Oppositisia Ukrainanyyn ubalyyna kaldy, Ukrainanyyn koz jashy*) and stated that Ukraine was on the brink of a dangerous civil war.

In de-legitimising the idea of a coloured revolution, the government externalised internal opponents, geographically displacing them as being outside the authentic realm of Kyrgyzness. The grievances and proposals of the opponents were never reasonably examined or explained. This strategy externalised the opponents, framing them not as indigenous proponents of alternative forms of government, but rather mercenaries in the pay of foreign forces, dupes to alien monsters, vectors of external disease. Akaev spoke darkly of the 'outside forces', whilst depicting those citizens of Kyrgyzstan who joined them as traitors, who were selling their dignity, their motherland, their stability and the unity of the nation for money. In exhibiting such disloyalty that would be so damaging to Kyrgyzstan, they were not authentically Kyrgyz – a realm preserved, implicitly, for supporters of Akaev.

### *Diabolical beings*

What is the nature of these ghostly 'outside forces' that are able to seduce innocent Kyrgyz people into their dastardly schemes? It is of little surprise that President Akaev should identify them as diabolical:

Cleanliness [purity] is sacred for the nomadic Kyrgyz people, and white snow will cleanse evil intentions, sinful hearts, and dirty minds. Cleanliness is a great word, it is a tradition for the generation of Khan Manas. The Kyrgyz people are always on the tops of mountains and will never bend. Kyrgyz people will not be sold to a 'dollar witch'. She is coming to life and is swallowing the whole world. Beware of this witch and be clean. If the Kyrgyz people had not been clean since ancient times, they would not have lived to this date and would not have *ak kalpaktar* [white Kyrgyz national hats as worn by men] on their heads.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, the monster behind the wave of 'coloured revolutions' identified in the previous section is finally identified, a diabolical being that is coming to life to terrorise the world. Why a 'dollar witch'? Money is commonly seen as dirty by the Kyrgyz, a resource of deceitful sedentary traders not honest nomads, but one that

<sup>58</sup> 'Tazalykty yiyk tut kochmon elim' (My nomad people, regard the cleanliness as a sacred) *Erkin Too* (18 February 2005), p. 5.

can lure them into moral declension: as the classic bard, Moldo Kylych, sang, 'When money made its appearance, the well-being of the people disappeared.' The identification of this as the American currency is so unsubtle as to require no further comment. However, powerful though this evil force may be, it can be overcome. Just as the legendary warrior-leader Manas rescued the Kyrgyz from foreign rule (see below), his descendants still stand firm in their mountains, proudly wearing their national hats. The seductive female monster will be defeated by resolute Kyrgyz manhood. This illustrates Campbell's contention that foreign policy discourse is about the articulation of identities and the policing of boundaries about who is within or without the nation.

### Good spirits, clean Kyrgyzstan

Government discourse thus depicted a 'gothic scene' of international relations, whereby monsters, ghosts and witches were bearing down on an innocent and peaceful Kyrgyzstan. It is thus not surprising that it also portrayed the Kyrgyz as having a defender: President Askar Akaev himself, bolstered and guided by good spirits.

At the heart of this narrative was the President's programme *Taza (clean) Kyrgyzstan*. In the Kyrgyz language, the word 'ak', has multiple meanings and associations, including cleanliness, innocence, purity, goodness, and dairy products (thus food), and the colour white. It is a very special, even sacred, word with an extraordinarily rich array of positive connotations, and for a person to be described as 'ak' is a great honour. In the final weeks of the Akaev regime, the discourse of a 'Clean Kyrgyzstan' (which deployed the word *ak* alongside *taza*) was its major rhetorical device to position itself as the legitimate power in the state, and thereby further discredit the opposition.

### *Clean Kyrgyzstan*

'Clean Kyrgyzstan', was a long-term modernisation strategy, declared by former President Askar Akaev on 5 February 2005 at the 5th *Kurultai* (conference) of the People of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>59</sup> From that point until the middle of March, the official government newspapers, *Kyrgyz Tuusu* and *Erkin Too* consistently allocated at least one or two pages to the topic of, 'Clean Kyrgyzstan'. Articles were largely published under rubrics entitled, 'Clean Kyrgyzstan, You and Me', and 'Clean Kyrgyzstan'.

Askar Akaev identified five branches of his new ideology. These were: clean hands, clean water, clean technology, clean nature, and clean elections. The purpose of the programme was to renew and clean the country, and to develop the economy. Practically, the five branches of the president's programme were:

<sup>59</sup> 'Tazalyk-Ala Toonun uraany sen' (Cleanliness- you are the slogan of Ala-Too) *Kyrgyz Tuusu* (15-17 February 2005), p. 8.

1. against corruption ('clean hands')
2. the development of water resource management ('clean water')
3. the development of an informational era ('clean technology')
4. the protection of the environment ('clean nature')
5. the conducting of free and fair elections ('clean elections')<sup>60</sup>

The theme of 'Clean Kyrgyzstan' appealed to the idea of national purity by painting a picture of 'clear and innocent us', that is to say, people in the pro-presidential faction are the only ones entitled to carry out the new programme. A prosperous future and clear ideas were presented as being the future results of this new agenda. One article, written before the elections, asserted that the Kyrgyz nation was in need of this fresh approach in order to impede those who wanted dirty money:

In order to facilitate the new programme, one already needs to have '*taza iyman*' [clean intentions/sense]. If a person is clean then everything will be clean. Everything good starts from cleanliness. Everybody who lives for the motherland, whose heart beats for our country, must contribute to this 'holy' beginning and must support the great idea of our *Ajo* [traditional head of a Kyrgyz tribal confederation]

In contrast to the cherished ideals of national purity, were those demonstrating and plotting 'coloured revolutions': wicked 'internal forces' who were disloyally serving as the catalyst of the external threat. This was done under the pretext of fighting for human rights and freedoms yet, in fact, threatened the democracy of the Kyrgyz people.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, the theme of 'Clean Kyrgyzstan' referred to political stability by presenting 'dirty' politicians as a threat. The underlying idea of this theme was that only clean governors can guarantee political stability in the country. This political stability was now under threat, because the politicians promoting a coloured revolution were dirty. The following is a quote from an article published a week before the election:

A bad politician is "*koomdun kolkosuna chykkan jara*" [a disease of the whole society], and therefore in order to take care of the health of our fatherland, it is our responsibility to cure these 'ill' people by 'explaining' to them. The idea behind Clean Kyrgyzstan is that it proves, time and again, the holiness of our fatherland, and that nobody should touch it with dirty hands. Cleanliness is a slogan of our holy Ala-Too [mountains in Kyrgyzstan, representative of the state]. Our buildings, for the sake of our people and the future generations of the country, should be able to withstand earthquakes, should have clean internal ecology, and should be politically and seismically stable and strong. Certainly, no country has the right to intervene, from the outside, in our state-building. However, we need to punish and 'explain' this to the 'internal strangers' who want our buildings to be vulnerable to earthquakes.<sup>62</sup>

Those pushing for a 'coloured revolution' were not clean, they had evil intentions and desired to precipitate an earthquake that would transform prosperous and happy Kyrgyzstan into an unclean and dark ruin – an eerie gothic dwelling. Such people, by definition, were 'internal strangers', not authentically Kyrgyz. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote, beliefs about hygiene consistently occur

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> 'Elibiz "sary chumag" jol berbeit' (Our people will not tolerate 'the yellow plague') *Kyrgyz Tuusu* (18–20, 21–27, 27–31 January 2005; 4–7 February 2005).

<sup>62</sup> 'Askar Akaevdin reitingi jonundo: Askar Akaev ak kishi' (About the rating of Askar Akaev: Askar Akaev is a true person) *Kyrgyz Tuusu* (11–14 February 2005), pp. 9, 11.

across cultures as part of symbolic structures about danger-beliefs that are used to coerce or exhort in defence of political power.<sup>63</sup> Dirt offends against order, and chasing it is part of an attempt to re-order our environment and make it conform to an ideal. 'Clean Kyrgyzstan' was just such an attempt to defend tenuously held political power.

### *Inspired leader, ancient spirits*

A necessary counterpart of the 'Clean Kyrgyzstan' campaign was not only that Akaev's opponents were depicted as unclean, evil, and not authentically Kyrgyz, but that the President himself was positioned as the natural leader. Alongside the idea of 'Clean Kyrgyzstan' there was also a discourse evolving around the legitimacy of President Askar Akaev's rule. His image was portrayed as 'clean', 'innocent', guiding the people on the 'clean' path.<sup>64</sup> Happy and independent Kyrgyzstan was acknowledged to be an island of democracy under the leadership of Askar Akaev, yet it needs to cleanse itself from the dirt of colourful revolutions, the power of monsters, ghosts and the 'dollar witch', and the traitors allied to them. The legitimisation of Akaev's rule is presented within the framework of this theme by portraying him as a 'clean' person.<sup>65</sup> Only a clean person with clean hands and clean thoughts can launch a programme of Clean Kyrgyzstan. An unclean person cannot push through such a historical achievement.

This is unremarkable and expected, as a discourse of danger works by identifying sharply contrasting dual forces of good and evil, and positioning an individual or group as champions of the former category. It is in the cultural specifics of discourse production, however, that this example is fascinating. Government discourse drew on a range of available resources to conjure up not merely political arguments to support Akaev, but an array of spiritual forces to join battle with the monsters and ghosts assailing the republic.

### *Harmony*

A spirit summoned by official discourse in support of Akaev was that of the harmony of the people. Aspects of this, concepts such as *birimdik* (unity) and *yntymak* (co-operation), occupy a vital place in Kyrgyz political discourse, as historically the essential ingredients for Kyrgyz tribal confederations to survive and prosper against more powerful neighbours. The great nineteenth century ethnographer, Radlov, on the basis of his pioneering research on the Manas epic (see below), wrote that 'the Kyrgyz are especially remarkable for their strong and lasting feeling of the people's unity, which is so clearly manifested in their epic poetry'.<sup>66</sup> In government discourse in early 2005, this was interpreted as a criticism of anyone who sought to rock the status quo by pursuing divisive politics. This was

<sup>63</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1991 (1966)), p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> 'Askar Akaevdin reitingi jonundo: Askar Akaev ak kishi' (About the rating of Askar Akaev: Askar Akaev is a true person) *Kyrgyz Tuusu* (11–14 February 2005), pp. 9, 11.

<sup>66</sup> V. V. Radlov, Preface in *Encyclopaedical Phenomenon of Epos 'Manas': Articles Collection*, edited by I. Kondrateva (Bishkek: Kyrgyz Encyclopaedia, 1995 (1885)), p. 258.

performed through the liberal quotation of folk proverbs, a marked characteristic of Kyrgyz political discourse. The proverbs, *bekter ketet el kalat, betege ketet bel kalat* (leaders come and go but the people remain; grasses are not eternal, but the mountains remain), and *eki too kagylyshsa, ortosunda mal olot* (if two mountains collide, cattle die between them), gave the message that it is not worth sacrificing the harmony of the whole nation for political gain. Furthermore, it stressed that innocent people should not be made victims of two fighting forces.

An article written right after the second round of the elections included the following text:

The ancient, holy Kyrgyz people have always overcome any challenge with wisdom, national unity and harmony. The source and power of happiness is always found in harmony.<sup>67</sup>

The Kyrgyz proverb, *Aiyldyn iti ala bolso da, boru korso chogulat* (though dogs of a village are divided, they unite against wolves), was used to invoke the notion that the opposition and the government should unite for the holy motherland. Prior to the elections, the newspapers presented this social stability as inter-ethnic, inter-religious peace and stability. However, according to Akaev, the ‘yellow plague’ of the colourful revolutions was threatening the healthy Kyrgyzstani society. According to the article, everybody was aware of what a plague was for humanity.<sup>68</sup>

Our people will not allow the ‘yellow plague’ to enter our land and there is no reason for such disease. The western reactionary forces are greedy and evil. We need to understand that this type of politics will enslave us. Why should we sell our national interests and freedom for evil money? [...] We have seen with our own eyes how the ‘West’ smartly used the religious factor to destroy the people of Yugoslavia. It is obvious that the leaders of the coloured revolution will not treat the ‘colonised’ country well. They are spreading the poison of slavery onto our people, but our people have always been free and will never let it happen.<sup>69</sup>

### *For God and Manas!*

A key figure invoked by the pro-government press in support of Akaev was *Manas*. *Manas* is the hero of the eponymous epic poem. Claimed as the world’s longest poem, it recounts the story of the warrior leader who led the Kyrgyz to victory against their Kalmak enemies. Although the epos was condemned as ‘reactionary’ in the 1950s,<sup>70</sup> Kyrgyz intellectuals were better able to resist the Stalinist denunciations of their epic than those of any other Central Asian republic,<sup>71</sup> ensuring that the major part of the poem was published by the late 1950s. In independence *Manas* has moved to the centre stage of the intellectual project, its putative 1000th anniversary being arbitrarily celebrated in 1995 with the support of

<sup>67</sup> ‘Ata jurtun birimdigi yiyk’ (The unity of the motherland is sacred) *Kyrgyz Tuusu* (11–14 March 2005), p. 9.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Elibiz ‘sary chumaga’ jol berbeit’ (Our people will not tolerate ‘the yellow plague’) *Kyrgyz Tuusu* (18–20, 21–27, 27–31 January 2005; 4–7 February 2005).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Sabir Attokurov, *Kirgiz Etnografiyası: Okuu Kuralı* (Kyrgyz Ethnography: Study Aids) (Bishkek: Kirgiz Mamlkettik Uluttuk Universiteti, 1997), p. 171.

<sup>71</sup> William Myer, ‘Islam and Colonialism: Western Perspectives on Central Asia’, Ph.D., University of London, p. 111.

UNESCO.<sup>72</sup> A version of Sayakbay Karalaev's variant of Manas was published for the occasion,<sup>73</sup> along with a two-volume comprehensive encyclopaedia of the epic.<sup>74</sup> A plethora of shorter books accompanied these, hymning the epic for preserving the 'core of the cultural development of the Kyrgyz people',<sup>75</sup> revealing their cosmology,<sup>76</sup> and being an encyclopaedia of authentic Kyrgyzness, even to the extent of cataloguing national games.<sup>77</sup>

The promotion of the Manas cult served clear political purposes, as Akaev derived seven 'principles' from it that served as platforms for building independent statehood – National unity, Inter-ethnic harmony, national honour and dignity, education and knowledge, generosity, respect for the environment, and the strengthening of independent statehood.<sup>78</sup> Akaev has attempted to raise these to the level of state ideology that communism occupied,<sup>79</sup> even saying that 'just as the Muslims hold their five duties sacred, so we too ought to observe [the 7 principles].'<sup>80</sup> Image 1 shows a typical Akaev-era wall mural, depicting the seven principles of Manas, arranged around a portrait of President Akaev, set against Kyrgyzstan's flag. Many believe with Aidarova that the epos can also be 'a source of inspiration from which the Kyrgyz people of today can draw the spiritual energy necessary to struggle to preserve their Motherland'.<sup>81</sup>

However, as Aidarova's reference to spirit indicates, Manas has more than simply historical associations or political use. The oral epic is classically not handed down from person to person, but new *manaschis* (reciters of Manas) are called to vocation and taught by the *arbak* (spirit) of Manas that appeared to them in dreams and visions. Manas' *arbak* plays a role in other aspects of Kyrgyz life: '*Manastyn arbagy seni koshtop jursun*' ('may the spirit of Manas go with you') is sometimes used in the way that Muslims or Christians invoke God's protection as a blessing on others. Indeed, Akaev at times closed speeches with this phrase. Manas's life was turned into a popular novel by Ashim Jakipbek, entitled *The God Manas*.<sup>82</sup> Manas is thus a divine presence.

<sup>72</sup> Abylabek Asankanov and N. Bekmuhamedova, *Akindar jana Manaschilar-Kirgiz Elinin Ruhaniy Madaniyatın Tüzüüchülör jana Saktöochular* ('Poets and Manaschis: The Creators and Defenders of the Kyrgyz People's spiritual Culture' (Bishkek: Muras, 1999), pp. 119–23.

<sup>73</sup> T. K. Koychuev, et al. (ed.), *Manas: Kirgiz Elinin Baatirdik Eposu. Sayakbay Karalaevdin Varianti Boyuncha Akademiyalik Basilishi* (Manas: The Kyrgyz People's Heroic Epos') 2 vols. (Bishkek: Kirgizstan, 1995).

<sup>74</sup> A. Karipkulov, et al. (ed.), *Manas Entsiklopediya* (The Manas Encyclopaedia') Vol. 1 and 2 (Bishkek: Muras, 1995).

<sup>75</sup> Aron Abramovich Brudnyi, 'The Kyrgyz people's socio-political thought according to the "Manas" epos', in A. Tendik, A. Asankanov, T. Omurbekov, A. Abetekov and N. Bekmukhamedova (eds), *'Manas' Epos and the World's Epic Heritage* (Bishkek: Muras, 1995).

<sup>76</sup> D. Urustemov, Ö. Tölöbaev, and T. Kaltaev, "'Manas" jana Kirgizdardın kosmogoniyalik tüşünüktörü' ('Manas and the cosmological understandings of the Kyrgyz'), in Muras (ed.), *Alp Manaschi: Tezister Jıynağı* (Bishkek: Kirgizstan, 1995).

<sup>77</sup> Kadirkul Aydarkulov, "'Manas" Eposundagi Eldik Oyundar: Ilimiy-Populyarduu Makalalar ('National games in the Manas Epos: Academic-Popular articles') (Bishkek: Kirgizstan, 1994).

<sup>78</sup> Bektur Isakov, *Manastın Jeti Osuyati: Koldonmo* ('Manas' seven principles: a handbook') (Bishkek: Uchkun, 1997).

<sup>79</sup> Toktobay Sulayman, 'Manas Bababızdın Jeti Osuyati Jönündö Söz' ('A word about the seven principles of our father Manas) *Osh Jangirigi*, 84 (18 September 1999), p. 3.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted by Sovetbek Baygaziev, "'Traybalizm" – kolomtogo kömülgön mina' (Tribalism – a bomb waiting to go off), *Kyrgyz Tuusu*, 57–58 (22251–52), (13–15 April 1999), p. 6.

<sup>81</sup> D. M. Aidarova, 'Epic Mentality in the "'Manas" Epos', in A. Tendik, A. Asankanov, T. Omurbekov, A. Abetekov and N. Bekmukhamedova (eds), *'Manas' Epos and the World's Epic Heritage* (Bishkek: Muras, 1995).

<sup>82</sup> Ashim Jakipbek, *Tengiri Manas* (Bishkek: Kirgizstan, 1995).



Image 1. The seven principles of Manas, arranged around a portrait of President Akaev set against Kyrgyzstan's flag, adorning a wall in Kyrgyzstan. (photograph: Nick Megoran)

Government discourse linked the 'Clean Kyrgyzstan' campaign to the earlier emphasis on Manas. 'Cleanness is a great word, a tradition for the descendants of the *Khan Manas*', wrote *Erkin Too*.<sup>83</sup> To be authentically Kyrgyz is to recognise the place of Manas; Manas advocated 'cleanness'; this is currently embodied in the President's 'Clean Kyrgyzstan' campaign; thus, support of the President is the patriotic duty of every Kyrgyz. Indeed, the government press even described Akaev as 'blessed by Manas,'<sup>84</sup> – the ultimate Kyrgyz seal of approval. How could he be opposed, if the spirit of the great warrior Manas is with him? Manas' spirit could not be seen and his impact was indeterminate, but he remained a force for good, a beneficent spectral presence that ensured the battle for cleanliness against the hordes of monsters and ghosts was not without spiritual support.

Not only was Manas for Akaev but so, it was hinted, was God himself. *Kyrgyz Tuusu* reported the Mufti of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan, Murataly aji Jumanov, as saying that: 'the King is the shadow of God on Earth. Whoever respects the King, respects God.'<sup>85</sup> God is clean and likes cleanliness, the article continued, and the president of the country is on God's path. With God, Manas, and the spirit of the Kyrgyz people with him, it is unsurprising that the paper would claim, only *ary joktor oz Ajosyn koralbait*, or 'only the stupid can hate their own Ajo'. Therefore, for the government press, this particular story closed like a true Gothic novel, with the terror of monsters, ghosts and witches prevailing over the forces of order and goodness. The tragic hero, Askar Akaev, fled the ancestral home that he had vainly sought to defend, as it collapsed around him in chaos and, quite literally, went up in flames.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>83</sup> 'Tazalykty yiyk tut kochmon elim' (My nomad people, regard the cleanliness as a sacred) *Erkin Too* (18 February 2005), p. 5.

<sup>84</sup> 'Ary joktor oz Ajosyn koralbait' (Only remorseless people can hate their own Khan) *Erkin-Too* (25 February 2005), pg. 3.

<sup>85</sup> 'Muz kozgoldu' (The ice has melted) *Kyrgyz Tuusu* (15–17 February 2005), p. 13.

<sup>86</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Akaev regime, lawless crowds burnt and looted the centre of the capital, Bishkek. For more on whether this was a democratic revolution or a

## Conclusion

In the final months of his rule of Kyrgyzstan, President Askar Akaev turned increasingly to the use of stark and dramatic discourses of danger in his analysis of political development in Kyrgyzstan. He articulated a view of a happy, peaceful and prosperous Kyrgyzstan endangered by the wiles and schemes of external opponents and internal traitors. This allowed him to portray the idea of a 'coloured revolution' not as reflective of genuine grievances or as a legitimate form of political participation, but as the work of enemies of the state attempting to destabilise it and thus seize the chance to turn Kyrgyzstan into a colony of the West. In so doing, Akaev articulated a moral vision of authentic Kyrgyzness and how that translated into the political identity of the contemporary Kyrgyz state. This enabled him to define his enemies as inauthentic Kyrgyz, and assert his own credentials for genuine national leadership.

Following Devetak, we suggest that this discourse of danger can be read as a 'gothic scene'. Akaev evoked a gloomy gothic world pervaded by terror and doom, populated by monsters, ghosts and hybrids that were threatening to engulf the upright house of Kyrgyzstan in chaos and ruin. These were embodied as terrorism, 'coloured revolutions', disloyal Kyrgyz, and American diplomatic, military, economic and political power. Arrayed against them were the forces of authentic Kyrgyz spirituality, Manas, and Allah himself, a coalition brought together in the person of Askar Akaev, bearing his somewhat prosaic-sounding weapon of the 'Clean Kyrgyzstan' campaign.

We propose that this analysis is useful in three ways: firstly, it informs reflection on the deployment of theories of critical security studies in a global context. It is important for truly global scholarship to be tested and developed outside the traditional cores of academia. Five years earlier, at the previous elections, the arguments and conclusions of critical security studies about discourses of danger were not generally applicable to Kyrgyzstan. However, when forced into an increasingly desperate corner, President Akaev embraced wholeheartedly the language of danger. Thus, whilst discourses of danger are not universally employed in political contest, they do appear to prove alluring at moments of crisis. Campbell traces US discourses of danger appeal through peculiarly American historical moments such as witch-trials and the Cold War, whereas Akaev locates his own analysis in Kyrgyz past experience of the political imperatives of nomadic tribal configurations. That similar structures of narration and discourse can occur in such dissimilar historical contexts is proof of their appeal to modern political leaders.

Secondly, it opens a fresh window of analysis on the collapse of the Akaev regime and the 'tulip revolution'/'coup' of March 2005. These events have largely been discussed within the frameworks of concepts and categories such of 'democracy', 'authoritarianism' and 'civil society', and this analysis approach offers a different perspective, demonstrating that the finesse of discourses of danger was a core part of the Akaev government's strategy.

Thirdly, this work informs our understanding of the geographies of the 'war on terror' and the effects of US foreign policy. However inconsistent over time,<sup>87</sup> US

criminal coup, see Matthew Crosston, *Fostering Fundamentalism: Terrorism, Democracy and American Engagement in Central Asia* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2006), ch. 4.

<sup>87</sup> Chris Seiple, *Uzbekistan: civil society in the Heartland* (Orbis, 2005), pp. 245–59.

foreign policy in the region is multifaceted and should not be conflated to the 'war on terror'. It was indeed President George W. Bush's 'war on terror', and Kyrgyzstan's incorporation into it, that provided the conceptual and linguistic framework, and the political context, for Akaev's adoption of discourses of danger. However, Akaev contextualised these discourses in ideas about Kyrgyz identity and his own political programmes, populating his gothic landscape of the 'war on terror' with hybrid monsters, ghosts and spirits alongside characters drafted in from the Bush account. He also used the language of the 'war on terror' to de-legitimise domestic opponents who were allegedly bolstered by another facet of US foreign policy in Central Asia, that of democratisation. Ultimately, Akaev inverted Bush's language so that America itself was the most terrifying ghost, the most obscene monster. Herein lies more than one irony. Devetak concludes his article by suggesting that US outrages against Iraqis in the 'war on terror' vindicated warnings that America would become the monster it pursued.<sup>88</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, America was indeed portrayed as a monster – by a political agent that was fighting a rearguard action to defend a corrupt and increasingly undemocratic regime. There is clearly a gothic *geography* of international relations. The classic Gothic monster was ambiguous, and the American monster lurking in Central Asia may be an altogether different 'beast' to that which is rampaging through Iraq and Afghanistan.

<sup>88</sup> Devetak, *The Gothic scene of international relations*, p. 643.