

Askar Akaev, president of Kyrgyzstan (1990-2005)

Anna Sous, RFE/RL

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(This interview was conducted in Russian.)

Anna Sous: We're recording this interview in the beautiful House of Scientists in Moscow. As a scientist, you've been quite prolific in recent years. You even predicted the summer 2011 financial crisis. Can you give a prognosis on what the Russian economy will look like two years from now?

Askar Akaev: Well, in two years, I think, the Russian economy will be in a much better state. The worst point of the crisis will pass this year, and as of next year the economy will have started growing.

Anna Sous: Even if the military activity in eastern Ukraine continues? How will that affect the Russian economy?

Askar Akaev: It's well known that Russia is not taking part in any military conflicts, either in Ukraine or anywhere else in the world. Let's hope this remains to be the case. So I don't see... I even did some research on the effect of the long-term Western sanctions against Russia, and even this... Russia has such colossal resources -- most importantly its people, and of course the whole world knows about Russia's natural resources. I'm convinced that the Russian people will mobilize and figure these problems out. The Russian economy will start to grow, I have no doubt about it.

Anna Sous: Mr. President, our project is called "Russia & Me." What is your Russia like? Would you name three politicians from Russia's past and present who represent your Russia?

Askar Akaev: Well, if it's three names, then it would be the politicians I've been privileged to have worked with -- Russia's leaders of the past 30 years, starting in 1985. Of course, these are Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin and Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. In my opinion, it's Putin who embodies Russia's domestic and foreign policy today in the most exemplary fashion.

Anna Sous: Can you name three politicians who are not part of your Russia -- whose hand you wouldn't shake?

Askar Akaev: I don't have this problem. These days I stay mainly within the world of science and education. I communicate with scientists and university professors. I see politicians rarely and in only very unexpected situations. Recently, I bumped into one ex-politician at a concert at the Conservatory. I don't see them, so I don't have to decide whether to shake their hands.

Anna Sous: In 2005, when you were forced to leave your country, why did you choose Russia? Did you consider moving to Kazakhstan, Belarus, or the European Union?

Askar Akaev: I didn't have an alternative because Russia is my second motherland. I spent my best years here -- 18 years in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, where I had studied, worked, went from being a student to a professor. I consider Russia my second motherland because it's here that I became a scientist. I started my family here. My elder children -- a son and a daughter -- were born in Leningrad. They're Leningrad natives. So there was no alternative to Russia. You asked a good question: what is my Russia? My Russia is the universe of Russian science and Russia's great culture. I was trained in the field of mathematical physics -- applied mathematics, physics. So of course I owe everything I am to Russian science.

Anna Sous: Why do you think the former president of Kyrgyzstan Kurmanbek Bakiyev chose Belarus for his exile? It's been four years. He was offered a home by [Belarusian President] Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Have you changed your opinion about Bakiyev?

Askar Akaev: No, I'm not the kind of person who changes his opinions just because of what's happening now, whether it's in politics or other areas. Lukashenka has always stressed that he and Bakiyev have a lot in common, that they have similar views on politics, on power. So it seems logical that Bakiyev ended up in Belarus.

Anna Sous: How can you explain Vladimir Putin's 90-percent popularity rating in Kyrgyzstan, according to M-Vector, a Canadian consulting company? That's higher than in Russia. How do you explain it? Isn't there a free press there?

Askar Akaev: I think it's logical. Firstly, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin is a strong, distinct politician. If I'm not mistaken, Time magazine named him the best world leader twice, singling him out even compared to U.S. President [Barack] Obama. As for Kyrgyzstan, I perfectly understand the people of Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan became an independent state right on the eve of the third millennium, and people value their independence. They see how Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin fiercely defends Russia's sovereignty. And this is a good example for them. The Kyrgyz people also want a president to fiercely defend Kyrgyzstan's sovereignty and interests, just like President Putin does in Russia. Also, there are some down-to-earth reasons. The Kyrgyz economy currently remains in a sad state. People are struggling to survive, and they're placing all their hopes for a better life on closer cooperation with Russia.

Anna Sous: You said in an interview that you're proud of your final presidential decree, which was the order not to open fire on protesters in March 2005. Let me quote you: "The orders of some presidents of the Arab world to shoot at compatriots led to national catastrophes and ignited what are now the most dangerous regional conflicts." There was an order to shoot at Maidan square in Ukraine. And now there is a de facto war in eastern Ukraine. What was Viktor Yanukovich's mistake back then? You both now reside in Russia. What's the fundamental difference between you two?

Askar Akaev: First of all, as far as I know, Yanukovich himself didn't give the order to open fire. People were shot in the back. It was the Maidan organizers who set this up, most certainly to escalate the situation. Secondly, Yanukovich's biggest mistake was signing this so-called memorandum on relinquishing power with three Western foreign ministers. And he did it despite having had the bitter experience 10 years earlier of having given up the power to Viktor Yushchenko. This was also done under pressure, after the third election tour, which according to the Ukrainian Constitution was not supposed to take place. I think that was his big mistake. As for comparing events after the coups in Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, I don't see anything common in our stories. There couldn't be. As I said before, we're from different strata. I'm a scientist; I've gone back to science. Yanukovich is from the bureaucratic world. Most likely he'll return to that.

Anna Sous: Has your perception of Russia and its leaders changed since the annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in eastern Ukraine?

Askar Akaev: If it has changed, it's only for the better. I'll explain why. First of all, I think that the conflict in southeastern Ukraine is to be blamed entirely on the leadership of Ukraine and President Petro Poroshenko. It was they who started the war against their own people. As for Crimea...

Anna Sous: So who does Crimea belong to?

Askar Akaev: Crimea is Russian. I am totally convinced. Any person who knows about world history and the history of the Russian state will say the same. Crimea is purely and exclusively a Russian project, something that Nikita Khrushchev's voluntarily gave away to Ukraine. There wasn't another Stalin to stop him. If Sir Winston Churchill or President Franklin Roosevelt were alive today, they also would say that Crimea is Russian.

Anna Sous: Do you consider Russian your native language along with Kyrgyz?

Askar Akaev: Most certainly.

Anna Sous: Which language do you dream in?

Askar Akaev: I'm a scientist. When I think about science problems, I think in Russian. I can't do it in Kyrgyz. My language for science is Russian. In my other, political, life I can think in my native Kyrgyz. But when it comes to my principal work -- scientific research -- it's only Russian, and it is native for me. That's why as president I promoted the Russian. You do know that the first constitution of Kyrgyzstan gave the Russian language official status. I was criticized a lot by Kyrgyz nationalists in the 1990s and now. But... In Russia, in Leningrad, I meet a lot of our Kyrgyz young people. You know what these young people thank me for the most? For the official status of Russian language. They -- my Kyrgyz people -- speak it well. There are 1 million of them today in Russia. One million. I was surprised to find out that they consider their command of Russian to be a competitive advantage.

Anna Sous: You said many times that you would return home to Kyrgyzstan if, I quote, there were constitutional order, civil rights and freedoms were observed, and safety was

guaranteed for you and your family. Have you talked to the current leadership of Kyrgyzstan about the possibility of your return and immunity? Are there any guarantees?

Askar Akaev: I have, of course.

Anna Sous: What is your status in Kyrgyzstan?

Askar Akaev: I'm an ex-president of Kyrgyzstan. Legally, according to the constitution, I've never been stripped of my title. Only parliament can strip me of this status. This is why Bakiev's first priority was to strip me of ex-presidential status. But his own parliament voted against it. So I remain an ex-president. Yes, a decision to strip me of my status was made by an unconstitutional government of Kyrgyzstan under Roza Otunbaeva. In my opinion, this interim government consisted of political deadbeats. And their decision is unconstitutional because it didn't go through parliament. Only parliament can do it.

Anna Sous: Would it be dangerous for you to return now?

Askar Akaev: Of course, if we're talking about immunity, there isn't much hope. Kyrgyzstan stopped being a law-respecting state 10 years ago. Revolutionary leaders are in power -- first Bakiev, then Otunbaeva, now Almazbek Atambayev. Those three were at the helm of the March 2005 coup d'etat. Since that time it has not been a lawful state. What kind of immunity can we talk about?

Anna Sous: But still, what are the advantages of being a former president?

Askar Akaev: Well, it's freedom. I am a free man. I work on things that interest me and get huge satisfaction from it. I enjoy my work, I enjoy my freedom. In terms of how busy am I? I am back in my native field, I have returned to scientific research. I have put all my energy into it, because in restarting my scientific career, I had to prove to myself and my friends that I still haven't had my last word in science.