

Tajikistan faces crisis of statehood

Maciej Falkowski
Co-operation: Aleksandra Jarosiewicz

The effects of the global economic crisis, the deep energy crisis of late 2008 and early 2009, and the rising tension in relations with Russia have dramatically exacerbated the social and economic problems with which Tajikistan has been struggling since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and have worsened the country's internal political crisis. The consequences of the economic crisis and the progressing decomposition of Tajikistan's state structures may bring the country to a stage where it will transform into a 'failing state' - unable to perform its basic functions, posing a threat to the stability of its neighbours and seriously impeding NATO's stabilisation operation in Afghanistan. Within the next few months, an outbreak of open manifestations of popular discontent is also possible, or attempts may even be made to overthrow the central government, and Tajikistan may become submerged in chaos and internal conflicts. As Tajikistan's economy depends on Russia, the direction of developments will be determined by the economic situation in the Russian Federation.

The systemic nature of Tajikistan's internal problems

Tajikistan is the poorest country of the former Soviet Union. In 2007 its GDP was US\$3.2 billion, its *per capita* GDP was only US\$578, its inflation rate stood at 19.8%, and the balance of trade turnover was negative at -US\$1.1 billion. The average salary in 2008 amounted to around US\$68. Given the condition of the country's economy, it would be more justified to compare the country not with the other post-Soviet economies, but rather with the poorest African or Asian states.

Tajikistan's economic development has been impeded by geographic and historical factors (such as its peripheral location), a lagging economy (its poorly developed industry and agriculture, an obsolete infrastructure, communication problems, and the absence of foreign investments) and political difficulties with state-building after the break-up of the USSR (in particular, the ruinous effects of the 1992-1997 civil war).

Emomali Rahmon, who has been Tajikistan's president since 1994, has failed to benefit from the social compromise which ended the civil war, from the West's interest in Central Asia in connection with the operation in Afghanistan and the war on terror, or to make any effort to transform the state he governs. The current political system consolidates the deep pathologies of Tajikistan's internal affairs, such as the clan system, nepotism, corruption, excessive bureaucracy, the involvement of state structures in drugs smuggling from Afghanistan, etc.

The system has many features of a kleptocracy; the president and his clan control not only the country's political life, but also its economy (all the major economic sectors are in the hands of 'Rahmon's people').

The condition of the Tajik state is so disastrous that it is legitimate to speak of the ongoing decomposition of the state structures, which are unable to perform their basic functions (such as ensuring security, access to education and healthcare or electricity and gas supplies for the population, etc.). Foreign aid does not alleviate the dramatic situation because most of it is wasted or stolen by state officials¹.

The sudden deterioration of the social and economic situation

Tajikistan's social and economic problems worsened dramatically in the second half of 2008 as a consequence of the global economic crisis, the serious problems experienced by the Russian economy and the deep energy crisis. According to most recent figures, Tajikistan's GDP decreased by 50.9% in January 2009 (on a month-to-month basis), and industrial production dropped by 18% on a month-to-month basis.

The crisis has hit Tajikistan's main source of export revenue, the aluminium sector, which accounts for around 75% of revenues from export². Aluminium production decreased by 12% in January 2009 compared to December 2008 (having declined by 5% in the course of 2008), and further slumps are expected.

The value of the Tajik currency, the somoni, is also declining rapidly, and the country's currency reserves are evaporating; they fell by more than 40% to US\$198 million in December alone.

The condition of the Tajik state is so disastrous that it is legitimate to speak of the ongoing decomposition of the state structures, which are unable to perform their basic functions

For many years, labour migration to Russia has been the main source of income for most Tajik households, and a security valve for the authorities; according to the IMF, migrant workers generated around 43% of the GDP in 2008 (around 1.5 million Tajiks reside permanently or temporarily in Russia, the entire popu-

lation of Tajikistan being 7.2 million). The current problems experienced by the Russian economy (and especially the construction sector, where most Tajik migrant workers have historically been employed) may shake the job-migration foundations of Tajikistan's internal stability. Figures for the second half of 2008 indicate that money transfers from Russia to Tajikistan have already decreased markedly (according to IMF's initial data, money transfers decreased by around 20% in January 2009, compared to January 2008). The first returns of newly-unemployed migrant workers have also been reported.

As a result of the decrease in money transfers from Russia and the natural disasters that have affected Tajikistan recently (the particularly severe winter of 2007/2008, droughts, floods and record low cotton harvest), hundreds of thousands of Tajiks face an imminent risk of famine³.

In late 2008 and early 2009, Tajikistan was also affected by the worst energy crisis since the break-up of the USSR, occasioned mainly by measures taken by neighbouring Uzbekistan. In December 2008 Uzbekistan raised the price of gas sold to Tajikistan from US\$145 to US\$240 per 1000 m³, which entailed drastic price increases for retail consumers. In addition, Uzbekistan refused to authorise the transit of electricity from Turkmenistan to Tajikistan in the first two months of 2009, claiming that no transit agreement had been reached (supplies from Turkmenistan were to cover around half of Tajikistan's electricity

¹ "Tajikistan on the Road to Failure", report by the International Crisis Group, 12 February 2009, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=5907&l=1>

² All of Tajikistan's aluminium production comes from the Talco Tajik Aluminium Company in Tursunzade. It is one of the largest aluminium works in the entire post-Soviet area (with a production capacity of 512,000 tons of aluminium a year). Talco is controlled by President Rahmon's clan.

³ In February 2009, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) included Tajikistan in the list of 32 countries in need of immediate food aid due to threat of famine. In the course of last year, the UN also repeatedly called on the international community to provide urgent assistance to Tajikistan.

deficit in the winter season; supplies were resumed on 27 February). In February, Uzbekistan also reduced gas supplies to Tajikistan by around 70% due to Tajikistan's growing debt (around US\$16 million).

As a result, large parts of the country were left without electricity, gas or heating, which has not only made the lives of the ordinary people more difficult, but also impeded the normal functioning of the economy (due to electricity shortages, the launch of the fourth unit of the Sangtuda-1 hydroelectric power plant build by Russia's RAO EES has been postponed). For these reasons, in early 2009 an energy rationing system was introduced (in Dushanbe, electricity is available for 11 hours a day, while in the rest of the country it is only available for two hours a day, if at all) and the consumption of water from the Nurek and Kairakum dam reservoirs has been increased in order to raise electricity production levels in Tajikistan's hydroelectric power plants. This has created a serious risk of water shortages throughout the region in the coming months.

Rahmon's reaction to the crisis

The Tajik authorities have not developed any anti-crisis programme as yet, nor have they taken any systematic measures to assist the people. The Tajik-Uzbek intergovernmental commission which met (for the first time in seven years) on 18 February to discuss the energy crisis was convened at the initiative of Tashkent, not Dushanbe (the parties agreed on the terms on which the Kairakum reservoir would be used, and established a timetable for the repayment of Tajikistan's gas debt).

The crisis poses a threat to the rule of President Rahmon, who has in any case been struggling with problems such as difficulties ensuring effective governance in the regions⁴, or divisions and conflicts within Rahmon's family over the distribution of their influence in the economy⁵. This is why President Rahmon's 'anti-crisis' strategy has been focused on measures designed to safeguard his rule and prevent the emergence of any opposition,

President Rahmon's 'anti-crisis' strategy has been focused on measures designed to safeguard his rule and prevent the emergence of any opposition, either in his own circle or in the marginalised regional clans.

either in his own circle or in the marginalised regional clans. In January and February 2009, the president carried out numerous dismissals in the central and regional authorities, as a result of which the chiefs of the largest energy companies, the governor of the Sogd region, the chief of the special police force (OMON) and the interior minister Makhmadnazar Salikhov lost their jobs, the latter being additionally placed under house arrest. This 'cleansing' was covered on national television, and was intended, on the one hand to prevent the emergence of anti-presidential plots within the elite or destroy existing ones, and on the other to make it clear to the public who is (allegedly) responsible for the crisis. The appointment of Salikhov's successor was also telling; the post of interior minister went to Abdurakhim Kakhkharov, a member of the Khojand clan which has been marginalised under Rahmon's rule (Salikhov, like Rahmon, came from the Kulab clan). This may mean that the president is trying to create a broader clan platform and pacify the opposition clans by offering them some posts in the government⁶.

Other measures undertaken by the authorities in order to weaken potentially dangerous groups include the Supreme Court's verdict given on 8 January, banning the Salafites, an in-

⁴ Local warlords are very influential in many regions. Events demonstrating that the central authorities do not fully control the situation in the province included the clashes between government forces and local gang leaders in 2008 in Kulab, Gharm and Upper Badakhshan. In addition, social protests have taken place in some regions (for example, against gas and electricity supply interruptions, arbitrary reshuffles in the local authorities, etc.).

⁵ The president's family is very large. Rahmon has nine adult children. His brothers, brothers-in-law, sons-in-law and other family members also have political and economic influence. For example, his brother Nuruddin Rahmon has been appointed by the president to manage the state administration's human resources. As regards conflicts within the family, the dispute between the president's son Rustam and his brother-in-law Khasan Sadulloev over control of Tajikistan's largest bank, Orionbank, was the most widely commented upon (there are rumours in Tajikistan that during an argument, Rustam shot Sadulloev and injured him).

⁶ Both the Kulab group and the other clans are dissatisfied with the monopoly on power and economic influence held by president Rahmon's large family. In the crisis conditions, it is very probable that these clans will try to limit the president's power and take over control of some state-owned resources.

formal Islamic fundamentalist movement advocating the purification of Islam of non-Koranic elements; they have nevertheless renounced violence, even though they are increasingly popular with young people in Tajikistan. Also notable was the president's decree obliging state officials to step up control of the media and respond if 'untrue information' is published (the decree was issued after one newspaper published an interview with Senator Akbar Hoja Turajonzoda, one of the leaders of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, in which he criticised the head of state⁷).

The Tajik authorities' international activities have been focused on efforts to obtain additional funding from states and international organisations in order to salvage the Tajik economy. For example, President Rahmon has recently visited Brussels (11 February) where he met the European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso, among others. Dushanbe's efforts have yielded some results. Over the last two months, financial aid intended for the fight against the consequences of the crisis has been pledged by the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank⁸.

A risky game for power and money

President Rahmon has also started a risky international game in order to obtain funds to combat the crisis, which would enable him to prevent total social and economic catastrophe and remain in power. As part of this game, he has intensified co-operation with the United States (the US has been seeking to broaden the Central Asian transport corridor to Afghanistan, in connection with the serious problems in the border area between the latter state and Pakistan). In early February Tajikistan authorised the USA and NATO to use its territory to transport non-military supplies. The press has also speculated about the possible deployment of a US military base in Tajikistan to replace the Manas airfield base near Bishkek, which has to be closed because Kyrgyzstan has terminated the agreement under which US troops have been stationed in its territory (however, since Tajikistan has no adequate airfield, this solution is technically impracticable⁹).

President Rahmon has also started a risky international game in order to obtain funds to combat the crisis, which would enable him to prevent total social and economic catastrophe and remain in power.

By demonstrating a willingness to build closer relations with Washington, the Tajik authorities are aiming to strengthen their own position vis-à-vis Russia. Russian-Tajik relations have been very tense recently, in connection with Tajikistan's deepening frustration with Russia's policy towards it. Both the Tajik authorities and the public are disappointed that Russia has failed to deliver on its promises made in 2004 (when Moscow committed itself to investing over US\$2 billion in the Tajik economy, including the completion of the Rogun hydroelectric power plant) and has been prioritising relations with Uzbekistan while ignoring Tajikistan's interests.

The souring of relations between Dushanbe and Moscow is also partly to be blamed on the behaviour of Rahmon himself, who has been seeking to obtain financial aid from Russia to fight the crisis similar to that Moscow has offered to Kyrgyzstan. In doing this, Rahmon has been trying to strengthen his own bargaining position in order not to have to pay too high a price for Russia's support (the Russians are demanding a majority stake in the Rogun power plant as well as perpetual lease of the Aini military airfield near Dushanbe). By provoking tension in relations with Russia, the Tajik president also wants to divert the public's attention from the deteriorating economic situation.

⁷ For more information, see <http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=11251>

⁸ The European Commission has pledged €15.5 million (and a further EU18 million subject to positive conclusions from the IMF report on the situation in Tajikistan), the International Monetary Fund has pledged US\$120 million (to be paid in 2009–2011, and spent on the fight against poverty), the Asian Development Bank has offered US\$102 million (including US\$51 million in 2009), while the World Bank has pledged US\$20 million (additional financing for the budget).

⁹ In 20 February, acting under pressure from Russia, Kyrgyzstan terminated the agreement under which the US military base in the Manas airfield near Bishkek had been operating (the base had existed since 2001 and was used within the framework of the operation in Afghanistan). In return for the termination, Moscow committed itself to providing Kyrgyzstan with financial aid in the total amount of US\$2.15 billion to combat the consequences of the economic crisis.

The steps taken recently by the Tajik authorities in relation to Russia include:

- a protest note issued by the Tajik Ministry for Foreign Affairs in connection with the statement made by President Dmitry Medvedev on 23 January during his visit to Tashkent, to the effect that Russia would not support any hydroelectric power plant projects in Central Asia which fail to take into account the interests of all the countries in the region. The Tajik side interpreted the statement as proving that Russia does not intend to participate in the construction of the Rogun hydroelectric power plant¹⁰;
- the cancellation of Rahmon's meeting with Medvedev, which was supposed to have taken place on 3 February;
- the resolution adopted on 25 February by the Tajik parliament, prohibiting the privatisation of strategically important establishments which Russian companies have been seeking to take over (such as the Talco aluminium works, the Rogun power plant and the Nurek hydroelectric power plant) as well as military facilities; the resolution was adopted just one day after the unsuccessful talks between the Tajik president and Dmitry Medvedev;
- the cancelling of the broadcasting licence for RTR-Planeta, the only Russian television channel available in Tajikistan (officially, in connection with its debt);
- a series of anti-Russian articles in the Tajik press on subjects such as the Russian authorities' passivity in the face of a series of racially-motivated murders of Tajik migrant workers in Russia;
- leaks from Rahmon's circle to the effect that Dushanbe intends to start charging Russia for the stationing of its 201 military base, deployed in Tajikistan since 2004¹¹.

Tajikistan as a 'failing state'?

The underlying objective of the measures undertaken recently by Rahmon and his circle is not so much to develop an anti-crisis strategy and launch reforms in order to repair the Tajik state, as to stay in power at any cost. These measures show that the Tajik leader is determined to do so, but also that his room for political manoeuvre is shrinking. It is also possible that - as many commentators of Tajikistan's political life have been suggesting - Rahmon has recently slipped into a delusion of grandeur and has been acting impulsively, emotionally and irresponsibly or even irrationally¹².

The underlying objective of the measures undertaken recently by Rahmon and his circle is not so much to develop an anti-crisis strategy and launch reforms in order to repair the Tajik state, as to stay in power at any cost.

His steps are very risky because, in the extreme case, they may even cost him his position. Russia may support opposition groups around Rahmon or grant neighbouring Uzbekistan informal consent to undertake measures to overthrow the Tajik leader; such measures might consist in imposing a tighter blockade on Tajikistan, provoking anti-government demonstrations in the Sogd district (inhabited by a large Uzbek community), etc.¹³.

It is more likely, though, that Moscow and Dushanbe will work out a compromise and Russia will grant Tajikistan financial aid to combat the crisis in return for certain concessions (stakes in establishments such as the Rogun power plant or the Talco aluminium plant for Russian companies, limiting co-operation with the USA, etc.). This might enable Rahmon to stay in power, and prevent a social and economic disaster. However, the systemic nature of Tajikistan's problems and the pessimistic forecasts for the Russian economy, with which Tajikistan's economy has close ties, suggest that the decomposition of the Tajik state will continue.

¹⁰ For more information on Dmitry Medvedev's visit to Tashkent, see Maciej Falkowski, Wojciech Górecki, *Medvedev in Uzbekistan – Russia sends contradictory signals to Central Asia*, CES Eastweek, 28 January 2009.

¹¹ The base was established in 2004 with the re-formed 201st Motorised Rifle Division of the Russian army. It comprises three regiments stationed in three different garrisons (Giprozemgorodok in the suburbs of Dushanbe, Kurgan-Tyube and Kulab), and an air force group. The base is manned exclusively with contract soldiers (around 7.5 thousand troops).

¹² For example, the president has banned gold-plated tooth implants, and issued a decree entitled "On putting in order traditions, festivities and ceremonies" which prohibits weddings with more than two hundred guests and funeral ceremonies with more than one hundred attendants.

¹³ In the 1990s, Uzbekistan repeatedly interfered with the internal situation in Tajikistan (mainly during the civil war). The unsuccessful insurgency of the Uzbekistan-supported colonel Makhmud Khudoyberdiyev which broke out in May 1998 in the Sogd region (after which Khudoyberdiyev took refuge in Uzbekistan) may serve as another example of such actions.

It is possible that this process will continue at a slow speed, as before, with the weakening of the state as the only consequence. However, it is equally likely that Tajikistan will become a failing state, unable to perform its basic functions¹⁴. This could in turn lead to a disintegration of the state with alternative centres of power emerging in individual regions. Such centres could form around local clan leaders, criminal organisations (especially drug gangs) or Islamic fundamentalists, who are increasingly influential and ever more popular with Tajikistan's young people.

If Tajikistan becomes a typical failing, or failed, state, this will have far-reaching consequences for the entire region. Instability, organised crime and Islamic radicalism may then spill over to the Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (especially to the Kyrgyz and Uzbek parts of the Fergana Valley), as was the case with Chechnya under the separatist rule in 1996–1999. This situation would very probably also trigger an influx of Tajik refugees to neighbouring countries.

The destabilisation of Tajikistan would also mean that NATO would lose one of the states providing backup for the operation in Afghanistan, and would face more difficulties in using Central Asia as a transport corridor to Afghanistan. Destabilisation would also probably be used by the Taliban and/or al-Qaida to step up their activities in the region, and open another front of the combat against NATO forces (after Afghanistan and the Afghan-/Pakistani border area).

In an extreme negative scenario, Tajikistan might experience serious internal destabilisation in the next few months. The country's situation will depend primarily on further develop-

If Tajikistan becomes a typical failing, or failed, state, this will have far-reaching consequences for the entire region. Instability, organised crime and Islamic radicalism may then spill over to the Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan

ments in Russia. If the economic crisis in Russia worsens, hundreds of thousands of Tajik seasonal workers who traditionally go to Russia in spring may fail to find jobs. Their return to Tajikistan, or a drastic decrease in money transfers to the homeland, may trigger a social revolt in Tajikistan. In this situation, the clans would probably step up their fight for power and

control of resources (both within the Kulab clan, and between clans), which might not only lead to the ousting of Emomali Rahmon, but also submerge the country in chaos.

The fear that the history of the 1992-1997 civil war might repeat itself still remains an important stabilising factor in Tajikistan, as it keeps the Tajik people passive and loyal to the authorities. However, in an extreme situation, in which the people become unable to support their families or risk famine, this factor might be of little significance.

¹⁴ Georgia under the rule of Eduard Shevardnadze was another example of a failing state. The central authorities controlled only the capital and several major cities, but they were unable to ensure electricity and gas supplies or pension payments to large sections of the population. Many regions, such as Javakhetia, were in fact left to fend for themselves and were independent of the central government. Many areas were ruled by criminal organisations or paramilitary groups (such as the Pankisi Gorge, then controlled by Chechen militants).



Centre for Eastern Studies
Koszykowa 6A,
00-564 Warszawa
e-mail: info@osw.waw.pl

The Centre for Eastern Studies (CES) was established in 1990. CES is financed from the budget. The Centre monitors and analyses the political, economic and social situation in Russia, Central and Eastern European countries, the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Central Asia. **CES focuses** on the key political, economic and security issues, such as internal situations and stability of the mentioned countries, the systems of power, relations between political centres, foreign policies, issues related to NATO and EU enlargement, energy supply security, existing and potential conflicts, among other issues.

© Copyright by OSW
Editors: Jolanta Darczewska,
Krzysztof Strachota
Anna Łabuszewska,
Katarzyna Kazimierska
Co-operation: Jim Todd
DTP: Wojciech Mańkowski