

Asian Studies Days 2025

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Keynote by Dr Asel Doolotkeldieva

Title

“Towards ‘vernacular’ Central Asian geopolitics: Russia-Kyrgyzstan/Kazakhstan entanglements after 2022”

Abstract

Three years after the full invasion of Ukraine, there seems to be continuity of Russian influence in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, but this belies significant shifts under the surface in a rapidly evolving geopolitical context. Economic and financial entanglements with Russia in terms of trade, foreign investment, and rublisation have increased under the impact of sanctions and the war. But does this demonstrate that elite geopolitics is all that matters? Drawing on insights from critical geopolitics, the lecture discusses how and why we should look beyond an elite-centric view of geopolitics towards ‘vernacular’ geopolitics, i.e. to the geopolitical imaginaries of ordinary people. It argues that this is not just an ethical concern but a productive conceptual and analytical framework that helps better understand empirical processes currently underway. There are reasons why popular support for a close or distant relationship with Russia is important for geopolitical analysis in authoritarian contexts. Reconfiguration of labour migration, the emergence of a younger generation beginning to question historical legacies of Soviet rule, and the emergence of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as hubs of Russian parallel import are part of how entanglements with and imaginaries of Russia are changing among populations and businesses. As these important reconfigurations have been affecting different strata of society differently in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, popular support for association with Russia varied too. Higher inflation and devaluation of tenge - at least partly induced by the war and sanctions – are a source of societal discontent among the ordinary people in Kazakhstan while GDP growth and the new ecology of war seem to be benefiting a narrower group of elites. Kazakh and Kyrgyz elites are navigating the issue of association with Russia more carefully than before, but regime legitimacy remains an important element of how the relationship with Russia is conducted. The lecture concludes that popular imaginaries participate in the co-production of geopolitical power, pushing for a continuous association with Russia in Kyrgyzstan and for more distance from it in Kazakhstan.

Bio

Dr. Asel Doolotkeldieva is a Research Fellow of the International Research Group on Authoritarianism at the University of Potsdam (Germany). She studies populist mobilizations and revolutionary praxis in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian contexts in conversation with discourses and practices of democracy, equality and social justice. Asel wrote extensively on regime transformations, contemporary popular uprisings, social protests and anti-neoliberal resistance with an empirical focus on Central Asia. Her work explores contentious politics across fields such as extractive industries, environmentalism, community resistance, and geopolitical encroachment of Russia and China. Her latest paper "Mining for Norms: International Extractivism, Chinese Business, and the Indeterminacy of Compliance in Kyrgyzstan (in *Regulation & Governance* with Till Mostowlansky) investigates Chinese business behavior against the background of uncertain regulatory framework, community resistance and opaque political system. Her current research focuses on the nexus of public opinion and elite legitimacy of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes in geopolitical relations with great powers.