Kyrgyzstan in Crisis: A Geopolitical Juncture

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Executive Summary

Kyrgyzstan is currently at a critical geopolitical juncture in which it is forced to confront its longstanding ties with Russia against a backdrop of internal and external pressures towards autocracy. Once celebrated as the ‘island of democracy’ in Central Asia, the small nation faces significant challenges in light of internal authoritarian tendencies and external pressure following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This report, therefore, examines the role of Kyrgyzstan within the global democracy versus autocracy debate that has intensified in the past two years and assesses President Japarov’s neutrality with regards to Russia’s invasion and Bishkek’s shifting allegiances.

This report relies on a qualitative methodology that builds on field research conducted in Kyrgyzstan in August 2023. As such, this report incorporates interviews with Kyrgyz civil society organizations and other stakeholders working on issues including, but not limited to, democratization, corruption, human rights, media, and the rule of law. The report presents an in-depth analysis of the Russian influence with regards to the Kyrgyz political system, civil society, and strategic relationship with Moscow, underpinned by the historical context of Kyrgyz–Russian relations.

Key Findings

1. **Political System**: Kyrgyzstan’s political system is inching towards autocracy under President Japarov and his de facto co-ruler Kamchibek Tashiev at an alarming rate as evidenced by recent constitutional reforms that further consolidating power within the presidency. Furthermore, the influence of Russia's governance model and a growing repression of dissent and criticism are both particularly prominent driving factors.

2. **Civil Society**: The space for civil society in Kyrgyzstan is shrinking which is driven by routine legislative assaults and government pressure, aspects of which have been intensified by Russian influence and the broader geopolitical focus on Ukraine.

3. **Strategic Relationship**: Despite efforts to diversify foreign relations, Kyrgyzstan’s relationship with Russia remains dominant, influenced heavily by economic dependence, military and security provisions, and cultural ties. The invasion of Ukraine has both highlighted and deepened these ties, even as Kyrgyzstan explores relations with other global and regional powers.
Policy Recommendations

The geopolitical juncture faced by Kyrgyzstan will significantly shape the future trajectory of the country and its people. This report's policy recommendations aim to guide international actors in supporting Kyrgyzstan's pivotal moment to choose a path aligned with its interests, free from external pressures:

1. Direct funding should be increased for human rights, media freedom, and education to counter negative trends. Such funding must come with stringent monitoring to avoid fueling corruption.
2. Greater support for the training and empowerment of civil society leaders, with an emphasis on multi-year projects, is crucial.
3. Sanctions should be considered as a deterrence tool to check attempts to pass legislation that undermines civil society's operating space, ensuring sanctions are targeted and not counterproductive.
4. Promote the Kyrgyz language to combat Russian propaganda, specifically disinformation that affects vulnerable groups, including the LGBTQ+ community.
5. Development actors must improve strategic communication and advocacy efforts, using local languages to reach and impact the Kyrgyz society effectively.
6. High-level diplomatic engagement with Kyrgyz leaders should be intensified to encourage partnerships that foster democratic values and strategic independence.
Introduction: The ‘Island of Democracy’ is Imperiled

Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, many have argued that the world is currently in an era of ‘democracy vs. autocracy’ struggle. One week after the invasion, President Biden delivered his State of the Union address to the U.S. congress and spoke of how “in the battle between democracy and autocracy, democracies are rising to the moment, and the world is clearly choosing the side of peace and security”. Kyrgyzstan, a country once considered to be the ‘island of democracy’ in Central Asia, could have been expected to side with its democratic counterparts, openly confront Moscow and defend Kyiv’s sovereignty. However, President Japarov has maintained an official policy of neutrality with regards to the invasion, and his country’s economic and political ties to Russia, which have been historically strong, have arguably intensified.

This report explores the extent to which Kyrgyzstan is siding on the democratic or autocratic side of this geopolitical struggle, as well as the factors determining President Japarov’s decision to play both sides and how feasible this strategy might be. It assesses the historically strong relationship between Kyrgyzstan and Russia and introduce a qualitative methodology primarily reliant on interviews aimed at further analyzing the impact of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine vis-à-vis three areas in Kyrgyzstan: 1) its political system, 2) its civil society space, and 3) Bishkek’s strategic relationship with Moscow. Our analysis concludes with a summary of findings arguing that Kyrgyzstan currently stands at a critical juncture in its history where the decisions of its leaders and society may determine the future of Kyrgyz generations to come. Finally, we present policy recommendations for international governments and development actors alike to enable Kyrgyzstan in this historic moment to make accurately informed decisions independent of external influences that have long dominated the country.

2 AFP News Agency (2022), “Biden says world in ‘battle between democracies and autocracies’”, Youtube, March 1, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJ6z5R-nMRA
Background: Mapping Kyrgyz–Russian History

Once called an “island of democracy”, Kyrgyzstan has been riddled with tumultuous political developments over the past two centuries. Since becoming an independent nation in 1991, the small Central Asian country has experienced three revolts and has been grappling with a bipolar geopolitical question that many in the region face: solidify its relationship with the Russian Federation or seek strategic alliances elsewhere. In the context of the ‘democracy vs. autocracy’ struggle, the relevance of this question has intensified.

Russia is often viewed as Kyrgyzstan's “big brother”—having been both its former colonial power and current strategic partner. However, Kyrgyzstan's engagement with Russia did not begin when the Central Asian country gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Kyrgyzstan became part of the Russian Empire in 1876, following a series of military conquests and rebellions, before emerging as part of the newly-formed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1917. In the subsequent decades, the USSR intentionally and strategically transformed Kyrgyz communities through the integration of Russian language, culture, values, and norms; the result of which created a sense of shared identity among diverse ethnic groups in the Soviet Union and established Kyrgyzstan’s path dependence on Russia.

Throughout the history of relations between Kyrgyzstan and Russia, Russia has routinely remained in the driver’s seat of Kyrgyz–Russian bilateral and multilateral engagement. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, however, Russia placed Kyrgyzstan and its neighbors on the periphery as a result of its domestic turbulence and lack of a clearly defined Central Asia foreign policy. During this time, Kyrgyzstan was able to establish strong democratic foundations in its national and local governance, a process that was accompanied by the development of a large civil

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9 Ibid.

society. This turned the country into a human rights and media freedom lighthouse in the region. Only in 2002 did Russia begin to understand again that it had interests in Kyrgyzstan (Knyazev 2010). Ever since, Russia has pressed to upgrade its more subtle spheres of influences in Kyrgyzstan to ones that are more tangible and well-defined.

Today, the more defined mechanisms of Russian influence in Kyrgyzstan take shape in the form of formidable military and security provisions, growing economic dependence through labor migrant remittances and development aid, and Russian language-based news and media outlets:

- **Military and Security Provisions**: Russia is well positioned to project power in Kyrgyzstan and the region at large through the Kant Air Base which is operated by the Russian Air Force and whose lease had been extended by 15 years in 2012 in exchange for Russia’s reduction of Kyrgyz debt. Even more, Kyrgyzstan’s membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) has led to cooperative defense agreements and joint military exercises—all of which reinforce and ground Russia’s sphere of influence in the landlocked nation.

- **Economic Dependence**: Roughly 1.2 million Kyrgyz migrants work in Russia, and they account for approximately 30% of the country’s total gross domestic product which only further expands its direct reliance on the Russian economic apparatus. Furthermore, Russian development aid and investment concentrate heavily in infrastructure and energy sectors, both of which play key roles in Kyrgyzstan’s economic landscape. Consequently, these financial inflows do not simply prop up the Kyrgyz economy but also strengthen its dependence on Russia and leave greater room for economic vulnerability and manipulation over Kyrgyzstan’s economic policies.

- **News and Media Dominance**: Within the Kyrgyz media landscape, Russian media powerhouses such as Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik help shape pro-Russian public opinion and political discourse in Kyrgyzstan. These well-established media outlets, many of whom face modest competition from

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local and international alternatives on the Kyrgyz market, promote a positive image of Russia through a reinforcement of shared political and cultural identity and subsequently disseminate and parrot Russian propaganda.15

In recent years, a series of events including President Japarov’s rise to power and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have created the conditions forcing Kyrgyzstan to confront the apparent tensions between its 21st century democratic institutions and its economic and security reliance on Moscow.16 This paper explores these tensions further, building on field research conducted in the country with leaders of the Kyrgyz civil society.

Methodologies

Having provided a brief overview of the political, economic, and societal trends and developments in Kyrgyzstan in the 21st century, a few comments on methods are now in order. This paper presents one principal research question: assessing the impact of Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine on Kyrgyzstan. This report mainly does so by exploring three sub-questions that reflect recent trends and developments vis-a-vis three principal areas in Kyrgyzstan: 1) its political system, 2) its civil society space, and 3) its strategic relationship with Moscow. Further to this analytical effort, this paper also lays out bottom-line policy recommendations to inform foreign policymakers on tangible pathways for effective and impactful engagement to strengthen Kyrgyzstan’s policies, economy, and society.

This paper employs a qualitative methodology to answer its main and sub-research questions, determining the extent to which Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has led to significant changes in Kyrgyzstan’s political system, civil society space, and strategic relationship with Moscow. Our analysis relies on primary sources and secondary literature. Primary sources include official government documents, reports, and speeches. These sources are further complemented with semi-structured interviews that we conducted in Kyrgyzstan during August 2023. The interviews were conducted with civil society organizations that work on issues including, but not limited to democratization, corruption, human rights, media, and the rule of law—other interviewees included relevant embassies in Bishkek as well as multilateral organizations. Throughout these interviews, we run discussions on the latest political, economic, and societal trends and developments in Kyrgyzstan in relation to our three sub-questions. Since access to official primary data that would speak to our research is heavily limited, conducting these interviews was essential to gather accurate information regarding these trends and developments. In this paper, we refer to our findings from these interview discussions to provide relevant insights to our analysis. The secondary literature used in this paper consists mainly of academic books and articles, reports published by think tanks and NGOs, and news articles covering issues related to our three sub-questions.

The qualitative methodology employed in this study also contributes to our final paper section on policy recommendations. Besides providing an analytical understanding of the impact of Russia’s war in Ukraine on Kyrgyzstan, this paper features a pragmatic approach that seeks to inform foreign policymakers and other actors involved in the development of Kyrgyzstan’s policies, economy, and society.
Our interview discussions with civil society organizations as well as multilateral and bilateral institutions operating in Kyrgyzstan shed a light on the current needs and challenges faced in the implementation of their efforts, as well as on opportunities to maximize their impact and engagement.

Finally, it is incumbent upon us to disclose several of the limitations to the information we could extrapolate from the semi-structured interviews and therefore conclude in our findings at large. As is the case for many social studies, our work lacks the ability to establish cause–effect relationships and the potential correlations inferred in our arguments must be considered accordingly. Furthermore, whereas our outreach to civil society organizations was successful in securing a wide range of perspectives, unresponsiveness of certain types of civil society organizations may have reduced our sample size. Nonetheless, our findings do represent a comprehensive assessment of the present situation in Kyrgyzstan in the context of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and provides a platform on which to further study these research questions.
Analysis

Recent evolutions in Kyrgyzstan’s political system, civic space, and strategic relationship with Russia are now going to be explored, building on the findings of our fieldwork and literature search and focusing on developments that have been linked with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. It is important to clarify that the three areas of our analysis are intrinsically linked, and that developments vis-à-vis one area have the capacity to significantly impact the other areas. It would be inaccurate, for instance, to explain the shrinking space for civil society that Kyrgyzstan has experienced in recent years, since before the invasion of Ukraine, without assessing its reliance on a changing political landscape that has threatened democratic processes in the country. Our intent by analyzing these areas independently is to explore their most salient changes in detail and contextualize them in their evolution prior to and following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Evolution of the Political System in Kyrgyzstan

Prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Kyrgyz Republic has arguably experienced a trend towards greater autocracy since President Japarov assumed office in early 2021—a governance transformation that he seems to be continuing from his predecessors. That same year, Japarov’s government led a successful effort to adopt a new constitution that features few and weak checks-and-balances and established a presidential system that has been labeled as close to the “authoritarian-style crown-presidentialism in the post-Soviet space”. According to Cholpon Jakupova, who provided legal advice to the constitutional reform process, these changes have resulted in the most autocratic political system in Kyrgyzstan’s history and has turned President Japarov into a modern ‘Tsar’. In this context, power is structured and controlled vertically and local government officials are significantly less relevant consequently, partly due to their direct appointment by the President. The Kyrgyz Parliament has not been spared either; its legislative authority has been reduced as evidenced by the words of the Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers, Edil

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19 Interview with Cholpon Jakupova, August 2023.
Baisalov, in a recent visit of his, where he stated that members of parliament, “do not have the right to speak on behalf of the people” anymore. Members of parliament have since called for Deputy Chairman Baisalov to be brought to disciplinary accountability, without much success. This new political system features an alarming level of power concentration, and the lack of formal checks and balances represents a “ticking bomb” for unresolved political tensions to grow out of proportion and potentially lead to a new revolution in Kyrgyzstan, a country that is all too well acquainted with revolutionary coups.

In this context, another figure stands out that has been attributed for the growing authoritarian tendencies of Kyrgyzstan and President Japarov’s capacity to implement them – Kamchybek Tashiev, Chairman of the State Committee for National Security (GKNB). As the main actor leading the country’s intelligence agency, Tashiev has been referred to as the “de facto co-ruler” of Kyrgyzstan and civil society organizations interviewed as part of this study clarified his role as a promoter of many of the undemocratic initiatives explored under this section. Some even questioned whether Tashiev himself holds more power than President Japarov, even if he seems to have greenlight the latter’s desire to seek re-election.

The extent to which this trend towards autocracy has been impacted by Russia’s invasion is difficult to measure accurately; however, there is a general consensus among the civil society organizations interviewed for this study that the invasion has reinforced and strengthened the ambition of both President Japarov and Chairman Tashiev to consolidate power within the executive branch. Indeed, prior to the invasion there was the impression that President Japarov was compelled to listen to his Western partners and attempt to find balance between his autocratic policies and the continuous demands for the respect for democracy and the rule of law. According to civil society organizations, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has cornered the Kyrgyz leadership into choosing which side of the conflict they are committed to: the democratic West promoting human rights on the one hand or autocratic Russia on the other—the latter of which seems to be the favored choice of President Japarov’s administration due to the perceived secured legitimacy and unilateral

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decision–making it brings.24 In this regard, Kyrgyzstan is facing a critical choice in its history where it stands at a crossroads that is best understood and captured by the broader ‘democracy versus autocracy’ struggle to which much of the international community is currently being subjected.25 And although the official Kyrgyz policy is to maintain neutrality when it comes to Ukraine through a strategic modulation of public statements, there is ample evidence that Japarov, together with Chairman Tashiev, have chosen to pursue Putin’s model of authoritarian–style crown–presidentialism—a model that our interviewees believe he deeply admires.26

Perhaps the most disturbing evidence of this decision, besides the consolidation of the new constitutional regime, is the increasing presence of empowered Kyrgyz security forces around the country, as they continue to open more offices and its members are receiving more financial benefits.27 It is not entirely clear who is funding this expanded military expense, but what has been confirmed is that the Kyrgyz forces are being trained by Russian soldiers.28 It might not be a coincidence, thus, that one of the main tasks of these enlarged forces is primarily directed at silencing criticism, both against President Japarov’s government and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.29 This new form of persecution is taking place through a more strategically opaque fashion than before and the news outlet Kloop Media Public Foundation, one of the most popular and critical news outlets in Kyrgyzstan, told us in our interview that it is becoming increasingly difficult to understand why an individual is being detained. Kloop has since been served a lawsuit by the Bishkek city Prosecutor’s Office to cease its operations entirely as a result of allegations that it failed to register as a mass media outlet.30 Failure to register, per Kyrgyzstan’s civil law code, may warrant the liquidation of legal entities, which further highlights the arbitrarily selective and discriminatory political landscape these organizations find themselves operating in.31

While Japarov’s governing style tends to operate in lockstep with Russia, there are notable exceptions. A particular quality of Japarov’s government style that has brought tensions to his regime’s relationship with Moscow is the President’s desire to diversify Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy and establish alliances with countries that can provide [personal] economic benefits. “Japarov is a man of money, so with regards to foreign policy that is all a question of money,” said Kloop in our interview. This has resulted in the President exploring opportunities to sign a new cooperation agreement with the United States, as well as to establish closer economic ties with Turkey, China, or even the European Union.\(^3\) However, every time there is significant political dialogue in these directions, Russia has responded by arbitrarily banning exports from Kyrgyzstan such as fish and milk products, despite this being a violation of Eurasian Economic Union standards.\(^3\) Russia’s weaponization of Rosselkhoznadzor, Russia’s Federal Service for Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance, as a crude foreign policy instrument against Kyrgyzstan and other Eurasian states during heightened bilateral tensions is nothing new. A recent ban took place after the chairman of Kyrgyzstan’s National Commission for the State Language and Language Policies stated that Kyrgyzstan is prepared to switch the Kyrgyz language from Cyrillic to Latin-based script.\(^4\) Russia seemingly perceived the move as an attempt by the turkic-speaking nation to distance itself from years of Russian influence in an effort to develop a stronger national identity.\(^5\)

The issue of Kyrgyz language remains to be a core tenant of President Japarov’s political stratagem vis–a–vis Russia. Whereas the implementation of the new constitutional model and the increased cooperation of security forces with Russia might point to Japarov’s undisclosed decision to take the autocratic side of the ‘democracy vs. autocracy’ struggle, it is not entirely clear that this will continue to be the case in the near future. As highlighted by civil society organizations, President Japarov, who has seemingly enjoyed popular support since coming to power, owes his popularity in great part to his populist rhetoric around Kyrgyz nationalism and his strategic prioritization of the Kyrgyz language’s use as opposed to the Russian language, which has traditionally been more prevalent.\(^6\) This included the signing of

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\(^4\) Eurasianet (2023), “Kyrgyzstan, Russia ties tested by differences on trade, language”, April 21, available at: https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-russia-ties-tested-by-differences-on-trade-language


\(^6\) Ibid.
a bill into law in July 2023 that stipulates all officials in the Kyrgyz government must be able to speak Kyrgyz for all official purposes; an action many civil society organizations believe has complicated Bishkek’s relationship with Moscow. Following the signing of this law, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov spoke out against it and called it “undemocratic” and “discriminatory,” signaling how Japarov’s efforts to consolidate his autocratic power can also on occasion create problems if they directly stand against Russia’s interests and influence in Kyrgyzstan.

While it is potentially difficult to capture the impact of Russia’s invasion on Kyrgyzstan’s political system accurately, it is clear that transformative political changes are underway and such changes, which may be influenced by Russia’s invasion, must be further studied. Although the decision by President Japarov and his “de facto co-ruler” Tashiev to mimic Russia’s autocratic governance style and reliance on Russian security expertise almost certainly belie any presumption of neutrality, their strategic decisions to leverage this ephemeral geopolitical window of opportunity and diversify Kyrgyzstan’s foreign policy constellation speak to the intensified balancing act, nevertheless, that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has forced Kyrgyz leadership to take up. However, to further define this understanding, it is also necessary to explore the impact of Russia’s war of aggression on Kyrgyz civic society which plays an instrumental role in monitoring Kyrgyzstan’s governance reforms and subsequently holding the Kyrgyz government accountable.

Developments in the Kyrgyz Civic Society Space

Just like its country’s political system, Kyrgyz civil society experienced numerous changes throughout the last decade—many of which have restricted critical voices. Despite assurances that the Kyrgyz government is protecting human rights and freedoms, notable pieces of legislation since Japarov’s access to the presidency continue to threaten the civil society space and its ability to operate independently of the government. While it is important to clarify that some of these restrictions began prior to and are independent of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the motivation

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Central Asia Program, January 21, available at: https://centralasiaprogram.org/peoples-perspectives-assessing-sadyr-japarov-opinions-constituents/
behind such legislative reforms could be traced to Russian influence and interference, both of which have seemingly intensified after the invasion. Indeed, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has influenced the Kyrgyz civil society space in a multitude of ways, ranging from intensified propaganda to direct government pressure, all of which are working to undermine the efforts of non-governmental organizations to effect meaningful change in Kyrgyzstan. These influences have served in some ways as a ‘wake-up call’ for non-governmental organizations and the Kyrgyz general public.\footnote{Jasmine D. Cameron, Ambassador (ret.) Eileen Malloy, Megan Osadzinski and Juliet Sorensen (2023), “From ‘Island of Democracy’ to ‘Consolidated Authoritarian Regime’: The Need to Reverse Kyrgyzstan’s Slide”, Just Security, July 24, available at: \url{https://www.justsecurity.org/87368/from-island-of-democracy-to-consolidated-authoritarian-regime-the-need-to-reverse-kyrgyzstans-slide/}}

First of all, Russia’s war has, in the opinion of the Kyrgyz civil society organizations interviewed in this study, empowered a domestic legislative assault against the Kyrgyz civil society space that is remaining substantially unchecked by international partners and organizations largely due to a geopolitical focus on Ukraine and elsewhere. The potential consequences of such an assault are concerning: restrictions on freedom of association and expression, criminal liability for civil society activities, and unchecked presidential consolidation of power.\footnote{Ibid; Haley Zehrung (2023), “New Wave Authoritarianism in Kyrgyzstan”, The Diplomat, May 31, available at: \url{https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/new-wave-authoritarianism-in-kyrgyzstan/}} Kyrgyzstan’s legislative sphere is vulnerable to direct Russian opposition and influence as is most recently demonstrated by the previously discussed example of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s criticism of the adoption of the Kyrgyz language law in Kyrgyzstan as an anti-democratic step.\footnote{The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2023), “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Remarks at a Meeting with Russian Non-profit organisation Leaders”, July 19, available at: \url{https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1897750/}} His criticism aims to fabricate the presence of language discrimination—as his government has previously done in Ukraine and the Baltics— in a nation that recognizes both Kyrgyz and Russian as de jure official languages. Even more, the move illustrates how the Russian administration perceives its interests in the Central Asian country, both in soft, cultural terms and more pronounced, politico-economic terms.

Drafted legislation such as the Law on Mass Media and Law on “Foreign Representatives” serve as existential threats to many Kyrgyz non-governmental organizations as their passage could spell the end of many civil society organizations’ ability to operate independently or exist altogether. The laws’ enforcement could lead to punishments such as the suspension of an organization’s activities including banking operations, undue fines and penalties, or, in some cases, up to 10 years of imprisonment. These efforts aim to stigmatize organizations that accept foreign funding—often a lifeline for small, local organizations—and discourage their operations altogether by shrinking the domains in which they can base their activities. This overt politicization of the civil society space through undue government oversight in Kyrgyzstan renders any form of civic activity politically-sensitive and, consequently, may subject an organization and its staff to political targeting and intimidation tactics.

Despite concerns raised by experts that these laws are incompatible with Kyrgyzstan's international human rights obligations under the International Covenant on Civil Political Rights (ICCPR), Kyrgyz officials remain determined to see their passage through. This is yet another evidence of the growing autocratic tendencies experienced in the country, and their relation to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine must be further explored. In this regard, it is important to note that the draft laws draw heavily from corresponding Russian legislation and would enable Kyrgyz authorities to arbitrarily discredit and obstruct the work of foreign-funded civil society organizations much like in Russia. The Kyrgyz draft laws, like their Russian counterparts, are ambiguously-phrased to allow virtually any form of activity to be construed as “political.” The existential threat that such legislation poses to civic

organizations in Kyrgyzstan must not be understated; many non-governmental organizations will either have to register as “foreign representatives” or cease their operations altogether to avoid restrictions and reputational damage. Many of the civil society organizations consulted in this study indicated a readiness for the latter path, as its leaders would not dare to endanger the lives of their staff were they subjected to the application of these laws.

The outlook for the civic space in Kyrgyzstan as a result of these legislative acts ominously resembles that of Russia’s in the past decade, which provides an alarming example of just how disastrous these legislative pieces can be. Russian authorities often use the adopted legislation to systemically discredit and silence civil society organizations as part of a larger crackdown on civil society.⁵³ Overtime, such legislation expanded to other types of organizations, including media, individual human rights activists, journalists, and lawyers—all of whom were accused of engaging in ‘political activities’ with the support of foreign funding.⁵⁴ Consequently, the government was able to use this as a tool to stifle any public dissent and criticism of state policies.⁵⁵

Besides sharing similar language and provisions, the relationship between the draft Kyrgyz laws and their Russian counterparts can also be traced back to meetings between Central Asian security sector chiefs that took place in Moscow and where discussions were held on how to limit Western organizations’ influence in the region.⁵⁶ Shortly after these meetings, members of parliament in Kyrgyzstan first introduced the draft “Law on Foreign Representatives”, exemplifying a rather particular timing. Later on, that same draft law was scheduled to be voted on in parliament on June 26th, 2023, but was withdrawn from the agenda following Prigozhin’s march to Moscow two days prior.

It is not only the introduction of draft laws limiting the scope of work for civil society organizations that is shrinking civic space in Kyrgyzstan. Public protests have been prohibited in the country since March 2022 due to a ban that is inextricably linked to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The Kyrgyz government first introduced such a ban following the first gatherings in front of the Russian Embassy in Bishkek of citizens

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who stood against the invasion of Ukraine.\textsuperscript{57} This ban has since been expanded to all forms of political protest in the country and has remained in place for over a year.\textsuperscript{58} Although this form of restriction falls outside of even the more autocratic new constitution in Kyrgyzstan, civil society leaders have pointed to a diplomatic note by Russia’s foreign ministry as the source granting the Kyrgyz government a justification to act in a way that heavily imposes limits to its citizens’ rights and liberties.\textsuperscript{59} Once again, this reinforces a tendency that has accompanied Kyrgyzstan’s path towards autocracy which places particular attention to limiting criticism against Russia and its military invasion of Ukraine. This is also reflected in an increasing number of cases where Russian citizens in Kyrgyzstan that speak out against the invasion of Ukraine or engage in any free speech that might be deem sensitive to Moscow have been deported by the Kyrgyz authorities and sent back to Russia. Similarly, Kyrgyz citizens in Russia that dare to speak up also face deportation as a punishment for their vocal disagreement with Putin’s policies.\textsuperscript{60}

The shrinking space of civil society organizations experienced in Kyrgyzstan, both due to the passing of restrictive laws as well as the prohibition of public protests, is inextricably linked to the country’s growing autocratic tendencies under Japarov’s presidency. According to the civil society organizations consulted in this study, these two phenomena have significantly intensified since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. It is thus imperative to consider, at this point in the report, their potential impact on the historic relationship between Bishkek and Moscow.

Kyrgyz Strategic Relationship with Russia

Kyrgyzstan’s geopolitical landscape has traditionally been dominated by Russia; however, in more recent times, China and other actors such as Turkey, the EU, and the U.S. have demonstrated a marked interest in deepening ties with the country and region.\textsuperscript{61} Still, Russia’s geopolitical dominance by far eclipses any of the other foreign contenders through its shared history, culture, language, and politico-economic engagement, and the invasion of Ukraine seems to have deepen these ties.


\textsuperscript{60} https://24.kg/proisshestviya/287452_zapublikatsii_vsotssetvah_vrossii_zaderjali_kyrgyzstantsa/

Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, scholars have noted that Russia has begun to perceive greater threats to its spheres of influence within Eurasia. As a result, these vulnerabilities have driven Russia to devote more attention and resources to cultivating its relationships with Central Asian states in an effort to maintain unparalleled regional power and influence.62 While an effort by Russia to decrease the influence of European, American and Chinese partners in Eurasia picks up speed, the invasion of Ukraine has most certainly damaged any form of influence the nation might have had in Eastern Europe. Consequently, Russia is now desperate to not face a similar fate and lose Central Asia and, therefore, is actively maintaining, if not expanding, its levers of influence in the region.63

While this effort to win Central Asian states shapes out, Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, has discovered a unique window of opportunity to diversify its menu of foreign policy options, particularly within the realm of strategic partnerships and alliances.64 Players such as Turkey via the organization of Turkic States (OTS) are developing their cultural and economic links with the region through greater economic and political commitments. Such efforts have begun to build geopolitical momentum and highlight Turkey’s desire to upgrade the organization from a lethargic alliance to a more formidable political union.65 Other actors such as China have concentrated on economic and security initiatives as a pathway through which to strengthen the ties between the two countries. In the context of extremism and terrorism, China has heavily lobbied Kyrgyzstan to amend national laws to secure its grip on voices of dissent, both internally and externally in countries like Kyrgyzstan.66 Turkey, China, and other international geopolitical actors are thus exploring pathways to expand their interests and influence in Kyrgyzstan, and consequently in Central Asia, and Bishkek sees in this an opportunity to diversify its geopolitical associations.

One observed push behind Kyrgyzstan’s desire to diversify its geopolitical associations is the appearance of a trend on ‘decolonisation’ which has led to public dialogue questioning the history behind Kyrgyzstan’s intimate partnership with

63 Ibid.
Russia.\textsuperscript{67} Such conversations, first developed by President Japarov’s Kyrgyz nationalist narratives and later accelerated by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, have encouraged some Kyrgyz to reexamine the Soviet Union’s violent legacy vis-a-vis Kyrgyzstan and how it has traditionally shaped national memory within the country.\textsuperscript{68} While public criticism of Russia remains taboo, many are deconstructing Russia’s image through a critical study of national memory which is closely linked to the process of decolonisation. Still, decolonisation remains to be a relatively sensitive topic in Kyrgyzstan with some fearing the discoveries and implications it could lead to.

In the midst of conversations on decolonisation, Kyrgyzstan has experienced a massive influx of Russian draft dodgers, regionally known as \textit{relokanty} (“relocators”) who have mostly been welcomed and accepted, not least because of the economic value they bring to the Kyrgyz market\textsuperscript{69}. However, some of these individuals have purportedly been strongly criticized by Kyrgyz society, particularly through social media, for their neo-colonial attitude towards Kyrgyz people, whether through condescending interactions with locals or constant complaints about infrastructure and services in their new host country. These exact interactions serve as painful reminders to some of past sufferings in which Kyrgyz people were considered and treated as second-class citizens during the Soviet period. Local sentiments towards \textit{relokanty} in Kyrgyzstan are only further exacerbated as a result of jacked up rent prices which has led some landlords to evict Kyrgyz tenants to make room for affluent Russians willing to pay a much higher premium.\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Relokanty} have also alarmed the public as a potential “fifth column” that could serve as a source of conflict or a tool to promote Russian influence, particularly because Russia might then use the expanded presence of ethnic Russians as a pretext to intervene and ‘protect’.\textsuperscript{71} Thus, the risks associated with such migration into Kyrgyzstan are duly noted and have led to heightened suspicion from locals and the national government alike.

Another tool to promote Russian influence, which has arguably intensified since the invasion, is Russian propaganda. According to Kloop, the wealth of misinformation

and online trolls present in Kyrgyz media has significantly increased over the past year, and these are particularly prevalent among Russian language outlets and platforms.\textsuperscript{72} Topics have centered around the ‘negative influences’ of Western civilisation on Kyrgyz culture and society, with content vilifying human rights defenders as well as members of the LGBTQ+ society. Russia, on the other hand, is often portrayed as a true protector of traditional Kyrgyz values and as a fellow victim of Western imperialism, an attempt to solidify some form of mutual victimhood between the two states.\textsuperscript{73} These very threats were recently explored in October 2023 by the Representative Office of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting in Central Asia together with the European Center for Security Studies (CESS) via an international expert forum on the influence of Russian propaganda in Central Asia.\textsuperscript{74} During the meeting, Dr. Rashid Gabdulkhakov, Assistant Professor at the Center for Media and Journalism Studies at the University of Groningen, emphasized the alarming fact of Russia’s total dominance of Russian media in the information space of Kyrgyzstan and highlighted all of the ways Russia maintains such dominance. These efforts are compounded with an increase in Russian funding for education programmes in Kyrgyzstan, where Moscow is building more and more schools and sending teachers to run education programmes in Russian. According to a statement by President Putin himself, Russia is planning to build nine schools in seven cities and two villages in the Kyrgyz Republic by 2027, hoping to serve over 11,000 children.\textsuperscript{75} This investment showcases efforts to strengthen ties between the two countries following the invasion of Ukraine, and civil society leaders worry that it will add to the overall propaganda work aimed at shaping Kyrgyz public opinion.

Perhaps one of the harshest consequences of increased Russian propaganda is President Japarov signing a law banning so-called “LGBT propaganda” in August 2023. This amendment to the child protection law built on homophobic trends in the country enhanced by Russian propaganda and has now codified “infamous Russian

\textsuperscript{72} Kloop (2023), “A round table ‘The impact of disinformation on the societies of Central Asia’ was held in Bishkek”, August 15, available at: https://kloop.kg/blog/2023/08/15/v-bishkeke-proshel-kruglyj-stol-vliyanie-dezinformatsii-na-obshhestva-tsentralnoj-azii/

\textsuperscript{73} Rashid Gabdulkhakov (2023), “I still trust the Russian media more' Narratives and perception of Russian propaganda in Kyrgyzstan”, EUCAM Policy Brief no.38, June 26, available at: https://eucentralasia.eu/i-still-trust-the-russian-media-more/#-text=Russian%20media%20is%20massive%20and%20accepted%20by%20International%20donors%20%26%23text%3A%20The%20Russian%20news%20narrative%20hovers%20Russia%20%26%23text%3A%20independently%20%26%23text%3A%20Kyrgyzstan.


\textsuperscript{75} President of Russia (2023), “Groundbreaking ceremony for three Russian-language schools in Kyrgyzstan, September 1, available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72168
anti-LGBTI laws and discourse” in the Kyrgyz legal system, despite warnings from the European Parliament and other Western actors.\textsuperscript{76} Kyrgyz Indigo, one of the largest LGBT+ organizations in Central Asia, highlighted in the role that this Russian–supported law is having on the rights and liberties of queer people in Kyrgyzstan, as well as on the capacity of NGOs to conduct effective sexual and reproductive education for vulnerable populations in the country.

Finally, another notable concern shared by civil society organizations in Kyrgyzstan with regards to Bishkek’s strategic relationship with Moscow is Russia’s history of managing relations with its traditional partners. Events in Transnistria, Nagorno–Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and more recently Crimea and Donbas are a source of distrust for governments that would otherwise rely heavily on Moscow for their security.\textsuperscript{77} The 2022 invasion of Ukraine and Russia’s ongoing war further undermine Kyrgyzstan’s unconditional reliance on a country that has proven aggressive towards its neighbors. As a result, suspicion has increased in Bishkek and there are more and more voices questioning the military alliances between the two countries. One key element in this concern is Russia’s deteriorating relationship with Kazakhstan, who has recently strengthened its commitments to the sanctions regime against Moscow following high–level meetings between President Tokayev and U.S. President Biden and German Chancellor Scholz.\textsuperscript{78} If Putin decided to take actions against Kazakhstan, many worry that he would do so using Kyrgyzstan in a similar way he has used Belarus against Ukraine. This builds on previous tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Russia following the 2010 revolution in the former, which some civil society organizations have claimed was intensified due to the interference of the Russian military.\textsuperscript{79}

The Kyrgyz strategic relationship with Russia has arguably intensified immediately after the invasion of Ukraine, as evidenced by the influence of Russian propaganda, general geopolitical pressures on the drafting and passing of laws including the “Anti–LGBT” Law and the previously mentioned Law on Mass Media and Law on “Foreign Representatives”, as well as an increase in visits by Russian officials to Bishkek since February 2022. However, a closer look at such a relationship finds that it

\textsuperscript{76} TGEU (2023), "Kyrgyzstan Passes Anti-LGBTI+ ‘Propaganda’ Law", June 7, available at: https://tgeu.org/kyrgyzstan-proposes-anti-lgbti-propaganda-law/

\textsuperscript{77} Interview with Dinara Oshukhunova, August 2023.


cannot be taken for granted in the near future. Increasing tensions associated with the
relokanty population, a growing interest in decolonial narratives, the geopolitical risks
associated with remaining close to Moscow, and the existing interest of other
potential partners in Kyrgyzstan all present direct challenges to these historical ties,
and the invasion of Ukraine is arguably deemed to reinforce theme in the
short-to-medium-term.
Conclusion

As shown in this report, Kyrgyzstan’s ‘island of democracy’ has suffered a number of existential challenges in years prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Its political system is becoming ever more autocratic under Japarov’s presidency. Increasingly restrictive laws and policies are shrinking the country’s civic space. In this context, historic ties to Russia have deepened as both countries’ leadership work together to consolidate their power and control over their respective societies.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has arguably intensified all of these tendencies, but the case for the protection of democracy in Kyrgyzstan is not all lost. There are sources of friction between Japarov and Putin, mostly related to the former’s nationalist and populist narratives which serve as a main source of his power. These may lead the Kyrgyz leadership to rely on alternative partnerships, which could have the potential to influence a reversal of their restrictive laws. Civil society in Kyrgyzstan, albeit under huge pressure, is still the strongest in the region, and they have proven successful at checking and countering authoritarian rule in the past.

In this context, this report argues that Kyrgyzstan stands at a critical juncture in its recent history. Kyrgyz leadership and society is now facing a choice that will determine its role in the broader ‘democracy vs. autocracy’ struggle. Will President Japarov further tie his country’s future to Moscow and risk losing a great deal of independence? Or will he seek to secure Kyrgyzstan’s sovereignty by establishing alternative partnerships that may limit his autocratic tendencies? As the Central Asian country faces this juncture, our report is now introducing policy recommendations aimed at empowering Kyrgyzstan to do so without the interference or limitations of external pressures.
Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations serve to inform the work of international governments and development actors alike that may wish to empower Kyrgyz geopolitical independence in making informed decisions as to which strategic path best serves its future and the future of its people. These recommendations build on our analysis of Kyrgyzstan’s developments regarding its political system, civic space, and historical strategic relationship with Russia as well as on our conversation with civil society organizations in the country. Ultimately, these policy recommendations aim to center Kyrgyz interests and enable the Central Asian country to have the capacity to independently choose the policies and partners that work best for it—outside of the realms of external influences that have for too long overshadowed the country.

1. Increase and target direct funding to impact-driven programmatic priorities: human rights, media freedom, and education

A strong majority of Kyrgyz civil society believe that development actors avoid engaging in ‘political’ work out of fear of government opposition and retaliation. Such avoidance has two interconnected, principal consequences: 1) if true, these actors will fail to produce any relevant impact in Kyrgyz society due to limited engagement and operational activities, and 2) civil society organizations and the broader Kyrgyz public’s views of the role played by development actors will deteriorate severely, thus further complicating these actors’ ability to operate and achieve desirable outcomes.

Increased funding should prioritize areas that can address the aforementioned negative trends in this report, including the protection of human rights, promotion of media freedom, and strengthening of independent education infrastructure. Direct government budget support should be conditioned on well-defined and achievable development and programmatic reforms in these key areas. In particular, opportunities to enhance access to education should be provided by development actors, just as these are being provided by increasing Russian and Chinese investment. This will ultimately give Kyrgyz people, and most importantly, Kyrgyz youth the ability to choose freely among a diverse set of education options.

Funding provided by development organizations to governmental actors nevertheless risks expanding corruption schemes in the country. Thus, a recommendation to increase direct funding to impact-driven programmatic priorities must be
accompanied with stronger monitoring and reporting mechanisms to ensure a risk–sensitive approach. Requiring actors receiving funds to engage in these thorough mechanisms can combat corruption and improve efficiency of donor programming.

2. Coordinate action on the empowerment and training of civil society leaders

The shrinking civic space witnessed in Kyrgyzstan in recent years is creating psychological trauma and burnout among senior civil society leaders. Often, these positions are held by women who have been at the forefront of civic efforts to defend and protect human rights, media freedom, and education. Development actors should acknowledge this issue and signal continued support to their vital work. Such support can be primarily achieved through better funding schemes that look beyond short–term projects and allow civic leaders to design and implement multi–year programming efforts that may result in higher impact yields. In this context, the right to source funding from foreign sources is an integral part of the right to freedom of association, per the UN Human Rights Committee, and must be protected by Kyrgyzstan’s officials and international partners, not least the European Union and the United States.

Beyond better financing schemes for weakened civil society organizations in Kyrgyzstan, efforts to revitalize the sector and raise awareness of the importance of its work are badly needed. Through both training programs and civil society leaders’ retreats for youth, the next generation of Kyrgyz change–makers and policy experts can be inspired to take up a career in civil society by understanding the importance of the civic space more concretely and having the necessary resources to kickstart those aspirations.

3. Wield sanctions as a policy tool to combat restrictive legislation

Numerous Kyrgyz civil society organizations underlined the efficacy of sanctions as a foreign policy tool, both the threat of sanctions and their actual execution on specific individuals and entities. While many Kyrgyz members of parliament demonize foreign actors, many themselves still travel abroad, own assets abroad, enroll their kids in school abroad, and much more. As a result, the threat of sanctions via travel or trade restrictions (to both politicians and their families) holds a certain degree of leverage to be able to dissuade their potential support for draft laws that target the civil society

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space. Kyrgyzstan’s partners should make full use of all the instruments in their foreign policy toolboxes, not least sanctions against individuals who openly support legislation that restricts freedoms of association, freedoms of expression, human rights, and political freedoms.

Individual sanctions such as visa restrictions are a strong example of sanctions’ strength in the foreign policy space. Several non-governmental organizations interviewed noted that threats to the U.S. and EU visas of members of parliament achieved their desired result: a departure from their public support for certain legislative acts—at the very least, these individuals were pushed to abstain. In other cases, where Kyrgyzstan was accused of helping Russia to evade sanctions, the U.S. sanctioned both individuals and commercial entities that were directly involved in these illicit practices.

However, it is important to note the risks associated with sanctions and their perfunctory application. Poor application of sanctions could prove to be counterproductive and instead isolate and push Kyrgyzstan closer towards Russian spheres of influence, such is particularly a concern with country-wide sanctions as the public would bear a far greater share of the costs than elite circles would.

4. Promote the use of the Kyrgyz language and combat disinformation and propaganda, particularly against LGBTQ+ people

To ensure the Kyrgyz government and society act independently and in accordance with their own best interest, it is critical that they have open and free access to accurate data that best informs their decisions. This requires the development of sound mechanisms to combat a burgeoning wealth of disinformation and propaganda that often serves to inundate the Kyrgyz media landscape and confuse and mislead the Kyrgyz public. As inaccurate information is often disseminated through media channels in the Russian language, a particularly effective tool to combat it is to support ongoing Kyrgyz efforts to promote the use of Kyrgyz language both inside and outside the government. This could take the form of budget support for Kyrgyz language–based education, journalism, and civil society engagement, among other areas. Additionally, support for independent media outlets that are currently exercising their right and duty to provide accurate, independent information to the Kyrgyz public should be increased in order to effectively combat disinformation and propaganda. Draft laws including the law on mass media as well as the law on foreign

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81 Interview with Saniia Toktogazieva, August 2023.
representatives are intended to undermine these very same efforts and thus should be actively denounced and discouraged.

When combating disinformation and propaganda, development actors should pay particular attention to one of the most vulnerable groups that are victims of these malign efforts—the LGBTQ+ community. Prioritizing the visibility of diverse queer groups across development programming as well as in education settings, together with a stronger human rights advocacy stand, can help de-vilify the group, defend them from constant scapegoating, and protect their rights as sexual minorities in Kyrgyzstan.

5. Improve strategic communication and defend the value of development actors

Development actors in Kyrgyzstan remain vulnerable to Kyrgyz public perception and risk having a worsening reputation due to their perceived lack of willingness to engage in ‘political’ issues. This deteriorating reputation can be equally attributable to a lack of planning around strategic communication that promotes and explains the work that they are conducting in the country. Noting that international development actors, particularly those perceived to be aligned with the West, are prime targets for disinformation and propaganda campaigns, they should invest more time and resources on effectively communicating their work and showcasing the positive impact that their actions can have on Kyrgyz society and the building of a more independent and prosperous Kyrgyzstan.

One tool to maximize reach and impact of such strategic communication would be to prioritize the use of the Kyrgyz language in their advocacy and outreach. A successful example of this strategic communication effort is the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek through its Instagram account, which produces content primarily in Kyrgyz and is the second most popular U.S. embassy Instagram account in the world.83

6. Engage in high-level dialogue with Kyrgyz leadership

Kyrgyz leadership has long felt neglected by their counterparts in the international community, both by Russia and other potential strategic partners. Consequently, President Japarov and his administration tend to respond well to signals of appreciation and endorsement at the international level. Efforts to showcase to the Kyrgyz leadership that a partnership between them and international development actors is not only valued but considered of utmost importance can have positive

impacts on their subsequent collaboration. Recent examples of how these broader
dynamics play out at the Central Asian level can be found in the C5-1 Summit hosted
by President Biden\(^4\) as well as the Central Asian Summit hosted by Chancellor Scholz\(^5\)
in September 2023. Following these events, President Toqaev of Kazakhstan
reaffirmed his country’s commitment to stopping the circumvention of sanctions
against Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.\(^6\) This highlights the immediate and
positive impacts that high-level engagement can have with both Kyrgyz leadership
and Central Asian leadership at large.

Therefore, foreign partners should continue to identify areas of high-level strategic
dialogue to develop direct channels of communication with Kyrgyz leadership that can
be used to promote democratic norms and values, compliance with international law
and obligations, and broader strategic engagement. These areas can be bilateral
meetings between heads of state, regional summits as mentioned above, or other
formats that demonstrate that Kyrgyzstan’s foreign partners value and prioritize their respective engagement and the role Kyrgyzstan plays in the global community.


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