



Kyrgyz Republic

Overview

The Kyrgyz Republic (commonly known as Kyrgyzstan) is a mountainous, landlocked country that borders the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China), Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (see **Figure 1**), and maintains close ties with Russia. Formerly part of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan became independent in 1991. Kyrgyzstan was long considered the most democratic country in Central Asia, and has a vibrant civil society and a higher degree of press freedom than found elsewhere in the region. Corruption is pervasive, however, and political institutions remain weak. In recent years, international observers have voiced concerns about democratic backsliding in Kyrgyzstan, particularly in light of the political upheaval that followed the country's contested 2020 parliamentary elections. In 2021, the NGO Freedom House classified Kyrgyzstan as "Not Free" for the first time in 11 years; it has since maintained that designation. Some Members of Congress have expressed concerns about democratic backsliding in Kyrgyzstan and about government pressure on independent media, including the U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Political Background

Government: After Kyrgyzstan experienced revolutions that ousted authoritarian-leaning presidents in 2005 and 2010, a new constitution adopted in 2010 imposed a one-term limit on the presidency and converted the country to a semi-parliamentary system in which the prime minister shared executive power. In 2021, two referendums initiated a return to a presidential system; resulting constitutional changes transferred a range of powers from parliament to the president and decreased the size of Kyrgyzstan's unicameral parliament, the *Jogorku Kenesh* ("Supreme Council") from 120 to 90 members.

Recent Political Developments: Amid protests following the disputed October 2020 parliamentary election and the resulting power vacuum, Sadyr Japarov, a former Member of Parliament who had been serving a lengthy prison sentence he maintains was politically motivated, quickly became both prime minister and acting president. Japarov was elected president in January 2021 with 79% of the vote amid 40% turnout, lower turnout than in previous elections; 84% of voters supported reverting to a presidential system in a concurrent referendum. A new constitution approved in an April 2021 referendum significantly expanded executive power at the expense of the legislature and allows a president to serve two five-year terms. Some observers questioned the legitimacy of these constitutional changes, as they were undertaken by a parliament whose mandate expired in October 2020. Some analysts posit that Kyrgyz voters may be drawn to a strong presidency due to long-standing frustrations with corruption and the ineffectiveness of parliament. The first parliamentary elections under the new constitution took place in November 2021.

The new constitution established the People's Kurultai as a new government body, but did not specify how it was to function or how its members were to be chosen. Subsequent legislation delineated the Kurultai as an assembly of 700 delegates with the authority to propose legislation and petition for the removal of government ministers. Japarov argues that the Kurultai promotes transparency and government accountability, while some critics see it as an attempt by the executive to further consolidate power at the expense of parliament and weaken civil society. Kyrgyzstan is next slated to hold parliamentary elections in 2026, with a presidential election scheduled to follow in 2027. Japarov already has expressed his intention to seek a second term.

Figure 1. Map of the Kyrgyz Republic



Source: Graphic created by CRS

Human Rights: According to the U.S. State Department, major human rights concerns in Kyrgyzstan include torture and arbitrary detention, inadequate judicial independence, severe restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of the press, and corruption. In 2015, the State Department recognized imprisoned activist Azimjon Askarov with its Human Rights Defender Award, leading to significant friction in the U.S.-Kyrgyz bilateral relationship. Askarov died in prison in July 2020. The State Department's 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report rated Kyrgyzstan as a Tier 2 Watch List country, assessing that the government "does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so." In May 2024, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended that Kyrgyzstan be added to the State Department's Special Watch List under the International Religious Freedom Act for the first time, citing increased repression and restrictive legislation.

Recent legislation in Kyrgyzstan has drawn concerns from observers about the future of Kyrgyz civil society and citizens' access to media and information. One 2023 law permits the government to restrict content it deems harmful to children; civil society activists argue that this indirectly targets the LGBTQI+ community. Some analysts consider

this legislation an extension of the 2021 Protection from False Information Law, which has been used to suppress freedom of the press and government dissent. A law enacted in April 2024 requires all organizations that receive foreign funding to register as “foreign representatives,” subjecting them to reporting and audit requirements.

The Kyrgyz Republic at a Glance

Land area: 199,951 sq. km. (slightly smaller than South Dakota)

Population: 7.1 million (2023)

Ethnicities: 73.6% Kyrgyz, 14.8% Uzbek, 5.3% Russian, 1.6% Ukrainian, 6.3% other (2020)

Languages: Kyrgyz (official), Russian (official)

GDP/GDP per capita (2022): \$14 billion/\$1,969

Data from the World Bank and the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic.

Economy

Trade: Kyrgyzstan’s 1998 accession to the WTO helped establish the country as a hub for the re-export of Chinese goods. The large informal economy is estimated at up to 24% of GDP. Gold is Kyrgyzstan’s main export commodity and is primarily produced by the Kumtor gold mine, which accounted for about 12% its GDP in 2022. Kumtor was managed by Centerra Gold, a Canadian company, until the Kyrgyz government nationalized the mine in 2021.

PRC investments: China has supported several large-scale infrastructure projects in Kyrgyzstan, financed primarily through China’s state-owned financial institutions. Kyrgyzstan is a member of Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative. China’s Export-Import Bank owns almost 40% of Kyrgyzstan’s roughly \$4 billion of foreign debt, according to official figures. In 2023, 43.8% of Kyrgyz imports came from China. Construction of the long-planned China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway is slated to begin in October 2024, but questions remain about the project’s financing and construction timeline.

Dependence on Russia: Kyrgyzstan is among the world’s most remittance-dependent economies. Remittances, predominantly from Russia, exceeded the equivalent of 20% of GDP in 2023. Russia is also one of Kyrgyzstan’s main trading partners. Kyrgyzstan has been a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union since 2015.

Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations

Foreign Policy: Kyrgyzstan maintains close political ties with Moscow. The country hosts four Russian military installations, including Kant Air Base. Since 2016, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have made strides towards resolving decades-old border disputes. Tensions on the partially undemarcated Kyrgyz-Tajik border erupted into violence in 2021 and 2022. The two countries agreed to a peace deal in September 2022 and are currently in delimitation talks. Kyrgyzstan is a member of various multilateral organizations, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Organization of Turkic States.

Impact of Russia’s War in Ukraine: Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Kyrgyzstan has maintained political, economic, and security ties with Russia, but has not endorsed Russian aggression in Ukraine. In March 2022, President Japarov stated before parliament that Kyrgyzstan should maintain neutrality. At the United Nations, Kyrgyzstan has abstained on resolutions condemning Russia’s invasion.

While labor migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia has continued, some analysts observe that Kyrgyz labor migrants are increasingly seeking alternative destinations in light of the war. Some Kyrgyz nationals have reportedly been enticed or coerced into fighting for Russia in Ukraine. As many as 1.5 million Russian citizens have left Russia due to the war, some seeking to evade conscription. Upwards of 30,000 Russian nationals relocated to Kyrgyzstan; it is unclear how many have stayed.

Since 2022, overall imports to Kyrgyzstan have surged, and exports from Kyrgyzstan to Russia have more than doubled. Some observers, including some Members of Congress, have expressed concern that Kyrgyzstan is functioning as a “back door” for restricted goods, including dual-use technologies for Russia’s defense sector. Since 2023, the United States has sanctioned multiple Kyrgyz companies for facilitating Russian sanctions evasion.

U.S. Relations: The United States was among the first countries to recognize Kyrgyz independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. From 2001 to 2014, the United States operated a Transit Center at Manas, just outside the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek, in support of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. U.S. relations with Kyrgyzstan deteriorated under President Almazbek Atambayev (in office 2011-2017), in part due to Russian pressure, but improved somewhat under former President Jeenbekov (in office 2017-2020). The State Department seeks to develop cooperation in combatting terrorism and extremism and promoting regional stability. Kyrgyzstan is one of 21 countries in the House Democracy Partnership, a bipartisan commission that seeks to promote responsive, effective government and strengthen democratic institutions.

U.S. Foreign Assistance: In 2015, the Kyrgyz government terminated the bilateral cooperation agreement (BCA) that facilitated the provision of U.S. humanitarian and technical economic assistance to Kyrgyzstan. Aid programs have continued, however, and U.S. officials have been involved in ongoing efforts to conclude a new BCA. According to the State Department, the United States has provided over \$2.1 billion in assistance to Kyrgyzstan since 1992. The Biden Administration requested \$39.6 million in assistance to Kyrgyzstan for FY2025 to help Kyrgyzstan decrease its economic dependence on Russia, promote the diversification of exports to international markets beyond Russia and China, counter Russian disinformation, support democracy, strengthen civil society and independent media, promote good governance, and combat tuberculosis.

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