



Britain as a 'force for good' in Central Asia Working Group: Kyrgyzstan paper¹

Overview of Current Political Situation

In October 2020 Kyrgyzstan went through yet another bout of rapid and chaotic political change, the third time a President has been removed from office through street protests since independence 30 years ago. Amid the tumult Sadyr Japarov, who had been in jail since 2017 (over violence at protests he organised in 2013 calling for the nationalisation of the Kumtor Gold Mine) was released and came to prominence as the leader of populist and nationalist protestors who gained dominance as the unrest developed, becoming Prime Minister within five days of the initial violence.

Since coming from prison to power President Japarov has consolidated his position, driving through not only his own election as President but a new constitution (albeit both with low turnouts) that has consolidated political power in the office of the Presidency. However, the challenging economic situation and recent history suggests that despite political consolidation and increasing authoritarian tendencies the situation remains precariously balanced.

Over the last decade nationalism and traditionalism have been an increasingly powerful force in Kyrgyz politics, with increasing homophobia and pushback against efforts to tackle issues like domestic violence and bride kidnapping. NGOs have been targeted for delegitimation and increasing regulation, with long-discussed new laws on NGO registration and reporting passed in the summer of 2021.² Despite this, the civic space is still freer than its regional peers, though notably less so than it has been in the past, and it is home to a number of regional civil society and educational initiatives. Corruption plays a central role in Kyrgyz political life, including the events that led to the overthrow of the Government in 2020, while the rule of law is uneven and politicised.

The Russia-Ukraine war is having an impact on the human rights situation in Kyrgyzstan, due to the Government's concerns about economic instability (Kyrgyzstan is a member of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and has a high reliance on remittances from migrant workers based in Russia) and potential pressure from Russia.³ This saw the Government initially banning protests of any kind in the area near the Russian Embassy and the Kyrgyz Parliament for several months and raiding a TV station

¹ This paper has been prepared through a range of different contributions from members of the Britain as a 'force for good' in Central Asia Working Group. This informal Working Group brings together academics and NGO representative from the UK and Central Asia to look at the role the UK can play to improve human rights and governance in the region. While this paper has been compiled from a range of different personal contributions, editorial decision-making has been taken by the Foreign Policy Centre Director Adam Hug.

² Myrzayim Zhanybek kyzy, Kyrgyzstan: Controversial NGO Law Passes, IWPR, July 2021, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyzstan-controversial-ngo-law-passes>

³ See: Joanna Lillis, Central Asia to suffer as remittances from Russia nosedive, Eurasianet, March 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/central-asia-to-suffer-as-remittances-from-russia-nosedive>; Maximilian Hess, Explainer: The ruble's rubble: Economic fallout on Central Asia, Eurasianet, March 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/explainer-the-rubles-rubble-economic-fallout-on-central-asia>. Grain imports from Russia to Central Asia have also been suspended until the autumn, see [риа новости](https://twitter.com/rianru/status/1501962684732002305), Twitter post, Twitter, March 2022, <https://twitter.com/rianru/status/1501962684732002305>

(with links to opposition figures) that commented on possible Kyrgyz military assistance to Russia.⁴ The country is facing falling remittances from migrant workers based in Russia.⁵

After an outbreak of armed conflict over the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border in 2021 that killed 37 Kyrgyz (and 19 Tajiks) and temporarily displaced 40,000 more, tensions have been rising again between the two countries during 2022, culminating in a further explosion of violence in September 2022 believed to have killed 59 Kyrgyz and lead to the temporary displacement of 140,000 (as well as the deaths of 35 Tajiks) as the result of clashes between the militaries of both countries.⁶ Kyrgyzstan withdrew from joint CSTO military exercises in October 2022, citing the ongoing tensions with the Tajiks.⁷

Further border demarcation issues have recently flared in relation to the land-border between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan as political leaders in both countries inch towards agreeing a deal (put on pause since 2021) that would see Uzbekistan secure control of key reservoirs in the Uzgen region but Kyrgyzstan receive over 19,000 hectares of farming land.⁸ The Government is believed to have conducted raids on the homes a number of opposition politicians and activists ahead of the proposed deal, taking 23 into custody, further fueling public backlash against the measures.⁹ On November 23rd 2022, Bishkek Court stripped independent investigative journalist Bolot Temirov (famous for his investigative reports on corruption) of his Kyrgyz citizenship (he had dual Kyrgyz-Russian citizenship).¹⁰ Kyrgyz law enforcement physically removed Temirov from the court, took him straight to the international Manas Airport and accompanied him to Moscow.¹¹

UK-Kyrgyzstan Relations

In an increasingly challenging international environment, Kyrgyzstan may be seen to have low-to-medium strategic importance to the UK (low from an economic and political perspective, but perhaps more from a security perspective), but there is a strong case for it holding greater interest for UK foreign policy:

- In the view of a number of the Working Group's contributors Kyrgyzstan has been fully exposed to some of the most worrying global trends: erosion of democratic values, growth of authoritarianism and dismantling of democratic institutions (alongside political volatility),

⁴ CPJ, Kyrgyzstan authorities raid broadcaster Next TV, detain director over Ukraine war posts, March 2022, <https://cpj.org/2022/03/kyrgyzstan-authorities-raid-broadcaster-next-tv-detain-director-over-ukraine-war-posts/>

⁵ Ayzirek Imanaliyeva, Kyrgyzstan National Bank predicts 20% decline in remittances, Eurasianet, June 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-national-bank-predicts-20-decline-in-remittances>

⁶ Aijan Sharshenova, More than a 'Border Skirmish' Between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, The Diplomat, September 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/more-than-a-border-skirmish-between-kyrgyzstan-and-tajikistan/>

⁷ Catherine Putz, Kyrgyzstan Cancels CSTO 'Indestructible Brotherhood' Military Exercises, The Diplomat, October 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/kyrgyzstan-cancels-csto-indestructible-brotherhood-military-exercises/>

⁸ Catherine Putz, Final Hurdles To Settling the Kyrgyz-Uzbek Border: Local Opposition, The Diplomat, October 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/final-hurdles-to-settling-the-kyrgyz-uzbek-border-local-opposition/>

⁹ Kloop, Reaction 5.0. A rally against the transfer of Kempir-Abad to Uzbekistan will be held in Bishkek, October 2022, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2022/10/23/reaktsiya-5-0-v-bishkeke-projdet-miting-protiv-peredachi-kempir-abada-uzbekistanu/>;

Joanna Lillis, Twitter post, Twitter, October 2022,

https://twitter.com/joannalillis/status/1585523143543869440?s=20&t=cdnkTtoAhjkdSmpavO-4_w; RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service, Kyrgyz Police Search Homes Of More Than A Dozen Activists, Politicians Over Opposition To Uzbek Border Agreement, RFE/RL, October 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-activists-search-homes-uzbek-border-agreement/32097097.html>; Syinat Sultanalieva, Kyrgyzstan Arrests Activists en Masse, Human Rights Watch, October 2022,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/25/kyrgyzstan-arrests-activists-en-masse>

¹⁰ FIDH, Kyrgyzstan: Rights defender and journalist Bolot Temirov illegally deported to Russia, November 2022, <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/kyrgyzstan-rights-defender-and-journalist-bolot-temirov-illegally>

¹¹ CPJ, Kyrgyz authorities deport investigative journalist Bolot Temirov to Russia, November 2022, <https://cpj.org/2022/11/kyrgyz-authorities-deport-investigative-journalist-bolot-temirov-to-russia/>

retreating internationalism, diminishing respect for human rights, crackdown on civil society and independent press and a growing vulnerability to radicalisation and extremism.

- It has increasingly been pulled in to Moscow's political orbit:
 - Subject to Russian political influence, military dependence, membership of the Eurasian Economic Union, and prone to misinformation and disinformation;¹²
 - As a result is experiencing many similar trends: cultural (e.g. growing anti LGBTQ+ and/or anti-Western sentiment), economic (growing state interference with the market to favour politicised or corrupt interests), political (growth of authoritarianism and dismantling of institutions), and legislative (laws restricting freedoms are copied from Russia); and
 - However, as with other Central Asian states, the war in Ukraine has highlighted the need to try and increase its independence from Russia, albeit while the Government takes steps to avoid antagonising Moscow.
- It is increasingly economically (investment) and financially (debt) dependent on China, despite growing public discontent and sinophobia.
- Kyrgyzstan has hundreds if not thousands of ethnic Kyrgyz who are victims of the Chinese Government's policies targeting Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang.
- It is close to Afghanistan.
- Kyrgyzstan is also still the only country in the region with a history of frequent change of the political elites

With all this happening the UK (and the West more generally) is at risk of 'losing it' (i.e. any real influence over political and social developments, particularly in relation to human rights), but has not lost it yet if action is taken. The UK is likely to have a strategic interest in helping provide alternatives to the Russia-China duopoly of influence over the country's future trajectory. Given the circumstance of the controversial rise to power of President Japarov, his rather inconsistent and un-strategic foreign policy, and unclear relations with the usual ally – Russia, there remains significant opportunities to engage with him and offer him increased international visibility.

In relation to UK-Kyrgyzstan ties, it is worth noting that President Japarov visited COP26 in person and is known to have requested a bilateral visit to the UK. The Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet responsible for domestic policy issues, Edil Baisalov, is a recent Ambassador to London, a known Anglophile, and someone who comes from a civil society background but has developed a combative approach (particularly online) to many critics of the Government.

While the size of the UK's aid presence in the country is below that of the US, EU and the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) as donors it remains a relevant player, particularly given the planned drawdown of German bilateral aid (and the erratic nature of USAID involvement), though not always a high profile one.¹³ Concerns have also been raised about the level of diplomatic focus on Kyrgyzstan within Central Asia vis-à-vis Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and on Central Asia within the Eastern Europe and Central Asia Department (EECAD) given the pressures and priorities further to the West (notably and understandably issues relating to Ukraine and Belarus). There is a desire amongst sympathetic local partners that despite ongoing pressures around Brexit that the UK is still able to work with the EU on areas of shared interests particularly around rule of law and freedom of speech.

¹² Though many sources of this disinformation are domestic in nature.

¹³ Tatyana Kudryavtseva, Germany announces reduction in cooperation with Kyrgyzstan, 24.kg, May 2020, https://24.kg/english/152054_Germany_announces_reduction_in_cooperation_with_Kyrgyzstan/

Amongst members of this Working Group there was a clear feeling that it would be helpful to find ways to provide reassurance to local partners (and to the Government of Kyrgyzstan) around the perceived importance of Central Asia within the wider region. It is important that such reassurance is framed in terms of Kyrgyzstan's own issues rather than purely in the context of Russia, China or Afghanistan and a little (appropriate) political attention in London would go a long way with governments and the general public in Kyrgyzstan and in Central Asia more broadly.

As UK is currently negotiating its post-Brexit partnership arrangements with Kyrgyzstan (presumably a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement) there may be scope for conditioning the process to ensure some specific and measurable actions to prevent further backsliding on human rights (albeit perhaps limited in scope relative to the UK's negotiating weight). However, substantial trade incentives may be restricted by Kyrgyzstan's membership of the Eurasian Economic Union.

The UK is home to Maxim Bakiyev, the son of the former President, sentenced in absentia for corruption in 2013. While Bakiyev has been given asylum in Britain and been successful in the UK Courts in legal action taken against him, his presence in the UK is often raised critically by members of Kyrgyz civil society.¹⁴

Potential Areas for Action

The UK may not on its own be a leading player in influencing the situation on the ground in Kyrgyzstan but it has capacity to make a difference, particularly by working with like-minded partners and in influencing the work of international institutions to help slow or reverse the retreat of democracy and respect for human rights in the country.

Organised Crime and Corruption

In recent years, there has been an increasing public awareness of the scale of operations of organised crime and complaints against corrupt officials in Kyrgyzstan. It is not a secret that they prefer to use international offshores and global financial centres to launder their illicit finance. Whilst, as set out below, customs networks and businesses benefiting from government patronage are a key features of Kyrgyz corruption, some of this finance might come from donor aid or from government funds freed-up by the use of such aid.¹⁵ Given the centrality of corruption to recent Kyrgyz governance failures this remains a crucial area to address both inside Kyrgyzstan and here in the UK.

Thanks to independent reports by OCCRP, Kloop and RFE/RL the public is aware of the scale of the alleged illicit financial operations of Raimbek Matraimov, an ex-customs officer on the US's Magnitsky

¹⁴ Global Witness, Former Kyrgyz president's son lives in £3.5m Surrey mansion despite convictions for attempted murder of UK citizen and grand corruption at home, March 2015, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/archive/former-kyrgyz-presidents-son-lives-35m-surrey-mansion-despite-convictions-attempted-murder/>; Hickman & Rose Solicitors, Insights: Kyrgyz Republic withdraws £20 million fraud claim against Maksim Bakiev, October 2016, <https://www.hickmanandrose.co.uk/kyrgyz-republic-withdraws-20-million-fraud-claim-against-maksim-bakiev/>; Harry Cassin, DOJ returns loot stolen by Kyrgyzstan ex-president, The FCPA Blog, February 2019, <https://fcpablog.com/2019/02/27/doj-returns-loot-stolen-by-kyrgyzstan-ex-president/>

¹⁵ As the recent World Bank policy paper discovered: *"aid disbursements to highly aid-dependent countries coincide with sharp increases in bank deposits in offshore financial centers known for bank secrecy and private wealth management"*. Jorgen Juel Andersen, Niels Johansen and Bob Rijkers, Elite Capture of Foreign Aid: Evidence from Offshore Bank Accounts, World Bank, Policy research paper no.9150, February 2020, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/493201582052636710/pdf/Elite-Capture-of-Foreign-Aid-Evidence-from-Offshore-Bank-Accounts.pdf>

list and the role of London laundromat in post-Soviet Kleptocracy more broadly.¹⁶ There are a number of different actions the UK could take. They include retaining or restoring the National Crime Agency's (NCA) presence in Central Asia. There has been a NCA officer in Uzbekistan covering both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the recent past, but this locally hired position has been removed by the NCA as of the end of March 2022 (with a previous UK national role removed 18 months ago) despite the roles being funded by the FCDO. Given the changing circumstances – public awareness, the increasing number of reports on money laundering, the allegations of organised crime's involvement in Kyrgyz politics, the role of customs networks in Afghan heroin smuggling via the Northern Route, etc. – there would seem to be a strong case for a renewed NCA presence in Central Asia rather than removing it and allowing expertise and contacts to wither on the vine.¹⁷

Matraimov is subject to a US Magnitsky sanction but not currently subject to comparable UK sanctions, and while there has been some speculation as to whether Matraimov's property holdings include property in London, conclusive evidence has yet to come to light in the public domain.¹⁸ However his close associate Khabibula Abdukadyr, an ethnic Uighur with a Kazakhstani passport based in Dubai, does. OCCRP, RFE/RL, and Kloop have suggested that Abdukadyr is at the centre of a Central Asian cargo empire and a recent Chatham House report has noted that his family purchased property in 2015 and 2016 in Kingston upon Thames, Stoke Newington and Uxbridge with a total value at purchase of £23.15 million.¹⁹

The UK may wish to consider whether to follow the lead of the US in placing Matraimov on its list of Global Anti-Corruption Sanctions and closely examine other cases that might be relevant for their use, or for the use of Unexplained Wealth Orders.²⁰

Working with the Government

President Japarov's policy so far seems to be, tactical, reactive and inconsistent. The lack of any medium or long-term vision in personnel management, policy building, and stakeholder engagement has been widely noted by local stakeholders. The UK and other international partners have had a mixed track record of working with the Government of Kyrgyzstan previously and lessons would need to be learned from past failures to achieve meaningful change within Kyrgyz administrative structures given the opaque nature of power within institutions and the high risk of corruption. However, at a policy development level there may be opportunities for renewed technical support (areas raised as being of

¹⁶ OCCRP and Kloop, *The Matraimov Kingdom*, October 2020, <https://www.occrp.org/en/the-matraimov-kingdom/>; John Heathershaw, Alexander Cooley, Thomas Mayne, Casey Michel, Tena Prelec, Jason Sharman and Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, *The UK's kleptocracy problem: How servicing post-Soviet elites weakens the rule of law*, Chatham House, December 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/12/uks-kleptocracy-problem>

¹⁷ Mirlan Kadyrov, *Kyrgyzstan on the way of international drug trafficking*, *Rus Azattyk*, May 2021, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31264502.html>. See also: UNODC, *Countering transnational organized crime, illicit drug trafficking and preventing terrorism*, <https://www.unodc.org/centralasia/en/drug-trafficking-and-border-control.html>

¹⁸ In June 2020 Bellingcat made this claim, but it has yet to be more widely substantiated, with some concerns raised over its accuracy: Bellingcat, *The Mystery of the Missing £5.6 Million*, June 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2020/06/30/the-mystery-of-the-missing-5-6-million/>

¹⁹ RFE/RL, OCCRP and Kloop, *A Real Estate Empire Built on Dark Money*, OCCRP, December 2019, <https://www.occrp.org/en/plunder-and-patronage/a-real-estate-empire-built-on-dark-money>; John Heathershaw, Alexander Cooley, Thomas Mayne, Casey Michel, Tena Prelec, Jason Sharman and Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, *The UK's kleptocracy problem: How servicing post-Soviet elites weakens the rule of law*, Chatham House, December 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/12/uks-kleptocracy-problem/annex>

²⁰ RFE/RL, *U.S. Places Former Kyrgyz Customs Official Matraimov Under Magnitsky Sanctions*, December 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-places-former-kyrgyz-customs-official-matraimov-under-magnitsky-sanctions/30992348.html>

interest include: international business practices, international law, stakeholder management, resources management, information management, and public engagement) albeit with a need to closely monitor if international advice is manifested in legislation and in practice. The work of the UK's Effective Governance for Economic Development in Central Asia project has the potential to be a useful driver of change provided it is supported by political engagement to buttress reform efforts.²¹

The Government has also instigated a major review of all existing legislation in light of the recently passed (but controversial) new constitution. This process was due to complete by the end of 2021 (despite having only begun in practice in July 2021), but is still ongoing. For example, the proposed new education law (adapting five previous laws and 50 further regulations) is being challenged by a coalition of 60 Civil Society Groups, due to lack of consultation with the expert community and increased powers for the Ministry. The UK Government should ensure its voice is added to calls for more time to be given to contentious cases and if appropriate offer support to the process.²²

After a tortured process where the Government *de facto* ceased control of the Kumtor Gold mine the Government of Kyrgyzstan has now come to an agreement with the mine's (now) former owners, the Canadian miners Centerra, to avoid international arbitration proceedings that could have further damaged confidence of international investors and donors.²³ There may be scope to work with the Government around potential confidence building measures as well as efforts to improve transparency about government contracts and asset sales (to avoid future problems similar to debate around the initial Kumtor contract).

Aid Spending and Protecting NGOs

As set out in a number of publications including the FPC's *Retreating Rights: Examining the pressure on human rights in Kyrgyzstan*, Kyrgyzstan's liberal leaning NGOs have faced a sustained campaign of delegitimisation by hostile political actors (often focusing on LGBTQ+ rights and feminism as wedge issues) that has created distrust amongst the wider public, creating challenges for the UK and other partner's promotion of human rights against a backdrop of anti-Western sentiment.²⁴ The creation of the FCDO should (if it has not already done so) act as a spur for a detailed review of the UK's bilateral aid spending, as examining the effectiveness of work conducted by multilaterals and the development banks that involve a UK financial contribution in some capacity. Efforts should be made to increase human rights and governance related conditionality on investments by IFIs.

Under recent Foreign Secretaries the UK has identified the economic dimensions of foreign policy as a key component of its approach and it is important that such efforts are targeted in the right way to ensure that economic growth promotes political freedoms in a Kyrgyz context. There is a case for a greater focus on tackling issues of economic inequality and providing grassroots support to economic wellbeing and smaller local businesses in the context of responding to rising populism. There is a strong case for increasing economic support in rural areas as well as finding new ways to ensure groups in

²¹ See FCDO Development Tracker: <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300961/document>

²² RFE/RL, U.S. Places Former Kyrgyz Customs Official Matraimov Under Magnitsky Sanctions, December 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-places-former-kyrgyz-customs-official-matraimov-under-magnitsky-sanctions/30992348.html>

²³ Clara Denina and Zandi Shabalala, Kyrgyzstan and Canada's Centerra end Kumtor gold mine dispute, Reuters, April 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/kyrgyzstan-canadas-centerra-end-kumtor-gold-mine-dispute-2022-04-04/>

²⁴ Adam Hug, *Retreating Rights: Examining the pressure on human rights in Kyrgyzstan*, FPC, March 2021, <https://fpc.org.uk/publications/retreating-rights-examining-the-pressure-on-human-rights-in-kyrgyzstan/>. This publication sets out more detail on how NGO support could be examined.

these more marginalised areas can have their voices heard on a more regular basis (not least given the sudden and decisive role some were seen to play in the rise of Japarov to power).

While UK expertise and examples for reform can help illustrate ideas and inform operational understanding, it is important to avoid aid backed projects that seek to simply replicate UK practices and structures, with a greater focus on tailoring schemes to the needs of the local population as well as learning from examples of good practice from other developing country contexts. Severe question marks should be placed around the utility of programmes focused on Parliamentary reform and working directly with political parties given the fluid and opaque nature of Kyrgyz politics.²⁵ It would be important for the FCDO to consider ways to enable funding to be more rapidly responsive to local concerns while bringing in new partners from outside traditional NGO networks.

Again in the wake of the October 2022 protest over the Kempir-Abad reservoir (part of the border delimitation deal with Uzbekistan) pressure on independent NGOs is increasing again, with a further piece of draft legislation looking to increase regulation on NGOs, with new requirements to declare sources of income, inspect offices, documents and internal meetings, giving officials new powers to sanction or close groups that they believe aren't in compliance with their charters.²⁶ The new law would create even further restrictions for the local branches of international organisations. Deputy Chairman Baisalov has previously used the example of the legal and reporting requirements placed on registered charities in the UK as an appropriate comparison for the legislative efforts passed by the Japarov Government. It therefore may be of value for the UK Government (potentially alongside UK Civil society) to help compare and contrast the requirements placed on UK Charities (and the benefits they receive for undertaking these provisions) and the requirements on campaign groups that are not registered charities with the new regulatory environment in Kyrgyzstan for NGOs in the wake of the recent laws.²⁷

The Environment and Climate Change

President Japarov's rather unexpected visit to Glasgow to attend COP26 last year provided an opportunity for greater UK-Kyrgyz engagement on climate change. Japarov has regularly referred to the Kumtor Gold Mining Company dispute through the prism of the environmental damages brought by the open-pit mining at Kumtor gold mine.²⁸ While the extent of President Japarov's genuine commitment to environmental issues might be open to question, it is possible to use his populist rhetoric on environment to generate more commitment to addressing environmental issues from the Kyrgyz side. There may be particular scope to provide support to water and land management projects not only to help mitigate the impact of climate change and improve livelihoods but to address potential cross-border conflicts. This might include supporting genuine initiatives to meet President Japarov's calls to protect and manage Kyrgyzstan's glaciers, which can provide water to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.²⁹ Given the lack of available direct funding, the UK's focus may need to be to help catalyse investment by

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Human Rights Watch, Kyrgyzstan: Draft Law Threatens Independent Groups, November 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/18/kyrgyzstan-draft-law-threatens-independent-groups>

²⁷ IPHR, Kyrgyzstan: Ensure that new legislation does not impede NGP activity, July 2021, <https://www.iphronline.org/kyrgyzstan-ensure-that-new-legislation-does-not-impede-ngo-activity.html>

²⁸ RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service, Kyrgyz President Signs Law Allowing External Management Of Kumtor Gold Mine, May 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-japarov-approves-law-takeover-kumtor-gold-mine/31255421.html>

²⁹ Darya Podolskaya, President Sadyr Japarov asks to save centuries-old glaciers, 24.kg, September 2021, https://24.kg/english/207921_President_Sadyr_Japarov_asks_to_save_centuries-old_glaciers____/; Ahmet Gencturk, UNESCO adopts resolution initiated by Kyrgyzstan on preservation of mountain glacier, November 2021, Anadolu Agency, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/unesco-adopts-resolution-initiated-by-kyrgyzstan-on-preservation-of-mountain-glacier/2430558>

International Financial Institutions and the UNDP in these areas. Air pollution is one more urgent environmental issue that requires both international and local attention. According to a recently published UNICEF study, air pollution might have contributed to up to 112 children deaths in Bishkek.³⁰

Border Management

The UK has significant third-sector and academic conflict resolution, peacebuilding and border management expertise that could be better supported in order to play a more significant role in helping prevent further violence at the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border (over water rights) or in other border areas. Recent regional efforts at resolving these long-standing disputes have not achieved the desired results, but the UK may have an interest in supporting this regional track rather than the countries looking to Moscow for assistance or the issue continuing to rumble on providing opportunities for future conflict and undermining the region's economic development. The issue also has links to the challenges with organised crime and cross-border smuggling routes.

Media Freedom

Kyrgyzstan suffers from a lack of diverse media funding sources, something that could potentially be further assisted by the work of the International Fund for Public Interest Media or where appropriate direct funding support for particular projects (including cross-border and investigative work). Political capital should be spent to push back against efforts by the Prosecutors Office, GKNB and wider political elite to restrict media freedom and the freedom of expression online, as well as the increasing culture of self-censorship (particularly those that have to raise funds commercially). Pockets of region leading independent journalism still exist (including donor backed groups such as Kloop) but the picture is tougher than a few years ago overall. Traditional donor funding can and should still assist with training on investigative reporting and on support for Kyrgyz language and local journalists, including how best to use social media and online dissemination channels.

Given the rise in online abuse (to complement and amplify in-person threats), social media companies and donors need to do more to provide psychosocial support for victims of abuse and to facilitate the holistic documentation of such targeted abuse campaigns against journalists, human rights defenders, NGO workers and lawyers, with a particular focus on women and those in rural areas without established support networks. Recent events at Twitter notwithstanding, the UK should seek to use its influence with international social media companies to encourage them to expand access to Kyrgyz language moderation, improving internal grievance/redress mechanisms providing greater support to tackle online hate speech, particularly at times of political tension such as elections or constitutional referendums or around known flashpoints such as International Women's Day.

Relations between the Government and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty have deteriorated with a temporary block of the Radio Azattyk website (over reporting of the border conflict) and the removal of the Parliamentary accreditation of seven of its journalists. In a more sinister turn investigative reported Bolot Temirov was stripped of his Kyrgyz Citizenship and deported in November 2022, in a case where the President publicly claimed Temirov had fraudulently gained his citizenship documents before the courts had ruled on the case.³¹

³⁰ Maria Orlova, Air pollution in Bishkek led to 112 deaths last year, 24.kg, November 2022, https://24.kg/english/252136_Air_pollution_in_Bishkek_led_to_112_deaths_last_year/

³¹ RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service, Kyrgyz Authorities Block RFE/RL's Website Over Video On Tajik Border Situation, RFE/RL, October 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-radio-free-europe-video-censorship-tajikistan/32101424.html>; Eurasianet, Kyrgyzstan: Investigative reporter stripped of citizenship and deported, November 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-investigative-reporter-stripped-of-citizenship-and-deported>

Human Rights

From the perspective of local human rights activists, how the UK is seen in each country, particularly given the modest size of the local footprint when compared to the US or EU, is often directly related to the extent to which the Ambassadors play an active role in openly speaking out on individual cases of human rights abuse and attending relevant trials. It is often perceived that the approach taken is driven by Ambassadors themselves (through a mix of personal judgement, preferences and approach) rather than being driven by policy. It would potentially be helpful to find ways in the Country Business plans to ensure that Embassies and Ambassadors feel supported and encouraged to be seen to be advocating for human rights both systemically and in specific cases, including endorsing decisions made by the UN Human Rights Committee. There would be support for increased trial monitoring if the Embassy can make capacity available, but there is scope to boost information sharing between civil society and the embassy and wider FCDO around early warning on emerging issues. The Government does not seem to have completed work on the long delayed 2022-2024 Human Rights Action plan (given the expiry of the 2019-21 initiative under former President Jeenbekov) and should be encouraged to do so.³²

A case is being built by Central Asian human rights activists to meet the criteria for triggering Magnitsky sanctions against those directly implicated in the imprisonment and death (through withheld medical assistance) of human rights activist Azimzhan Askarov. A case, that despite years of international pressure, the Government of Kyrgyzstan has refused to take action, fearful of the complex web of culpability in relation the situation in the City of Osh between ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz. This leaves the international community as the only plausible route for accountability for this crime. When negotiating the new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Kyrgyzstan the UK Government should be encouraged to include specific provisions on human rights within the framework of the future political dialogue processes with Bishkek. If possible, there should be scope for human rights conditionality linked to potential benefits offered to Kyrgyzstan through the agreement.

Debt Relief

The UK should look at ways to influence the discussion on debt forbearance (such as interest relief) and debt reductions and relief on the portion of Kyrgyzstan's debt held by multilateral banks (around 44 per cent of total external debt, which at \$1.7 billion is a relatively small figure by global standards) and other Western partners.³³ Such efforts could help to free up funding for services in the governance revenue budget and give the country the policy space to consider new capital investment projects. If the politics of this vis-à-vis Kyrgyzstan's separate debts to China prove too problematic, an alternative option might be to write off old-debt to the IFIs in return for new investment in mutually agreed priority areas, such as green energy. A comprehensive approach to existing debt relief could also be linked to finding ways to improve transparency and accountability over new lending by China and other partners.

³² OHCHR, In Dialogue with Kyrgyzstan, Experts of the Human Rights Committee Commend Legislation Promoting Freedom of Religious Belief, Raise Issues Concerning Corruption and Detainees' Access to Lawyers, October 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/10/dialogue-kyrgyzstan-experts-human-rights-committee-commend-legislation>

³³ Adam Hug, Retreating Rights – Kyrgyzstan: Conclusions and recommendations, FPC, March 2021, https://fpc.org.uk/retreating-rights-kyrgyzstan-conclusions-and-recommendations/#_ftn11

Recommendations for the UK Government:

- Increase the frequency of regional/country visits of senior politicians and/or senior officials. If individual country visits are difficult to arrange, it is recommended to organise regional tours or “5+1” format high-level meetings with the Central Asian government to convince Central Asian governments and publics that the region and individual countries matter for the British foreign policy.³⁴
- Follow up on President Japarov’s visit to COP26 in Glasgow and engage his administration in the global climate change efforts. This is a window of opportunity to improve the UK-Kyrgyz relations through the channel of joint work on climate change issues and an opportunity to engage Kyrgyzstan in rule-based multilateral cooperation.
- Consider bringing back the NCA presence to the Central Asian region to help tackle organised crime and illicit financial flows from the region. An increased cooperation on Unexplained Wealth Orders and bringing the stolen public assets of Kyrgyzstan (and other Central Asian republics) back from the UK requires a strong liaison on the ground.
- Examine the use of Magnitsky Sanctions and Global Anti-Corruption Sanctions in relation to Kyrgyzstan.
- Consider further engagement with civil society and independent mass media as these two groups of domestic actors seem to be the only genuine agents of change for the better in Kyrgyzstan. Investigative journalism and civic action have brought to public attention a lot of previously hidden issues of corruption and organised crime, with due support they will continue bringing positive change from within.
- Undertake a systemic review of UK funded projects in Kyrgyzstan including budget support, the use of consultancies and working with NGOs. Find ways to empower fresh thinking and new voices, while giving partners the space and resources to adapt to local priorities.
- Where appropriate consider offering President Japarov’s administration relevant kind of technical consultancy support and policy advice to address the pressing political and economic issues, particularly if they wish to develop a new National Human Rights Action Plan.
- Increase human rights and governance conditionality as a requirement to unlock stalled EU and UK partnership agreements, debt relief, and further government related aid and new investment.
- Raise the need for expanded Kyrgyz language moderation and improved reporting and redress mechanism in Kyrgyzstan in the UK Government’s engagement with social media companies.
- Negotiate the inclusion of human rights within the political dialogue process of any UK-Kyrgyzstan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and include human rights conditionality on any trade or other significant benefits offered.

³⁴ Italian Government, Minister Di Maio attends the 2nd Italy – Central Asia Conference in 1+5 format, December 2021, https://www.esteri.it/en/sala_stamp/archivionotizie/comunicati/2021/12/partecipazione-del-ministro-di-maio-alla-ii-conferenza-italia-asia-centrale-nel-formato-15/

Resources:

- **FPC – Retreating Rights: Examining the pressure on human rights in Kyrgyzstan:**
<https://fpc.org.uk/publications/retreating-rights-examining-the-pressure-on-human-rights-in-kyrgyzstan/>
- **Forum 18 – Kyrgyzstan news:** <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=30>
- **Amnesty International – Kyrgyzstan:** <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/kyrgyzstan/>
- **Human Rights Watch – Kyrgyzstan:** <https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/kyrgyzstan>
- **JFJ Attacks on Media Workers in 2020 – Kyrgyzstan:** <https://jfj.fund/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/FINAL-JFJ-country-report-.pdf>
- **Human Rights Measurement Initiative – Kyrgyzstan:**
<https://humanrightsmasurement.org/ethnic-violence-and-human-rights-in-kyrgyzstan/>
- **Chatham House – The UK’s kleptocracy problem:**
<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/12/uks-kleptocracy-problem>
- **FPC – The rise of illiberal civil society in the former Soviet Union?:**
<https://fpc.org.uk/publications/the-rise-of-illiberal-civil-society-in-the-former-soviet-union/>