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Kyrgyz Republic

Overview

The Kyrgyz Republic (commonly known as Kyrgyzstan) is a mountainous, landlocked country that borders China and maintains close ties with Russia. Formerly a constituent republic of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan became independent in 1991. As a parliamentary republic that holds contested elections, Kyrgyzstan has long been considered the most democratic country in Central Asia, with 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. Some Members of Congress have also expressed concerns about government pressure on independent media outlets, including the congressionally-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Because Kyrgyzstan is an impoverished country that relies heavily on foreign remittances, the ongoing Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is causing significant economic strain.

Political Background

Government: Kyrgyzstan has twice experienced revolutions that ousted authoritarian-leaning presidents, first in 2005 and again in 2010. A new constitution adopted in 2010 converted the country to a semi-parliamentary system and imposed a one-term limit on presidents, who are elected directly via universal suffrage and serve for six years. The prime minister, nominated by the parliamentary majority and appointed by the president, shares executive power. Kyrgyzstan's unicameral parliament, the *Jogorku Kenesh* ("Supreme Council"), has 120 members; deputies are elected to five-year terms in a closed-list proportional electoral system.

Political landscape: In recent years, the ruling Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) has moved to consolidate its position, using state resources to pressure political opponents and civil society. Although Kyrgyzstan enjoys a greater degree of political pluralism than its Central Asian neighbors, in the assessment of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, "political parties are characterized by the personalities leading them, rather than by their platforms, which overlap significantly." Governing coalitions are frequently unstable, and the prime minister has been replaced 12 times since the 2010 revolution. Kyrgyzstan's political landscape is shifting due in part to an ongoing feud between President Sooronbai Jeenbekov (in office since 2017) and his predecessor and former patron, Almazbek Atambayev (in office 2011-2017), which has led to a split in the SDPK. In June 2020 Atambayev was sentenced to 11 years and 2 months in prison on corruption-related charges. He also faces murder charges stemming from an August 2019 law enforcement raid on his compound that left one member of the security services dead.

Figure 1. Map of the Kyrgyz Republic



Source: Graphic created by CRS

2020 Parliamentary Elections: The next parliamentary elections are scheduled for October 4, 2020, but they may be deferred because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The two major parliamentary factions have fractured internally and there are no clear front-runners in the 2020 elections; it is possible that new groupings will enter the *Jogorku Kenesh*.

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 on July 24, 2020, possibly of COVID-19.

In June 2020, Kyrgyzstan's parliament passed a law that would enable authorities to censor websites containing information they determined to be untruthful and require internet service providers to turn user data over to government agencies on request. After the bill sparked protests and drew criticism from international observers, the president returned it to the legislature for revision. Draft bills that would impose financial reporting requirements on nongovernmental organizations and restrict workers' right to organize have also drawn international criticism.

Terrorism: Although terrorist attacks within Kyrgyzstan are rare, about 800 Kyrgyz nationals travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State or other terrorist groups; more than 200 are estimated to have died over the course of the Syrian conflict. Government plans to repatriate Kyrgyz citizens, primarily women and children, were disrupted by unrest in Iraq and Turkey's October 2019 military incursion into northern Syria. Some 300 Kyrgyz nationals have returned to the country, and about 50 have been imprisoned. Foreign fighters from Central Asia remain an international

concern due to their ongoing participation in armed groups active in Syria and Afghanistan.

The Kyrgyz Republic at a Glance

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

Population: 6.5 million (2020 est.)

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

Languages: Kyrgyz (official), Russian (official)

GDP/GDP per capita (2019): \$8.5 billion/\$1,323

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. Gold is Kyrgyzstan's main export commodity and is primarily produced by the Canadian-owned Kumtor gold mine, which accounted for about one-tenth of GDP in 2019. The large informal economy is estimated at up to 24% of GDP. Kyrgyzstan has been a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) since 2015, but accession has proven controversial domestically because EAEU membership introduced new regulatory hurdles while failing to confer some of the expected benefits.

Chinese investments: China has supported several large-scale infrastructure projects in Kyrgyzstan, financed primarily through concessional loans, as part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. China's Export-Import Bank owns almost 50% of Kyrgyzstan's roughly \$4 billion of foreign debt, according to official figures. The expanding Chinese economic presence in Kyrgyzstan has sparked controversy and protests, which have sometimes turned violent.

Economic dependence on Russia: Kyrgyzstan is one of the most remittance-dependent economies in the world, with remittances, predominantly from Russia, accounting for roughly 30% of GDP in 2019. As of 2019, there were an estimated 640,000 to 800,000 Kyrgyz citizens in Russia, accounting for over 20% of Kyrgyzstan's working-age population and rendering the Kyrgyz economy vulnerable to external shocks from downturns in the Russian economy.

COVID-19: The ongoing pandemic has had a significant negative impact on Kyrgyzstan's economy and is straining the country's under-resourced healthcare system. The National Bank projects a 4% decline in GDP in 2020 (previous forecasts had predicted 3.4% growth in 2020; GDP growth has averaged 4% since 2014). The World Bank estimates that remittances to Kyrgyzstan will fall significantly in 2020 as a consequence of the pandemic. Additionally, large numbers of people either returning from abroad or unable to migrate for work will likely aggravate unemployment and place additional stress on the country's social services. Kyrgyzstan has received emergency financial assistance from international financial institutions, and the Kyrgyz government has requested debt relief from China. The United States Agency for International Development has donated personal protective equipment

and has allocated about \$1 million to support Kyrgyzstan's COVID response.

Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations

Foreign policy: Bishkek maintains close political ties with Moscow and is generally seen as the most Russia-friendly government in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan hosts four Russian military installations, including Kant Air Base. In recent years, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have made strides towards resolving decades-old border disputes, although clashes periodically break out. Tensions on the partially undemarcated Kyrgyz-Tajik border also periodically erupt into violence. Kyrgyzstan is a member of numerous multilateral organizations, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

U.S. Relations: The United States was among the first countries to recognize Kyrgyz independence following 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 Atambayev, at least in part due to Russian pressure. U.S.-Kyrgyzstan relations have improved somewhat under current President Jeenbekov. Although security cooperation has waned since 2014, the State Department is seeking to develop bilateral cooperation in combatting terrorism and extremism and promoting regional stability. Other U.S. priorities in Kyrgyzstan include supporting a more inclusive and accountable democracy and improving the country's business environment.

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, with \$37 million appropriated in FY2019. According to the State Department, the United States has provided \$1.2 billion in assistance to Kyrgyzstan over the past 20 years. U.S. officials have been involved in ongoing efforts to conclude a new BCA.

Travel Restrictions: In January 2020, the Trump Administration suspended the issuance of most immigrant visas to Kyrgyz citizens as part of its expansion of the travel restrictions introduced by Executive Order 13780 of March 6, 2017, citing Kyrgyzstan's failure to comply with information-sharing criteria and deficiencies in the security of Kyrgyz passports. Kyrgyzstan's introduction of biometric passports was delayed in 2019 as the result of a corruption investigation, and Kyrgyz passports are notoriously easy to forge or obtain through illegal means. Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticized the travel restrictions, stating that they caused "significant damage" to U.S.-Kyrgyz relations and noting that more than 80 countries have yet to introduce biometric passports. Both U.S. and Kyrgyz authorities have expressed willingness to cooperate on addressing the passport deficiencies.

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