



Feature Article  
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## Russia's Menu of Manipulation in Kyrgyzstan

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*Kyrgyzstan is fertile soil for Russian manipulation. Institutional enmeshing with Russia, lack of alternative security protection, old and new economic linkages, and traditional values vulnerable to Russian propaganda have enabled Moscow to retain a firm grip on Kyrgyzstan. Meanwhile, Russia's war in Ukraine has led to greater uncertainty. There are opportunities for Kyrgyzstan to diversify external relations, but also risks of new dependencies and greater insecurities vis-à-vis Russia.*

**K**yrgyzstan is one of the countries where Russia's influence runs deepest. Moscow possesses a broad spectrum of instruments to use for influencing Kyrgyzstan's politics and society in directions favorable to its interests. Russia's physical presence looms large with a military base and several military installations in the country. Membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) ties Kyrgyzstan to Russia's declared sphere of interest and serve as constraints on its foreign policy decision making. A major economic partner for Kyrgyzstan, old and new linkages

in trade, labor and infrastructure ensure that Russia can manipulate Kyrgyzstan's economy in several ways. Strong post-imperial bonds further connect Kyrgyz society to Russia by means of such measures as Russian media



*Sadyr Japarov and Vladimir Putin in Moscow. (Radio Liberty)*

broadcasting, educational scholarships, and cultural and language programs. This study maps these major Russian levers and analyzes how they affect Kyrgyzstan.

### **Relying on Russia for Military Security**

Russia remains Kyrgyzstan's dominant security partner. It is a member of the Moscow-led military alliance, the CSTO, which helps legitimizing Russia's military presence in the country. Russia operates the Kant airbase outside the capital Bishkek since 2003 with the current contract running until 2032. There are several additional Russian military installations on Kyrgyz soil, including with bearing on Russia's nuclear weapons. During Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Kyrgyzstan in October 2023, the two states ratified an agreement on the establishment of a joint air defense system next to the Russian airbase.

In recent years, Kyrgyzstan's main security problem has related to the territorial dispute with its neighbor Tajikistan. More than one-third of the 970-kilometer Kyrgyz-Tajik border has yet to be demarcated. Since 2021, the conflict has escalated from skirmishes between civilians and border guards to heavy shelling between the countries' armed forces. In the worst episode of violence, in September 2022, heavily armed regular and irregular Tajik forces made incursions deep into villages in Batken, Kyrgyzstan's southernmost province, as well as hitting remote areas of Osh province. Kyrgyzstan responded by shelling Tajikistan's border

areas. After four days of intense fighting, more than 100 people had died and close to 140,000 Kyrgyz civilians had fled their homes. Paradoxically, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are members of the CSTO, have Russian military bases on their territories and see Russia as their principal security ally. However, throughout the conflict, Moscow stayed conspicuously silent. Russia, of course, has a history of taking advantage of and manipulating territorial conflicts on the territories of former Soviet states as part of a policy of divide and rule.

On one hand, the conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan demonstrates the limitations of the CSTO as an effective military alliance guaranteeing the collective security of its members, as well as the liability of relying on Russian security guarantees. As revealed in the case of Armenia, institutional enmeshing with Russia is no guarantee that these security guarantees will be honored. In Kyrgyzstan, the CSTO's inability to deter Tajikistan's attack in September 2022 was taken as proof of the close ties between Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon and the Russian leadership. There is a widespread feeling inside Kyrgyzstan that Russian media coverage tended to align with Tajikistan's position on the course of events.

On the other hand, rather than being a military alliance analogous to NATO, for example, the CSTO primarily serves as a political tool for Moscow to keep members under its influence

and prevent them from expanding security cooperation with other states and alliances.<sup>1</sup> Instead of approaching local security dilemmas from the perspective of regional integration, Moscow typically resorts to bilateral dealings with involved parties. This enables Russia to play the parties against one another and make them second-guess the Kremlin's real intentions.

### The Omnipresent FSB

Ever since the former KGB officer Vladimir Putin rose to power in Russia, the security services have played the lead part in Russian politics, including relations with neighboring countries.<sup>2</sup> Few of them are as infiltrated by Russian intelligence officials as Kyrgyzstan. Russian penetration of Kyrgyzstan's security services has deep roots, dating back to the Soviet system. For long, a particularly important role was reportedly played by Vyacheslav Ushakov, who started his career in the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic's local security services in 1975 and worked there until 1994 when he migrated to Russia. In Russia, he quickly rose

through the ranks, becoming deputy director of the Federal Security Service (FSB) of the Russian Federation in 2003, a post he kept until being unceremoniously dismissed in 2011. According to several former and current Kyrgyz officials, one of Ushakov's special tasks was to oversee personnel decisions in Kyrgyzstan's State Committee for National Security (GKNB), drawing on his long-standing ties with security personnel in his former homeland.<sup>3</sup>

Since then, a strong hand in the country's security services has continued to be one of the main tools of Russian influence. In 2013, Putin sent FSB consultants to Kyrgyzstan on a permanent basis to "provide assistance to local intelligence services".<sup>4</sup> In 2016, a former chief of Kyrgyzstan's presidential apparatus claimed that Russian FSB officers were present in every department of the GKNB. Each year, Russia provides fully funded scholarships allowing up to 20 Kyrgyz future security officers to be educated at the Academy of the FSB, thereby securing influence over a cadre of young officers.<sup>5</sup> The fact that most commanders in the

<sup>1</sup> Ecaterina Locoman & Michael Papa, "Transformation of alliances: Mapping Russia's close relationships in the era of multivectorism," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (2022): 274-307.

<sup>2</sup> S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, "Security Services: Moscow's Fifth Column Across Eurasia," *The Diplomat*, January 17, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/security-services-moscows-fifth-column-across-eurasia/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Kak rossiiskii general pod gornym solntsem sgorel," *24.kg*, February 28, 2011, <https://24.kg/archive/ru/biznes-info/94096-kak-rossijskij-general-pod-gornym-solncem-sgorel.html/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Rossiya komandiruet v Kyrgyzstan na postoyannoie osnove konsul'tantov FSB," *Radio Ozodi*, March 6, 2013, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/24920735.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Yrysbek Ulukbek uulu, "Kakie znaniya poluchayut kyrgyzskie kursanty v Akademii FSB Rossii?" *Radio Azattyk*, November 28, 2016, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/28143638.html>.

GKNB and power ministries, such as the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense, have received training in Russia undermines Kyrgyzstan's actual sovereignty over its domestic and external affairs, including efforts to reform these Soviet-legacy bodies.

### **The Authoritarian Temptation**

For Kyrgyzstan's political leadership, securing Moscow's support is seen as a display of strength and critical for regime survival in a country that has experienced more political upheavals than any other post-Soviet state. The political elite's subservient attitude gives Russia plenty of entry points into the political system. After the removal of Kurmanbek Bakiyev's regime in 2010, the leaders of Kyrgyzstan's major political parties immediately turned to Russia for backing and protection. During the 2010 parliamentary election campaign, leading Kyrgyz politicians visited Moscow and used campaign posters to communicate to the electorate that they enjoyed special support from Russia. When Almazbek Atambayev became president, he fulfilled his promise to Moscow and terminated the U.S. military's decade-long lease of the Manas Transit Center at Bishkek's airport. Overall, At-

ambayev's tenure (2011-2017) saw Kyrgyzstan's political and economic dependence on Russia grow substantially, while relations with the West deteriorated. During the 2019 political infighting between Atambayev and his presidential successor Sooronbay Jeenbekov, both sides competed for Putin's favors. To avert Kyrgyzstan's latest "revolution" in 2020, Putin sent the deputy head of his administration, Dmitry Kozak, to Bishkek to negotiate a deal to keep incumbent President Jeenbekov in power. However, as soon as Kozak had boarded his flight back to Russia, the deal fell apart and Sadyr Japarov grabbed power, forcing Jeenbekov to resign.<sup>6</sup> On one hand, this indicates Moscow's waning influence over domestic political processes in Kyrgyzstan. On the other hand, President Japarov has since worked diligently to acquire Moscow's trust as a partner.

Moscow was always suspicious of Kyrgyzstan's decade-long experiment with a parliamentary-style political system from 2010 to 2020. But it retained the ability to influence Kyrgyzstan's legislation and policy documents, which are routinely copied from Russia or relying on principles dating back to the Soviet Union. Russian policy experts often serve as consultants shaping the policy formulation

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<sup>6</sup> Asel Doolotkeldieva, "Violent change of government in Kyrgyzstan amidst COVID-19 pandemic: Patronal presidentialism, oligarchisation of politics, and public indignation with corruption and rigged elections," *The Foreign Policy Centre*, March 1, 2021.

(<https://fpc.org.uk/violent-change-of-government-in-kyrgyzstan-amidst-covid-19-pandemic-patronal-presidentialism-oligarchisation-of-politics-and-public-indignation-with-corruption-and-rigged-elections/>.)

process in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>7</sup> According to Lemon and Antonov, “Russia acts as an ‘authoritarian gravity center’” providing legislation to be copied in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>8</sup> Recent proposed initiatives, including bills targeting free speech as well as renewed efforts to introduce a “foreign agents” law, are largely based on texts replicated from existing Russian laws. Kyrgyzstan’s relatively vocal civil society has nevertheless provided a check on political leaders’ ability to seamlessly harmonize its legislation with Russia.

### Old and New Economic Levers

Kyrgyzstan remains heavily exposed to Russia through trade (including energy imports), remittances and financial linkages. Russia is Kyrgyzstan’s top destination of export commodities and Russia is the second largest source of imports after China. In 2022, trade between Kyrgyzstan and Russia increased by 37 percent. Kyrgyzstan is particularly dependent on Russian energy deliveries. Besides significant imports of oil products, Russia’s Gazprom has monopoly control of Kyrgyzstan’s domestic gas sector. In the past, Russia has used both sticks and carrots in its energy policy towards Kyrgyzstan. In early 2010, Russia introduced a 100 percent tariff increase on fuel exports to Kyrgyzstan as part of a concerted attack on

Bakiyev’s government. Ahead of Kyrgyzstan’s decision to join the EEU, Russia’s main vehicle for economic integration, in 2015, Russia lured Bishkek with promises of subsidized energy. Besides the energy weapon, Moscow has utilized debts accrued by Kyrgyzstan to advance its presence. Russia has constricted or written off debts in exchange for control of strategic state-owned assets in Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan’s membership in the EEU limits its freedom of economic maneuverability and formalizes its dependence on Russia. It is not an organization of equals; Russia stands for 85 percent of the union’s total GDP. The EEU is primarily an instrument for Russia to keep member countries tied to Russia and complicate their economic linkages with the outside world. Like the CSTO in the field of security, the EEU serves as an umbrella for Russia’s ambition to serve as a geopolitical pivot in Eurasia and is therefore used to circumscribe the member states’ political choices. Russia’s *de facto* control of the organization is ensured through a system of weighted representation which allows Moscow to control its decision-making organs and subordinate them to the country’s

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<sup>7</sup> Aijan Sharshenova, “Mapping Russia’s Influence in the Kyrgyz Republic,” Policy Brief 69, OSCE Academy in Bishkek, February 2021, pp. 1-2, [https://osce-academy.net/upload/file/PB\\_69-compressed.pdf](https://osce-academy.net/upload/file/PB_69-compressed.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Edward Lemon & Oleg Antonov, “Authoritarian legal harmonization in the post-Soviet space,” *Democratization*, 27: 7 (2020), p. 1232.

foreign policy goals.<sup>9</sup> For Kyrgyzstan, economic integration is about securing practical economic interests.

There are also indications that the EEU serves as a tool for Russia to circumvent economic sanctions. A 2023 study by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development showed an increase in exports from the EU to Kyrgyzstan and other members of the EEU of goods partially or fully subject to sanctions. The evidence suggested that these products are then re-exported to Russia.<sup>10</sup> Thus, there are mounting indications that Kyrgyzstan's membership in the EEU makes it susceptible to being used for sanctions evasion, which in turn carries risks of becoming the target of secondary Western sanctions.

For Kyrgyzstan, the major export to Russia is not goods but people. Labor migration took off in the early 2000s, driven by a growing labor demand in Russia and a stagnant domestic labor market. Ever since, hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyz citizens depend on the availability of

jobs in Russia. These migration flows have become resilient in spite of recurrent economic crises, such as the oil price fall, the Covid-19 pandemic and Western economic sanctions against Russia, and stricter immigration laws.<sup>11</sup> According to World Bank calculations, remittances from work abroad – of which Russia is the primary source – in 2020 accounted for 31 percent of Kyrgyzstan's GDP, the highest for any post-Soviet country. The remittance flows are comparable to the country's exports of goods and services.<sup>12</sup>

Kyrgyzstan's labor market is unable to absorb this workforce, and alternative destinations have higher entry barriers than Russia. As long as Kyrgyzstan's structural dependence on the Russian labor market remains, the authorities will be vulnerable to Moscow's demands. Russian authorities have repeatedly threatened to crack down on migrants or even expelling them, which could lead to severe social destabilization in Kyrgyzstan. However, because of the war, Russia's own supply of labor is shrinking which might even reinforce the need for labor migrants to fill the shortages. After Putin

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<sup>9</sup> Alexander Cooley, "Whose Rules, Whose Sphere? Russian Governance and Influence in Post-Soviet States," Task Force White Paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 30, 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/06/30/whose-rules-whose-sphere-russian-governance-and-influence-in-post-soviet-states-pub-71403>.

<sup>10</sup> Maxim Chupilkin, Beata Javorcik and Alexander Plekhanov, "The Eurasian roundabout: Trade flows into Russia through the Caucasus and Central Asia,"

*EBRD Working Paper 276*, February 2023, <https://www.ebrd.com/publications/working-papers/the-eurasian-roundabout>.

<sup>11</sup> Sherzod Eraliev and Rustamjon Urinboyev, "Precarious Times for Central Asian migrants in Russia," *Current History*, October 2020, pp. 258-263.

<sup>12</sup> Dilip Ratha & Eung Ju Kim, "Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Implications for Remittance Flows to Ukraine and Central Asia," *KNOMAD Policy Brief 17*, March 4, 2022.

ordered a partial mobilization in September 2022, labor migrants have become even more vulnerable. Russian military recruiters have reportedly targeted labor migrants, including from Kyrgyzstan, to participate in the war through promises of Russian citizenship, higher salaries and other enticements. According to Kyrgyzstan's legislation, participation in foreign conflicts is a criminal offense, subject to maximum punishments of up to 10 years. Thus, far one Kyrgyz citizen has been imprisoned for fighting on the Russian side in Ukraine. Apparently, this has irritated Russia to the extent that it is pressuring Kyrgyzstan to abolish criminal liability for Kyrgyz citizens' participation in foreign military conflicts.<sup>13</sup>

After February 24, 2022, a reversed migration flow has occurred as Kyrgyzstan has become one of the countries that has seen an unprecedented influx of Russians. Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Digital Development stated that 184,000 Russians had entered the country from January to September 2022. It did not specify how many of these had left the country.<sup>14</sup> The presence of a politically sensitive new group of people in Kyrgyzstan has become a thorny issue to navigate for the authorities.

### The Power of Russian Media

Russian state media is a primary tool for shaping public opinion in Kyrgyzstan. The lingering role of the Russian language undergirds Moscow's dominance over Kyrgyzstan's media landscape. Russian media outlets dwarf all other sources of information in Kyrgyzstan and are distributed broadly, through traditional TV and radio channels and newspapers as well as across online and social media platforms. Some Russian channels are broadcasted as part of Kyrgyzstan's National Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation (KTRK) and major Russian newspapers, such as *Argumenty i Fakty*, *Moskovskij Komsomolets* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, have local branches. In addition, Russia effectively uses the Internet to disseminate Kremlin-backed information. For example, the Russia-originated messaging app Telegram, a key source of disinformation, dominates among social media users in Kyrgyzstan. The main advantage of Russian media in Kyrgyzstan is that it is considered native rather than externally imposed. The Russian media narrative is seen as familiar and trustworthy in comparison to Kyrgyz and Western media.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Chris Rickleton, "Kyrgyzstan Facing 'All Possible' Pressure From Russia After Jailing Citizen Who Fought in Ukraine," *RFE/RL*, August 7, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-soldier-russia-war-prison/32538119.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Kanat Nogoybayev, "The Impact of Partial Military Mobilization in Russia on the Countries of Central

Asia," *Cabar*, October 11, 2022, <https://cabar.asia/en/the-impact-of-partial-military-mobilization-in-russia-on-the-countries-of-central-asia>.

<sup>15</sup> "Narratives and perceptions of Russian propaganda in Kyrgyzstan," EUCAM & Institute for War & Peace Reporting, July 2023, <https://iwpr.net/global->

A detailed 2023 study on Russian propaganda in Kyrgyzstan identifies four principal messages conveyed to the Kyrgyz public. First, Ukraine is portrayed as an artificial state ruled by Western-supported “Nazis”. Second, the collective West is identified as the enemy responsible for most of the world’s problems. Third, Russia is presented as a distinct civilization, a bastion of moral values to be defended from malign Western intent. Finally, Kyrgyzstan is seen as an extension of the Russian civilization, a country dependent on Russia for its security and economic well-being. Indeed, as Russia’s break with the West became permanent, countries like Kyrgyzstan, earlier seen as “oriental,” are now highlighted as belonging to the Russian world through shared values and norms. The steady undercurrent in Moscow’s narrative is to portray Russia as a big brother, trying to help Kyrgyzstan in every way imaginable.<sup>16</sup> The effectiveness of the Russian information space is suggested by the Bishkek-based Central Asia Barometer’s survey on public attitudes to the war, where a significant portion of respondents in Kyrgyzstan views West and Ukraine as the main culprits.<sup>17</sup>

For Russia, it helps that Kyrgyzstan’s authorities never constituted its independent statehood on an anti-colonial basis. However, a critical look at the past is now slowly spilling over from previously marginalized movements to larger segments of the public.<sup>18</sup> Any such attempts to uncover national traumas and critically review aspects of Soviet colonial rule are feverishly rejected by Moscow. While the nostalgia for the Soviet past makes the older generation particularly susceptible to Russian propaganda and manipulation, there is a large post-Soviet generation coming to the fore without actual experience of the Soviet Union.<sup>19</sup> For the younger generation, the attractiveness of Russia is less ideological and sentimental, but more related to Russia as a source of employment and material opportunities.

As Russian culture is losing its dominant position among the youth, the Russian government uses various instruments to arrest this decline. *Rosstrudnichestvo* is the main organization re-

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[voices/print-publications/russian-propaganda-kyrgyzstan/russian.](#)

<sup>16</sup> “Narratives and perceptions of Russian propaganda in Kyrgyzstan”.

<sup>17</sup> “Surveying Kazakh and Kyrgyz attitudes on Russia’s war,” *Eurasianet*, September 6, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/surveying-kazakh-and-kyrgyz-attitudes-on-russias-war>.

<sup>18</sup> Erica Marat and Johan Engvall, “Former Soviet States are Distancing Themselves from their Old Imperial Master,” *Foreign Policy*, May 10, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/10/soviet-imperialism-colonialism-ukraine-kazakhstan-georgia-moldova/>.

<sup>19</sup> Johan Engvall, “Central Asia Moves Beyond Russia,” *Current History*, October 2023, pp. 261-267.



sponsible for advancing Russia's cultural influence abroad, not least among the youth.<sup>20</sup> It stands behind several platforms, including "Russian Houses" in Bishkek and Osh, tasked with promoting both educational and cultural programs. Lately, there has been an increased activity of these institutions, most notably the declaration that nine new modern Russian language schools will be established across all regions of Kyrgyzstan, including the cities of Bishkek and Osh.<sup>21</sup>

### Trends and Prospects

Before Kyrgyzstan joined the EEU, Russia did not hesitate to take aggressive measures to subsume Kyrgyz leaders. Raised tariffs on fuel exports to Kyrgyzstan, termination of loans and a media attack denouncing the corrupt nature of the leadership were all measures preceding the fall of Bakiyev's rule in April 2010. Moscow also repeatedly warned Kyrgyzstan of stricter measures to ensure effective immigration control unless it joined the EEU.

However, a paradoxical consequence of Russia's war against Ukraine is that the Central Asian countries, including Kyrgyzstan, have become increasingly important for an internationally isolated Russia. Since 2022, President Putin has been on a charm offensive, holding

numerous meetings with Kyrgyzstan's political leadership in an obvious attempt to tie the country even closer to Russia. The official tone from Moscow's side has also been unusually polite, contrasting with the previously condescending attitude. Nowadays, Putin even refers to the country as Kyrgyzstan rather than the colonial, Soviet-era name "Kirghizia" that he and the entire Russian establishment continue to prefer.

Entrenched military, political, economic and cultural dependencies suggest that Russia is set to retain a strong grip on Kyrgyzstan. But a number of potential factors could upset the balance. A first factor is the outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine. A Russian defeat would have enormous consequences beyond Ukraine, especially in the former Soviet states that Moscow sees as its near abroad. The war and its geopolitical ramifications are already turning reliance on Russia into a liability. For Kyrgyzstan, China's role as a counterweight to Russia is only likely to grow, not least because of Moscow's growing subordination to Beijing. As long as Russian forces remains bogged down in Ukraine, Russia's ability to maintain its military posture in other directions will erode. This has already led Kyrgyzstan to expanding security cooperation with Turkey and purchasing Turkish military drones. The West could also

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<sup>20</sup> The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation.

<sup>21</sup> Maksat Kutmanbekov, "'Mogut stat' orudiem propagandy'. Rossiya nachala stroit' v Kyrgyzstane shkoly," *Radio Azattyk*, September 3, 2023, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/32576617.html>.

have a role to play if Kyrgyzstan's political leadership is serious about trying to find balance in its diplomatic relations.

Another potential game-changer would be if the Central Asian states, including adversaries Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, manage to take real steps toward building stability and security from within the region, thereby reducing Russia's ability to play a meddling role. Finally, in

a slightly longer perspective, the natural change of generations in Kyrgyzstan means that the tide is turning against Russia. The rising generation has an outlook formed by developments since independence rather than a shared Soviet past. They are considerably more diverse than the older Soviet-nostalgic generation, and less prepared to accept Russia's lingering colonial approach to dealing with their country.

