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Walking a Fine Line: Kyrgyzstan's Foreign Policy post-2022

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About the author



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Summary

Russia's war in Ukraine, which began in February 2022, had a ripple effect on the foreign policies of many countries. The republics of Central Asia had to quickly adjust their foreign policy narratives and behaviours in various bilateral and multilateral cooperation platforms to balance between their long-term strategic partner – Russia – and their Western counterparts. Kyrgyzstan found itself in a particularly challenging situation as it had to take into account the large population of Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia and its shared past and language with that country, as well as the need to dodge secondary sanctions and maintain positive relationships with its North American and European partners.

Introduction

24 February 2022 represents a watershed moment for a number of nations for a range of political, geopolitical and economic reasons. First and foremost, it signified the start¹ of countless losses and suffering, but also moments of remarkable resilience and unity for the people of Ukraine. Second, it has put Russia's international and domestic politics into an unprecedented state of turmoil and uncertainty. Third, EU member-states, as well as North Atlantic Treaty Organisation member-states have faced a multitude of foreign policy challenges and have had to make hard and often unpopular decisions regarding their support or lack of support for Ukraine. Finally, the rest of the former Soviet republics cautiously inhaled and have forgotten to exhale ever since that day.

Indeed, when listening to Russian President Vladimir Putin's speech,² it is possible to replace Ukraine with any other former Soviet republic and have the statements still make sense in the eyes of Russian policy makers. Yet, at the same time, Russia's war in Ukraine, and the official Russian reasons for invasion, have appealed to and found some support among former Soviet communities (e.g., see 2023 ENC report on media consumption and disinformation by Doveri Vesterbye et al.).

Central Asian governments have had to carefully observe the ever-changing geopolitical situation in the region and cautiously adapt to the new international reality of post-2022 global politics. While Russia has always been treated as a strategic partner in the majority of Central Asian countries, its war in Ukraine has made it more difficult for Central Asian governments to align their policies with Russian interests. Open support of Russia raises a lot of domestic issues, as well as the risks faced by Russian supporters as international pariahs and subjects of secondary economic sanctions. Open opposition to Russia risks causing unpredictable and asymmetric responses from Russia, which is a dangerous price to pay.

In this paper, I explore contemporary Kyrgyz foreign policy, Kyrgyzstan's relations with Russia, and how these might have changed in the post-2022 international environment. This paper was largely inspired by a brilliant analytical report written by Professor Nargis Kassenova for the ENC in 2022, in which Kassenova focussed

¹ The author is aware that the start of the war could be traced back to 2014. However, in 2022 Russia engaged in a large-scale open military invasion of Ukrainian territories which had not been targeted before.

² Full English translation of Putin's speech is available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>

on Kazakhstan's challenges and opportunities against the background of the war in Ukraine (see Kassenova 2022).

Having read the paper on Kazakhstan, I thought it would be interesting to analyse how Kyrgyzstan has responded to the war in Ukraine so far, both at the state and the public levels. While there remains a lack of reliable hard data on this issue, it has been over a year since February 2022, and both the Kyrgyz government and civil society have produced a variety of very different responses and reactions. It is these which will be explored in this paper. Due to the paper's limitations of scope, it is rather difficult to engage in a deeper level analysis. Hopefully this paper will inspire more debate and discussion, and help build an understanding of how and why Central Asian republics act, fail to act, or react to such drastic political events as the war in Ukraine.

Context of Kyrgyz Foreign Policy

Kyrgyz³ foreign policy is not as widely researched or discussed as the foreign policies of larger countries. Given this, it might be worth providing a brief overview of the relevant background information on Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy. The section below outlines the legal and normative foundations of Kyrgyz foreign policy, as well as its institutional framework, and formal and informal key decision makers. It further outlines the bilateral and multilateral relations and relevant domestic factors which might shape and inform the way Kyrgyzstan conducts itself in the world.

The legal and normative framework of Kyrgyz foreign policy revolves around two key documents. The *Constitution* of the Kyrgyz Republic⁴ is the main law of the country which informs all other areas of legislation. The *Foreign Policy Concept* is another key document as it specifies Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy priorities, challenges and solutions.⁵ The institutional framework of foreign policy decision-making and implementation is defined by both documents. As a former Soviet country, Kyrgyzstan has inherited a centralized top-down approach to institution-making. At the policy level, the *President* defines the key directions of

³ The author uses the terms "Kyrgyz" and "Kyrgyzstan's" interchangeably to refer to civic nationhood, rather than ethnic group.

⁴ The official Russian-language version of the Kyrgyz Constitution is available at the website of the Ministry of Justice of the Kyrgyz Republic at <http://cbd.minijust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/112213?cl=ru-ru>

⁵ The official Russian-language version of the Kyrgyz Foreign Policy Concept is available at the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at https://mfa.kg/acts/koncepciya-vneshnei-politiki-kr_kg.html

domestic and foreign policy in compliance with the Constitution. At the executive level, the *Cabinet of Ministers* and, within it, the *Ministry of Foreign Affairs* coordinate the implementation of key directions of domestic and foreign policy.

In terms of the content of foreign policy, Kyrgyzstan pursues a variety of bilateral and multilateral relations in the spirit of *multi-vector foreign policy*. Among these, relations with Russia have a special place given Kyrgyzstan's shared past and current dependence on Russia. Kyrgyzstan is a full-fledged member of a number of regional multilateral security, political, and economic cooperation organisations where Russia plays an important role. These organisations include the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Kyrgyzstan is a lower income country according to the World Bank.⁶ Kyrgyzstan's economy relies heavily on labour migrant remittances, gold mining, and foreign aid. Over 90% of Kyrgyz labour migrants choose Russia as their destination for employment. This dependence on natural resources and external sources (labour migrants and overseas development donors) puts extra pressure on Kyrgyzstan's ability to conduct a truly independent foreign policy. As the next sections demonstrate, Kyrgyzstan has always had and still has to exercise extreme caution when dealing with such key partners as Russia.

⁶ Kyrgyzstan's country profile on the World Bank's website can be found at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/kyrgyzrepublic/overview#1>

Kyrgyzstan's pre-war relations with Russia

Kyrgyzstan and Russia established bilateral relations in 1992. This was the year when virtually all the Central Asian republics established formal diplomatic relations with foreign countries. As a former part of the Soviet Union, the direction of Kyrgyz foreign and domestic policy was often taken for granted in the first 20-30 years of independence, and Central Asia in general was often perceived as the “near abroad” and a natural sphere of Russian influence thanks to the shared Soviet past, centre-periphery path dependence, and continued official use of the Russian language.

In terms of multilateral relations, Kyrgyzstan has proven itself to be a loyal Russian ally. From among the republics of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan (along with Tajikistan) is possibly the most aligned with Russia on various multi-lateral frameworks. Kyrgyzstan is a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the Eurasian Economic Union, all of which see Russia play a leading role.

Kyrgyzstan's close relations with Russia are dictated by a range of factors. First, there is a certain path dependence that has remained since Soviet times, when Kyrgyzstan's relations with the world outside the Soviet Union took place only via Moscow (Sharshenova 2021b). The shared past is a strong factor as it has informed generations of decision-makers and the public alike (Valenza 2022 offers an excellent argument about the power of “one people”). Second, Kyrgyzstan's dependence on labour migrant remittances is over a third of its GDP, and the overwhelming majority of Kyrgyz labour migrants have chosen Russia as their employment destination. Third, the Kyrgyz economy depends on external factors and is closely tied to the Russian economy (Borodachev 2022, p.35). Fourth, Russia remains one of the key security and military partners for Kyrgyzstan, even though this partnership is highly unequal.

Finally, the current President of Kyrgyzstan's ascent to power was questionable in terms of legitimacy. As someone who was hardly known outside of Kyrgyzstan as a political figure pre-2020, President Japarov sought the external validation and support he needed to increase his international decorum and acceptance in the league of authoritarian gentlemen from Moscow.⁷ In addition, Japarov is a populist leader (Sharshenova 2021a), and the public in Kyrgyzstan held largely

⁷ Alexander Cooley wrote about the league back in 2013, and this definition still holds its value ten years later <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/01/30/the-league-of-authoritarian-gentlemen/>, last accessed on 7 May 2023.

positive views of Russia, at least, pre-2022. Given these factors, Kyrgyzstan was largely seen as a loyal ally to Russia by the Kremlin, and Kyrgyzstan's support was taken for granted. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has changed the international and regional politics drastically. How has this affected Kyrgyzstan's position so far? The most immediate change is probably the difficulties faced by the Kyrgyz state and public in walking the fine line between Russia and the rest of the world.

Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine

Russian President Putin's addresses⁸ of 21 and 24 February and the subsequent military invasion of Ukraine seemed to have come as a surprise to the Kyrgyz leadership and the rest of the world. Nevertheless, President Japarov felt compelled to speak before seeing the bigger picture: Media reports of President Japarov's support⁹ for Russia's "special military operation" started coming in as early as 26 February. President Japarov attempted to balance this with his subsequent speech at the Kyrgyz Parliament where he explained the need for Kyrgyzstan to stay neutral given the small size of the country and its inability to change the situation.¹⁰ However, his attempts to stay neutral proved to be difficult. Kyrgyzstan cancelled a CSTO military exercise in October 2022, which led to accusations of Western backed sabotage. Deputy Head of Russian Parliament's Committee on CIS Affairs, Konstantin Zatulin,¹¹ immediately alleged that Kyrgyzstan had distanced itself from Russia as a way to please its Western partners. Occasions like this have been plentiful since February 2022, with any indication of support or disagreement interpreted as a sign of the pro-Russian or pro-Western stance of Kyrgyzstan. Nevertheless, Kyrgyzstan is seen as a "Putin pal," a nation that is friendly with Russia despite the possibility of secondary sanctions and international backlash.¹² The Russian public seems to hold a similar

⁸ 21 February speech is available at <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67828>; 24 February speech is available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>, last accessed on 7 May 2023.

⁹ As reported by the Kremlin Press Service in 2022, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67869>

¹⁰ As cited by the Kloop media agency, 2022, available at <https://kloop.kg/blog/2022/03/09/sadyr-zhaparov-my-dolzhen-zanimat-nejtralnuyu-pozitsiyu-v-vojne-rossii-s-ukrai noi/>

¹¹ As cited by the Gazeta.ru media outlets at <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/2022/10/09/18755281.shtml>

¹² Putin pal notion was suggested by the Economist in a publication of March 2023 <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2023/03/31/who-are-russias-supporters>

view according to Russian public opinion polls.¹³ While Kyrgyzstan did not receive too many mentions, those ones who did mention Kyrgyzstan listed it as a friendly state.

While there are still not enough large-scale public polls available to comment with any certainty about public perceptions in Kyrgyzstan, it seems that the existing data demonstrates that Kyrgyzstan still tends to share Russian narratives about the war in Ukraine. According to the Central Asian Barometer data taken in autumn 2022 and spring 2023, a third of respondents in Kyrgyzstan (36% in 2022 and 30% in 2023) believe that Ukraine is responsible for the “situation” in Ukraine.¹⁴ This could be attributed to the continued popularity of Russian-language news and entertainment sources (A report by Vesterbye et al. explores this issue in depth).

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to state that the Kyrgyz public supports Russia as there have been quite a few protest actions against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as humanitarian assistance sent to Ukraine from civil society activists. The anti-war protests were not particularly numerous, but they scared the Kyrgyz authorities enough to ban any protest actions in several locations around the capital city of Bishkek (including locations near the Russian Embassy).¹⁵

Formally, Kyrgyzstan has not shown obvious support to either Ukraine or Russia. As a nation that is dependent on both the Russian economy and Western development aid, Kyrgyzstan finds itself in a very challenging position, where expressing any foreign policy preferences can lead to real and serious repercussions. On the one hand lies the risk of secondary sanctions against “Putin pals,” and on the other the risk of Russia’s notoriously asymmetric responses to any signs of disloyalty.

¹³ Russian Public Opinion Research Centre 2022, "Friends and ill-wishers amidst the special operation," VCIOM Analytical review, available at <https://wciom.com/press-release/friends-and-ill-wishers-amidst-the-special-operation>, last accessed on 16 April 2023. While the reliability and validity of Russian public opinion polls might be questioned since VCIOM is a state-controlled pollster, such data provides some insight and indication of what the Russian public might think. In the absence of other alternatives, this is potentially the only available way to get some understanding of public opinions in Russia.

¹⁴ Central Asia Barometer's data is available at <https://ca-barometer.org/assets/files/froala/e4300ab28a6b259a55aec74397ef77497e9b46aa.pdf>

¹⁵ Azattyk news, dated April 2nd, 2022, available in Russian at <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31782330.html>

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