

Kyrgyzstan

by Erica Marat

Capital: Bishkek
Population: 5.6 million
GNI/capita, PPP: US\$2,220

Source: The data above are drawn from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators 2014*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Electoral Process	6.00	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.00	5.50	5.50	5.50
Civil Society	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.75	5.00	4.75	4.75	4.75	4.50
Independent Media	5.75	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.25	6.25	6.00
National Democratic Governance	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.75	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50
Local Democratic Governance	5.75	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.25	6.25
Judicial Framework and Independence	5.50	5.50	5.50	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25
Corruption	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25
Democracy Score	5.64	5.68	5.68	5.93	6.04	6.21	6.11	6.00	5.96	5.89

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s). The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the three years since the April 2010 ouster of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, Kyrgyzstan has developed the most dynamic political system in post-Soviet Central Asia. In 2013, government leadership promised to uphold the schedule for parliamentary and presidential elections in 2015 and 2017, which would mean breaking a decade-long pattern of early elections that typically served to strengthen the incumbent. Political parties appear to be diversifying, and some regional political parties that won local elections in 2012 are preparing nationwide campaigns. There are also parties that strive to represent the interests of specific social groups, such as migrants and entrepreneurs, rather than self-interested political cliques.

Online media outlets and newspapers offer a growing range of views. Some attempts to restore Uzbek-language media were made during the year, mostly with the support of international donors. Ferghana News, a popular site that was officially blocked for its “extremist” content in 2011, became fully available again as the result of an April 2013 court ruling.

Kyrgyzstan’s civil society sector continues to diversify and expand its reach to vulnerable groups, though most of these positive developments take place in the capital. In 2013, a number of proposed legal changes threatened the health of civil society operations but were pushed back under pressure from NGOs and watchdogs.

Notwithstanding these signs of progress, endemic institutional weaknesses of national and local government agencies, the unreformed judicial sector, and the intermittent rule of law continue to hamper Kyrgyzstan’s democratic gains. Frequent changes in the composition of the ruling coalition in 2010–12 undermined the continuity of government policies. Political parties remain too weak to perform as coherent units, and the parliament is composed primarily of political forces acting to protect their individual business interests. Corruption and nepotism continue to plague government agencies.

Kyrgyzstan’s parliament still lacks specialized committees designed to address issues related to gender and ethnic minorities. Three years after their introduction, quotas for female, youth, and ethnic minority representation in parliament have not been filled—indeed, the number of non-Kyrgyz and female deputies has continued to fall. Perpetrators of the June 2010 ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, which took the lives of nearly 470 people, predominantly ethnic Uzbeks, still have not been brought to justice.

The number of “rent-a-mob” protests in Bishkek has significantly declined since 2010, and most political forces resolve their issues within the halls of the parliament. However, organized protests shifted to rural areas in 2013, calling for the nationalization of Kumtor, the gold mining company operated by Centerra Gold of Canada. It is likely that the protests were an attempt by opposition groups

to destabilize the political situation in Kyrgyzstan by fueling nationalist and populist complaints, but neither the government nor the mass media had identified any suspects by year's end.

National Democratic Governance. Political actors have yet to internalize the separation of powers enshrined by the 2010 constitution, and members of parliament continue to prioritize their own views or business interests over broader policy concerns. In April, the presidential administration adopted a long-awaited “Concept of Development of National Unity and Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Kyrgyz Republic,” a symbolic step in improving relations between the country's ethnic groups. Implementation of the concept—which is broad, and vulnerable to selective interpretation—proved challenging in 2013. Opposition forces found a rallying point in the government's new negotiations over the Kumtor gold mine, stirring up protests with nationalist rhetoric and accusing the Atambayev administration of incompetence. *Kyrgyzstan's rating for national democratic governance remains unchanged at 6.50.*

Electoral Process. Political parties in Kyrgyzstan remain institutionally weak and rely heavily on individuals' popularity or wealth to attract votes. Parties currently represented in the parliament and local councils, as well as newly registered parties, spent much of 2013 gearing up for parliamentary and presidential elections in 2015 and 2017. Local elections in August in the district of Kara-Suu in Osh were marked by a violent fight in front of one of the voting precincts between representatives of several political parties. *Kyrgyzstan's rating for electoral process remains unchanged at 5.50.*

Civil Society. Kyrgyzstan's civil society is becoming more diverse and vibrant. In 2013, a number of proposed legal changes threatened the health of civil society operations but were rejected under pressure from NGOs and watchdogs. The most controversial of these—a law closely resembling Russia's “foreign agents” law—remained under discussion at year's end after President Almazbek Atambayev refused to approve it. The government and the parliament do sometimes collaborate with civil society groups in designing policy programs and election monitoring efforts, and NGOs regularly generate discussions in mass media on human rights, political reforms, and other issues. As civil society develops the strength to effectively lobby for diverse causes and against restrictive legislation, *Kyrgyzstan's rating for civil society improves from 4.75 to 4.50.*

Independent Media. Despite proposals in parliament to ban “extremist” or “anti-Kyrgyzstan” content, the trend since 2010 has been toward greater media openness. Online news sources are particularly diverse, ranging from straight news reporting to long-form, analytical pieces. The Uzbek-language media outlets that were shut down following ethnic violence in 2010 remain closed, but new media outlets publishing in Uzbek as well as in Kyrgyz and Russian have been launched

due to international support. In 2013, a regional court challenged a 2011 ban against the popular Fergana News website on the basis that only a court, and not the parliament, may take action to block online content. The website was officially available through all Kyrgyz internet service providers at year's end. As a result of slowly improving environment for Uzbek-language media, *Kyrgyzstan's rating for independent media improves from 6.25 to 6.00.*

Local Democratic Governance. In general, local governments have little capacity to implement policy or respond to their constituents' concerns, and most local government officials demonstrate low efficiency and professionalism. On 5 December, Prime Minister Jantoro Satybaldiyev fired powerful Osh mayor Melis Myrzakmatov abruptly, without public explanation. *Kyrgyzstan's rating for local democratic governance remains unchanged at 6.25.*

Judicial Framework and Independence. Kyrgyzstan's judicial sector remains in dire need of reform. Political pressure, corruption, and the weak capacity of judicial employees are the main obstacles to the administration of justice. Azimjon Askarov, an ethnic-Uzbek human rights activist, remained in prison throughout 2013, while a well-known Chechen drug lord believed to have ties to President Atambayev was released on questionable grounds. After a two-year delay, appointments were made to the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court, the body responsible for interpreting the 2010 constitution. *Kyrgyzstan's rating for judicial framework and independence remains unchanged at 6.25.*

Corruption. The state of corruption in Kyrgyzstan has improved slightly since the removal of Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2010, but graft remains widespread and the government still has no unified anticorruption policy. Several officials were arrested on corruption charges in 2013, all of them from opposition political parties. Polling suggests that citizens have not noticed significant changes in their daily lives. *Kyrgyzstan's rating for corruption remains unchanged at 6.25.*

Outlook for 2014. The year 2014 will be marked by intensifying competition among national political parties in preparation for parliamentary elections in 2015. Regional parties, too, will seek to boost their national visibility, including former Osh Mayor Melis Myrzakamatov's Uluttar Birimdigi, and the labor migrant party, Zamandash. However, local parties will find it difficult to attract the same level of media coverage as those parties represented in the parliament.

As political competition between local and national political parties intensifies, mass protests may resume in rural areas. Such protests are likely to revolve around competition for local political dominance, but they may also exploit issues that concern the country at large, such as calls to nationalize the Kumtor gold mine.

President Atambayev may continue to expand his influence in the parliament, particularly if Ata-Jurt, Ar-Namys, Ata-Meken, and other parties remain weakened by infighting among their lead figures.

The government's ethnic reconciliation program, adopted in 2013, will be put to the test in 2014. International support will be key to implementing some of its core ambitions, including raising the prestige of both Kyrgyz and minority languages in schools throughout the country, as well as supporting mass media outlets that publish in minority languages.

The situation in southern Kyrgyzstan will remain tense, mostly because local government lacks the capacity to ensure the equal treatment of all ethnic groups living in the region. Although some degree of normalcy has returned to daily life in most urban areas in Osh, ethnic Uzbeks remain vulnerable to random abuse by corrupt local law-enforcement agencies. Political competition among major political parties will likely revive both the nationalist voices that seek to discriminate against ethnic minorities and those that advocate inclusion.

MAIN REPORT

National Democratic Governance

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.75	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50

During the first two years under the 2010 constitution, Kyrgyzstan’s parliament produced four different ruling coalitions. The most recent reorganization occurred in August 2012, when Prime Minister Omurbek Babanov resigned amid accusations of corruption and inefficient economic policies. The subsequent coalition included President Almazbek Atambayev’s Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK), Ar-Namys (Dignity), and Ata-Meken (Motherland), with Babanov’s Respublika party joining Ata-Jurt (Fatherland) in the parliamentary opposition.

The new constitution grants greater powers to parliament and includes several provisions to prevent the emergence of a single, dominant leader. No one political party may receive more than 65 of the parliament’s 120 seats, and presidents are limited to one six-year term. Media in Bishkek closely follow the activities of the parliament and executive branch, providing an important check on lawmakers. Members of parliament (MPs), the president, and government employees are generally receptive to criticism from the media, and often directly respond to negative coverage.

A number of serious barriers to democratic transition remain. Kyrgyzstan’s constitution is still very new, and political actors have yet to fully internalize the separation of powers. President Atambayev continues to use SDPK (of which he is no longer formally a member) as a vehicle to advance the interests of his presidency. “It is the only one [party] that I can rely on,” the president said in December 2013.¹ At other times, the parliament has failed to take responsibility for important issues that should fall under its purview. For instance, the parliament never acted to lift the ban it had imposed on the Fergana News site in 2011, even after it had effectively been reversed by a court ruling.

High levels of absenteeism slowed parliamentary work throughout 2013, with MPs often prioritizing their own views or business interests over broader policy concerns. Most lawmakers are primarily concerned with maintaining voter support in their parties’ regional strongholds and therefore focus on local issues or procedural matters, rather than nationwide interests. In general, the parliament tends to impose new taxes and new regulation for society and institutions, rather than creating opportunities for economic growth. For example, instead of seriously discussing the capacity of Kyrgyzstan’s higher education institutions to counter rising youth unemployment, MPs in June met for a Soviet-style dressing-down of university rectors, who were called upon to fulfill their “patriotic duty” by guaranteeing jobs to 30–50 percent of graduates.² (The bill they proposed did not pass, however.)

Over the past two years, Kyrgyzstan's government and parliament have regularly proposed legislation impinging on fundamental civil liberties. In late 2012, the parliament implemented a harsher version of former president Bakiyev's 2009 law limiting religious freedoms. The amended law prohibits students from traveling abroad for religious education without the state's permission, requires foreign religious organizations to obtain a state license to conduct activities in Kyrgyzstan, and increases censorship of religious literature. The legislation was passed quietly, without open discussion in the parliament, and quickly signed by President Atambayev.³ Despite international and domestic criticism, in 2013 the Ministry of Justice and the State Committee on National Security prepared further revisions to the controversial law that would punish foreign religious missionaries for proselytizing in Kyrgyzstan.⁴ Kyrgyz lawmakers further proposed outlawing "preaching" in educational institutions.⁵ At year's end, the parliament had not yet voted on these latest amendments.

Opposition forces launched several unsuccessful attempts to overthrow the government in 2013. The most visible of these centered around negotiations with Canada-based Centerra Gold over Kyrgyzstan's ownership stake in the Kumtor gold mine. Centerra Gold's original deal with Kyrgyz leadership was renegotiated with minor changes under president Bakiyev in 2009. In February 2013—after years of pressure from local and nationalist forces to pursue a more favorable arrangement⁶—the parliament scrapped the 2009 agreement, sending the government back to the negotiating table with Centerra. When the government proposed a deal in which Kyrgyzstan would trade its 32.7 percent stake in Centerra for a 50 percent share of the Kumtor mine, the parliament blocked the bill, demanding no less than 67 percent of Kumtor.⁷

Using nationalist rhetoric, the opposition accused the Atambayev administration of incompetence in the Kumtor negotiations, reigniting protests that had begun in October 2012 under the leadership of Ata-Jurt head Kamchybek Tashiev. (Tashiev and several of his supporters scaled the fence surrounding the parliament building before being arrested for attempting a coup d'état.⁸) In April 2013, opposition leader Azimbek Beknazarov (of the Banner National Revival "Asaba" party) bussed men from his native village to Bishkek with similar demands to nationalize Kumtor. His protest failed to gather momentum and quickly dissipated. Observers from the media noted that protestors were not genuinely interested in supporting Beknazarov, but joined the politician for a prospect to receive financial compensation.⁹

Additional rallies followed in Jeti-Oguz and Karakol, the two districts nearest Kumtor.¹⁰ In June, several hundred men protested in Jeti-Oguz and halted production at the mine, but other operations continued at Kumtor. Rather than turning to the police, the government sent officials from Bishkek to negotiate with the protestors. Four months later, in Karakol, protesters captured oblast-leader Emilbek Kaptagayev, demanding the right to replace him with someone would be better able to represent their interests. This time, the central government deployed special police forces to free Kaptagayev and disperse the demonstrators.¹¹ Several people were wounded in clashes between the police and protestors.¹²

Neither the presidential administration nor the parliament has been able to preempt sabotage of mining operations organized at the local level because of unclear policy and weak administrative coordination with local governments. As local governments are often unable to meet the needs of their residents or perform basic administrative duties, villagers living near mining areas distrust central and local government policies and become easy targets for nationalist and antigovernment rhetoric.

Nevertheless, Kyrgyzstan's government remained stable during 2013. Political infighting within and between parties continued, however, usually caused by competition for finances and party leadership posts. All parties represented in the parliament have experienced deep internal splits since the 2012 elections. With the exception of SPDK, every party has lost some of their MPs to new splinter groups. Some MPs allege that internal disagreements have considerably weakened Ata-Jurt and Ar-Namys as they enter the next elections.¹³ The instability of the parliament seems to leave more power to the presidential office than intended under the new constitution, allowing Atambaev to strengthen his position as the parliament continues to fumble and falter.

Three years after the June 2010 ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, discrimination persists. Ethnic minorities, especially ethnic Uzbeks, remain underrepresented in the parliament and the government compared with previous years. In general, political forces have avoided discussion of interethnic relations, especially in southern Kyrgyzstan, leaving the burden of peace building and reconciliation to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). However, in April 2013, the government took a step forward with the adoption of a long-anticipated Concept of Development of National Unity and Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Kyrgyz Republic.¹⁴ According to the head of the Department of Ethnic and Religious Policy and Interaction, the concept is the product of over three years of debate and represents a broad consensus among nationalist MPs, human rights NGOs, and the government. The concept's goal is to spread the use of Kyrgyz as a unifying state language while also promoting multilingualism and instilling respect for the rights of minority groups. It moves away from defining the Kyrgyz as a "state-making ethnicity," contrary to the demands of the nationalists involved in drafting the concept.

Implementation of the concept—which is broad and vulnerable to selective interpretation—proved challenging in 2013. Many NGOs complained that the concept did not adequately protect minority rights. Nationalists, meanwhile, focused on promoting the Kyrgyz language, largely ignoring the concept's other goals. Planned efforts to spread Kyrgyz language will include setting up multilingual kindergartens, as well as translating more literary works into Kyrgyz for readers of all ages.

Another problem with the concept is that it relies heavily on program implementation at the local level, which local governments are not currently equipped to provide. For the concept to have a real impact on interethnic relations, Bishkek will need to invest massively in promoting Kyrgyz and minority languages, training local officials, and organizing community initiatives.

Russian president Vladimir Putin visited Bishkek twice in 2013, both times offering Kyrgyzstan greater economic and military assistance in (implicit) exchange for a reduction in Western influence. In June, Kyrgyzstan's parliament voted in support of Atambayev's decision to cancel the contract for the U.S. military transit center at Manas Airport. This decision was made shortly after Moscow's promise to write off \$500 million of Kyrgyzstan's debt and construct hydropower stations on the Naryn River in Kyrgyzstan,¹⁵ an offer the United States declined to counter. It also followed the U.S. Attorney's announcement that it would not be pursuing criminal charges for insider trading against former president Bakiyev's son, Maksim. Some analysts believe the Kyrgyzstani government had been expecting the U.S. to extradite the young Bakiyev to Bishkek.

A special working group set up by the Kyrgyz government in 2013 to design a roadmap for joining the Russia-led Eurasian Customs Union has yet to produce a final document. There is speculation that the ongoing delay may be a strategy on the part of the Atambayev administration to appease popular concerns about the union's potential impact on Kyrgyzstan's small and medium-sized businesses. Kyrgyzstan is already a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and has demanded that it be allowed to retain the WTO's low customs tariffs, particularly with China, after joining Russia's customs union. In the final days of 2013, Deputy Prime Minister Djoomart Otorbayev announced that a new road map would be prepared by spring 2014, adding that Kyrgyzstan would need \$200 million from the union for market and border security support—a demand likely to delay the signatory process for another year.¹⁶

Electoral Process

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
6.00	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.00	5.50	5.50	5.50

Political parties in Kyrgyzstan remain institutionally weak and rely heavily on individuals' popularity or wealth to attract votes. Since 2010, President Atambayev's SPDK has been the only party to consistently win local elections or develop nationwide name-recognition.

Particularly in local elections, voters cast ballots for personalities, rather than parties or platforms. Currently, only two local parties—Zamandash and Reforma—have a clearly defined message (the former represents the interests of labor migrants working in Russia, while the latter advocates for the entrepreneurial community in Bishkek). In October, the Ar-Namys (Dignity) party suggested that the electoral code be amended to allow individual MPs to run as independent candidates, but the initiative received limited support in the legislature.

President Atambayev and most political forces represented in the parliament have expressed their determination to hold the Kyrgyzstan's next parliamentary and presidential elections on schedule, in 2015 and 2017, respectively.¹⁷ This would represent a step forward, as Atambayev's predecessors, Askar Akayev and

Kurmanbek Bakiyev, consistently used snap elections to bolster their preferred parties’ majorities in the parliament.

In 2013, political parties and individual politicians were already preparing for the next elections. Members of parties with representation in the parliament began campaigning in their districts to assure their individual slots on party lists and lay the groundwork for electoral victory. Local parties, such as former Osh mayor Melis Myrzakmatov’s Uluttar Birimdigi (Unity of Ethnicities), opened offices in Bishkek and other parts of the country, suggesting their interest in gaining national attention. The overall number of political parties has nearly doubled since the last parliamentary elections, totalling 350 in 2013.¹⁸

Article 72 of the Kyrgyz Electoral Code requires that 15 percent of each party’s candidates be non-Kyrgyz. However, the code provides no guidance on dividing those spots among different ethnic groups, nor does it regulate where (in what position relative to other candidates) they must appear on party lists. A quota requiring that one-third of parliamentary seats go to female deputies has been similarly ineffective.

Only one district, Kara-Suu (in Osh province), held local elections in 2013. On election day, a violent fight broke out between representatives of several political parties in front of one of the voting precincts. While details of the skirmish remain unclear, members of local Meken Yntymagy (Fatherland Unity), Onuguu (Development), and SDPK were injured.¹⁹ The fight reportedly broke out over allegations of ballot falsification.

Civil Society

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.75	5.00	4.75	4.75	4.75	4.50

Civil society is becoming increasingly vibrant, despite regular efforts by some lawmakers to circumscribe NGO activities. In 2013, a number of proposed legal changes threatened the health of civil society operations but were rejected under pressure from NGOs and watchdogs. The most serious of these remained under discussion at year’s end after President Atambayev declined to approve it.

The year witnessed several attempts to introduce legislation with potentially negative repercussions for civil society organizations. These included controversial reporting requirements and other new oversight mechanisms added to a draft law on money laundering,²⁰ as well as a draft law imposing fines on anyone affiliated with unregistered NGOs.²¹ A treason law proposed by Ar-Namys party MP Bakir Uulu would have made sharing “state secrets” with foreign organizations illegal.²² All three measures were rejected in parliament after negative feedback and pressure from domestic and international NGOs.

The most serious assault on civil society organizations in 2013 was a bill seemingly modeled on Russia’s 2012 “foreign agents” law.²³ Proposed by Uulu and another Ar-Namys deputy, the legislation would have enabled the Kyrgyzstani

government to brand as a “foreign agent” any NGO receiving financial support from abroad or engaging in vaguely defined “political activities.” Russia’s “foreign agents” law has been interpreted expansively, leading to hundreds of audits and prosecutions of NGOs. Resounding criticism from Kyrgyzstani NGOs and international watchdog groups prompted President Atambayev to publicly declare his own opposition to the bill before parliament could vote on it in mid-September.²⁴ Due to the persistence of the bill’s authors, it remained under discussion at year’s end, as criticism continued.²⁵ It is unclear whether it will come before parliament in 2014.

In October, police officials in Bishkek began soliciting letters from the general public in support of a ban on public demonstrations. It was unclear whether the police acted independently or on behalf of the city’s mayor. However, the Interior Ministry’s leadership condemned the police for partisanship.²⁶

In April, feminist groups in Bishkek organized performances of the “Vagina Monologues” in defiance of verbal intimidation from the Ministry of Culture, which accused the play of “promot[ing] scenes that destroy the moral and ethical standards and national traditions of the peoples of Kyrgyzstan.”²⁷ Government officials eventually conceded that there was no legal basis for banning the event.

These events illustrate two key realities: first, that the relationship between state institutions and civil society remains filled with distrust; and second, that civil society is becoming increasingly capable of pushing back against legislative attacks or intimidation, whether by acting locally or communicating their grievances to the international community.

The government and the parliament do sometimes collaborate with civil society groups in designing policy programs and election monitoring efforts, and NGOs regularly generate discussions in mass media on human rights, political reforms, and other issues. Several leading NGO activists have joined the government’s efforts to reform the police and judicial system. They often work pro bono and consider their collaboration with the government to be an important part of civic engagement. Activists also cooperate with like-minded members of parliament on issues such as gender equality. These actors regularly critique new legislative initiatives, especially those related to human rights, employing public protests, petitions, letters to the parliament, and public hearings to convey their views. In 2012 and 2013, civil society groups collaborated with the Interior Ministry regarding police reform. The police accreditation exam is now administered by members of the Coalition for Democracy and Human Rights and the NGO *Nashe Pravo* (Our Right). Their efforts are complemented by the work of the Alliance of Liberal Youth NGOs, which promotes greater transparency and accountability in police work.²⁸

Demonstrators are commonly visible in Bishkek’s public spaces. The area in front of the parliament building is frequently occupied by small groups of 5–50 people, advocating for a wide spectrum of social, family-related, and political issues. Other groups of activists rally for better public services—safer roads, cleaner streets, more bike lanes.²⁹ Police regulate the protests by ensuring they do not block traffic or lead to violence.

More and more individuals appear to be taking part in community work and advocacy. Several youth NGOs in Bishkek and Osh, supported by international or local donors, address complex issues such as ethnic reconciliation and political leadership. Notably, the multiethnic members of Youth of Osh address inter-ethnic reconciliation from the perspective of joint community development.³⁰ These grassroots activities as well as civil society critiques of political processes in the country are often featured in national and local media.

Kyrgyzstan’s NGOs remain overwhelmingly dependent on foreign grants. As a result, the civil sector can resemble a marketplace competition for donor funding rather than a contest between ideas, and organizations are often out of touch with local needs. Very few NGOs have tried to solicit funds from local donors or engage local communities in their work. When it does materialize, local financing mainly comes from individual entrepreneurs, large corporations, or political leaders. For the most part, local funds are targeted at organizing one-time projects or public events, such as filming an advocacy video or organizing a charity campaign. Most of these locally generated NGO activities are concentrated in the capital. Indeed, the vast majority of NGOs and other civil society groups are based in the country’s two largest cities, Bishkek and Osh. This, too, limits their impact on most citizens’ daily lives.

In early 2011, then president Roza Otunbayeva, with the financial support of international donors, formed Public Advisory Councils (PACs) to monitor the work of various government agencies. PACs are composed of independent experts, academics, NGO leaders, and entrepreneurs. They have access to all relevant government documents. Some PACs continue to actively supervise the work of the ministries, while others have become dormant. A number of officials spoke out against PACs in 2013, citing concerns that the councils have access to sensitive national security information.³¹ Nevertheless, President Atamabayev sent a bill to renew the councils’ tenure before parliament in late 2013.³² The government encouraged universities to create a special class devoted to the centuries-old Manas epic, a key component of the Kyrgyz national identity. Some universities introduced the class in September 2012, but it will take time before every school offers instruction on the epic poem.

Independent Media

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
5.75	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.25	6.25	6.00

Despite proposals in parliament to ban “extremist” or “anti-Kyrgyzstan” content, the trend since 2010 has been toward greater media openness and more affordable access to the internet, including via third-generation (3G) mobile telephones. Online news sources are particularly diverse, ranging from straight news reporting to long-form, analytical pieces. In 2013, a regional court overturned a two-year sanction against the popular Fergana News website on the basis that only a court, and not the parliament, may take action to block online content.

The vast majority of Kyrgyzstani citizens get their information from television. There are approximately 25 television stations operating in Kyrgyzstan. Of these, only a few broadcast nationwide. According to the media registry of the Ministry of Justice, every channel in Kyrgyzstan offers some Kyrgyz language programming, and 21 carry programming in Russian. The division between Kyrgyz and Russian-language content is similar in print media and radio.³³

In general, objective and reliable journalism is in short supply in Kyrgyzstan, and it can be difficult to differentiate between facts and reporters' opinions. Some independent media publish short news items of reasonable quality, but they stop short of analytical or in-depth investigative reports. In 2013, Kyrgyz media failed to fill in the information gaps on the year's most complex political issues, such as who was responsible for organizing protests in the eastern parts of the country.

State television and radio generally avoid open criticism of the president or SDPK during newscasts, though talk shows are more apt to air opposing views.

The online universe remains mostly free, and some news sites³⁴ do publish criticism of the president, parliament, and government. Citizen-journalists sometimes expose abuses of power or corruption when traditional media do not. Videotapes of police personnel breaking the law by extorting a bribe or parking illegally have become the most frequent genre of online activism. In addition, political satire is increasingly popular, with several creative groups tackling corruption, nationalism, and individual political leaders. Their performances are aired on TV and can be found online.³⁵

Nationalist voices in the parliament still seek to prevent the reestablishment of Uzbek-language mass media in southern Kyrgyzstan, where nearly all Uzbek outlets were shut down in the wake of ethnic violence in 2010. They also remain vigilant against any media content and providers that might threaten "traditional" Kyrgyz values or the country's image abroad. In June 2011, lawmakers singled out the Central Asia-wide Russian-language news site, Ferghana News, which had produced critical coverage of the government's response to the violence in Osh. Citing the outlet's "extremist" content, parliament passed a resolution banning it.³⁶ In February 2012, Fergana News was officially blocked by the State Communications Agency (SCA), which controls KyrgyzTelecom, the main internet service provider (ISP) in the country. Other ISPs followed suit. Ferghana News took the SCA to court, and in late March 2013, a regional judge lifted the sanction on the basis that only courts have the authority to ban online content. In April, Kyrgyzstan's local ISPs, including KyrgyzTelecom, opened access to Fergana News following a letter from the SCA.

To some degree, the victory was symbolic: first, because the SCA's blocking of the website had never been entirely effective; and second, because at year's end the parliament had yet to officially overturn its 2011 ban. Nevertheless, the return of unrestricted access to a popular news site that is highly critical of all the region's governments was notable, and a sign that in some cases, the judiciary is willing to defend politically controversial speech. The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media welcomed this development as "a positive sign for Internet freedom in

Kyrgyzstan.”³⁷ Praise from the OSCE was countered by a critical reaction piece from Fergana News.³⁸

The Uzbek-language media outlets that were shut down in 2010 have yet to re-open, and most ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan primarily watch television channels from Uzbekistan, reinforcing their cultural marginalization within Kyrgyzstan. Thanks to strong foreign donor support, a new Osh-based radio and television station, Yntymak (Accord/Hamony), began broadcasting in Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Russian in 2012, targeting younger listeners. The city of Jalalabad, too, has a new Uzbek/Kyrgyz TV station, although it focuses more on cultural programs than political discussions. In 2013, a journalism-focused NGO launched a trilingual newspaper, *Danek* (Kernel of Grain), written and published by students in Osh with financial support from international donors. The newspaper employs young journalists and is distributed throughout schools in Osh for a small fee.³⁹

The significance of the “Uzbek vote” will likely increase as the 2015 parliamentary elections approach. This may facilitate the expansion of Uzbek-language media, particularly because political parties that hope to obtain votes in Osh and Jalalabad oblasts will need to find a way to communicate with the ethnic Uzbek population.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, in an effort to promote the Kyrgyz language, the state-owned Public TV and Radio Channel (Obschestveny teleradio kanal, OTRK) has introduced children’s programming during prime time. The majority is in Kyrgyz, with some shows in Russian.

The government is looking for ways to expedite Kyrgyzstan’s conversion to digital television, which must be completed by the internationally mandated analogue switch-off date in June 2015. The transition will also enable Kyrgyzstan-based broadcasters to reach a nationwide audience. Currently, the population of northern Kyrgyzstan is served primarily by television programming from Kazakhstan, while southern parts of the country often watch channels from Uzbekistan.⁴¹ The Ministry of Culture estimates that the transition to digital broadcasting will cost roughly \$11.3 million to complete.⁴² Kyrgyzstan will need extensive international support to raise this amount.

Local Democratic Governance

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
5.75	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.25	6.25

Although local governments have become more independent from Bishkek since the nationwide local elections of 2012, their efficiency and professionalism have not improved. Local political party representatives lack experience with public service and bureaucracies and have little financial capacity to implement policy or respond to their constituents’ concerns. Moreover, there is virtually no horizontal communication among local governments in the same or neighboring oblasts.

Local governing bodies have even less ethnic and gender diversity than their national counterparts, with women making up only 12 percent of local council

representatives.⁴³ Usually, ethnic Uzbeks are more likely to be represented in local governments where they are the majority population, but this is not the case in Osh, where Uzbeks comprise roughly half of the city's population and only 20 percent of the city council. Women, too, are underrepresented on the Osh city council, making up less than 16 percent of its membership.⁴⁴

The degree of independence of local authorities from the national government varies. Bishkek's government is the most independent, with the mayor able to make autonomous decisions on the city's development. Of all other local leaders, Osh mayor Melis Myrzakmatov enjoyed the greatest independence in 2013, thanks to his business connections and support from the informal grouping of young men in his martial arts club. Myrzakmatov has presented himself as the primary force behind Osh's post-conflict municipal reconstruction, strategically underplaying the support of the national government and international donors. On 5 December, Prime Minister Jantoro Satybaldiyev fired Myrzakmatov abruptly, without public explanation. The dismissal came days after the mayor had participated in (and possibly organized) a public protest demanding the release of one of his allies, Akhmatbek Keldibekov, who was arrested in late November on corruption charges.⁴⁵ Also under investigation for corruption, Bishkek Mayor Isa Omurkulov resigned from his post one day before Myrzakmatov's dismissal.⁴⁶

The president's administration uses the Agency of Local Governance and Inter-Ethnic Relations to address ethnic inequality and pre-empt ethnic tensions. The agency is tasked with promoting the goals outlined in the "Concept of Development of National Unity and Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Kyrgyz Republic." Mira Karybayeva, the head of the department responsible for drafting the concept, says professionalism and a lack of funding are the two most important challenges to implementing it on the local level.⁴⁷ Following the concept's adoption in April 2013, the administration began soliciting international donor funds to increase local government capacity.

Outside of election season, local governments receive little media attention. With occasional exceptions for developments in Osh and Bishkek, the mass media are mostly concentrated on the work of the national government. Likewise, local government officials are not accustomed to working with civil society, business owners, or other groups on important policy issues.

Central authorities have failed to implement actions that concretely promote interethnic peace in southern Kyrgyzstan. This has made some local governments feel immune to prosecution for discrimination, arbitrary arrests, and violence against ethnic minority groups. Three years after the violence of June 2010, the fault lines in southern Kyrgyzstan run not only between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz but also between communities, law-enforcement agencies, and local government representatives.⁴⁸

The State Agency of Local Governance and Inter-Ethnic Relations is tasked with promoting the goals outlined in the presidential administration's new Concept of Development of National Unity and Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Kyrgyz Republic. Following the Concept's adoption in April 2013, the administration

began soliciting international donor funds to increase local government capacity and enable proper implementation.

Judicial Framework and Independence

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
5.50	5.50	5.50	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25

Kyrgyzstan’s judicial system and law enforcement agencies continue to be a major source of human rights violations and corruption. Nepotism, political pressure, and lack of professionalism among judges render the court system ill-equipped to administer justice consistently or impartially. Nearly four years after the June 2010 violence, the vast majority of ethnic-Uzbek victims have yet to see their attackers brought to justice.

Courtroom violence and intimidation have been consistent features of law enforcement’s response to the June 2010 violence. In related trials, relatives of some ethnic-Kyrgyz plaintiffs have attacked the lawyers of their accused Uzbek attackers or threatened presiding judges. In 2013, Kyrgyzstan’s Supreme Court began reviewing appealed cases from regional trials of the last three years to assess whether intimidation practices had interfered with due process.⁴⁹ Despite the fact that ethnic Uzbeks suffered far higher casualties than their ethnic-Kyrgyz neighbors, 96 of the 107 people charged with murder in the aftermath of the 2010 violence were Uzbek.⁵⁰

In an event reminiscent of the Bakiyev era, the lawyer Ikramidin Aitkulov was brutally attacked near his home in November 2013.⁵¹ Aitkulov’s relatives believe that he was targeted because of his willingness to defend politically controversial figures such as former minister of social development Ravshan Sabirov, criminal kingpin Kamchy Kolbayev, and various Ata-Jurt party leaders.⁵² Lawyers protecting opposition figures still experience political pressure, but violent attacks have become unusual.

Azimjon Askarov, an ethnic-Uzbek human rights activist, remained in prison throughout 2013. Following an arrest and prosecution marked by egregious violations of due process, Askarov is serving a life sentence for his alleged complicity in the death of an ethnic-Kyrgyz police officer killed during an outburst of ethnic violence in June 2010. Askarov’s appeals to the Supreme Court were denied in late 2011. In August 2013, the human rights organization Bir Dyino–Kyrgyzstan asked a court in Jalalabad to review allegations that Askarov had been tortured by police while in detention. The request was denied by both the Jalalabad court and the Supreme Court.

Despite continuous international pressure, Atambayev’s administration shows little political will to take up the Askarov case. When journalists asked the president about the issue during an official visit to Brussels, Atambayev said there is no evidence suggesting that the activist might be innocent.⁵³

It took parliamentary, judiciary, and civil society actors three full years to establish a legal body (the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court) for interpreting the 2010 constitution. During this delay, which was caused primarily by disagreements over the selection of chamber members, various political forces had the opportunity to draft unconstitutional legislative initiatives, some of them restricting basic civil liberties. Important examples include the 2012 and 2013 legislation limiting religious freedoms. The proposals pushed back by NGO pressure in 2013—especially Kyrgyzstan’s version of the Russian “foreign agents” law—were also initiatives that a functioning Constitutional Chamber would have examined closely.⁵⁴ The same may be assumed of parliamentary deputy Yrgal Kydyralieva’s 2012 proposal that women under 23 years of age should be compelled to obtain parental consent before traveling abroad. (After months of outcry from domestic and international rights groups, in June 2013 the parliament adopted a non-abiding decree based on Kydyralieva’s other travel and migration–related proposals, without any specific mention of a minimum travel age for women.⁵⁵) All members of the Constitutional Chamber were finally instated in July 2013.

The abrupt release of Aziz Batukaev, a notorious Chechen crime boss accused of drug trafficking and violent crime, was seen by most as evidence of the government’s ties to the criminal underworld. In early April, Kyrgyzstani authorities terminated Batukaev’s 16-year prison term on the grounds that he was suffering from acute leukemia. Soon after Batukaev returned to Chechnya, rumors surfaced that he was in good health and had married a young Chechen woman.⁵⁶ As news of “Operation Free Batukaev” spread, outraged parliamentarians called for the resignation of officials they accused of falsifying Batukaev’s health reports in order to secure his release. These included Deputy Prime Minister Shamir Atakhanov, Interior Minister Abdylda Suranchiev, Ombudsman Tursunbek Akun, and prison chief Zarylbek Rysaliev. President Atambayev himself is suspected of having ties to Batukaev and other known criminals.⁵⁷

Corruption

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25

The level of corruption in Kyrgyzstan has declined slightly since the 2010 ouster of Kurmanbek Bakiyev, whose son Maksim wielded informal control over virtually all sectors of the economy. Unlike most of his predecessors, Atambayev himself does not appear to be engaged in large-scale corruption deals, nor does he seek to impose family rule over the national economy. Nevertheless, graft remains widespread, permeating all government agencies.⁵⁸ MPs regularly use their political positions to protect and promote their personal business interests. Citizens encounter corruption in their everyday lives, whether in dealings with the police or when trying to send their children to school. According to a study conducted in Osh and Bishkek by the

SIAR Research and Consulting Group, corruption is considered to be one of the top three most pressing problems in Kyrgyzstan: 64 percent of SIAR's respondents indicated that they had bribed the police and 70 percent had bribed judges.⁵⁹

Shortly after his election in 2011, President Bakiyev declared corruption to be a top priority and a matter of national security. In order to insulate high-level corruption investigations from political manoeuvring or bribery, he created a special Anti-Corruption Service (ACS) under the supervision of the State Committee on National Security (SCNS) and tasked it with fighting corruption in the parliament, executive branch, Supreme Court, and law-enforcement agencies.⁶⁰

Still, two years into Atambayev's presidency, Kyrgyzstan has no unified anticorruption policy. Instead, ad hoc measures are used to prosecute corrupt officials. Several high-profile political officials were arrested in 2013, mostly from opposition political parties, including the popular former mayor of Bishkek Nariman Tuleev (Ata-Jurt), Minister of Social Development and Ravshan Sabirov (Ata-Meken), and Nurlan Sulaimanov (Ata-Jurt), who is reportedly hiding in Moscow. It remains unclear whether the crackdown on opposition party leaders is the result of a political directive from the president's office or an objective decision by the ACS. In 2013, President Atambayev's fight against corruption touched members of almost every political party—except his own SDPK. In October, Chairman of State Correction Service Zarylbek Ryzaliev accused four opposition MPs of looting after the collapse of the Bakiyev regime.⁶¹ All four denied the charges, insisting that the accusations were made to exert pressure on them in parliament.

In November, the Parliamentary Committee on Law, the Rule-of-Law, and the Fight Against Crime discussed taking the ACS out of SCNS's control. The SCNS resisted the change, pointing to its successful track record. According to the head of ACS, this includes some 500 criminal investigations of alleged corruption to date—70 percent of them against government officials.⁶²

Kyrgyzstan receives a score of 24 on the 0-to-100 scale of Transparency International's latest Corruption Perceptions Index, with 0 as the worst possible performance.⁶³ However, the World Bank's *Doing Business 2014* report granted Kyrgyzstan a 2-point upgrade on its hundred-point scale, mostly thanks to positive changes in “resolving insolvency,” “starting a business,” and “trading across borders.”⁶⁴

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