



# Kyrgyz Republic Country Report

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## Executive Summary:

*In spite of its strategically important location, the Kyrgyz Republic's economy is underdeveloped, heavily relying on agriculture and mining, suffering from high unemployment, and remaining vulnerable to regional instability. The presence of several small ethnic Kyrgyz enclaves in Tajik and Uzbek territory contributes to periodic border demarcation and border-crossing disputes among Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Relations with the Russian Federation and the United States are positive, and feature growing security and economic cooperation.*

*The U.S. has contributed to Kyrgyzstan development and reform measures, working to strengthen protections of civil rights, prevent proliferation of weapons, and combat trafficking of narcotics and people, and fight terrorism.*

*The small Kyrgyz Jewish community, concentrated in Bishkek, is divided between indigenous Bukharan Jews and Ashkenazic immigrants from European Russia during the Soviet era.*

*Manifestations of anti-Semitism in Kyrgyzstan are rare, and the Jewish community enjoys healthy relations with the government.*

## Political Situation:

The Kyrgyz Republic is a landlocked, mountainous country slightly smaller than South Dakota. It is bordered by China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Poor and remote, Kyrgyzstan was populated for centuries by Turkic nomads related to the nearby Kazakh ethnic group. The present territory of Kyrgyzstan was annexed by Tsarist Russia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Despite several revolts against tsarist rule, Kyrgyzstan remained under Russian and then Soviet control until declaring its independence on August 31, 1991.

Shortly after Kyrgyzstan gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Askar Akayev was elected president. He won reelection in 1995 and 2000.

Increasingly an authoritarian and unpopular ruler, Askar Akayev was forced to flee the country in the wake of massive protests against discredited parliamentary elections, dubbed the "Tulip Revolution" in March, 2005. Kurmanbek Bakiyev, a former Akayev prime minister turned opposition leader, was elected

## Statistics:

**Population:** 6,202,000  
(November 2018 est.)

**Size:** 198,500 sq. km

**Capital:** Bishkek

**Major cities:** Bishkek, Osh

**Jewish population:** 500

**Head of State:** President  
Sooronbay Jeenbekov

**Head of Government:**  
Prime Minister Mukham-  
medkalyi Abylgaziev

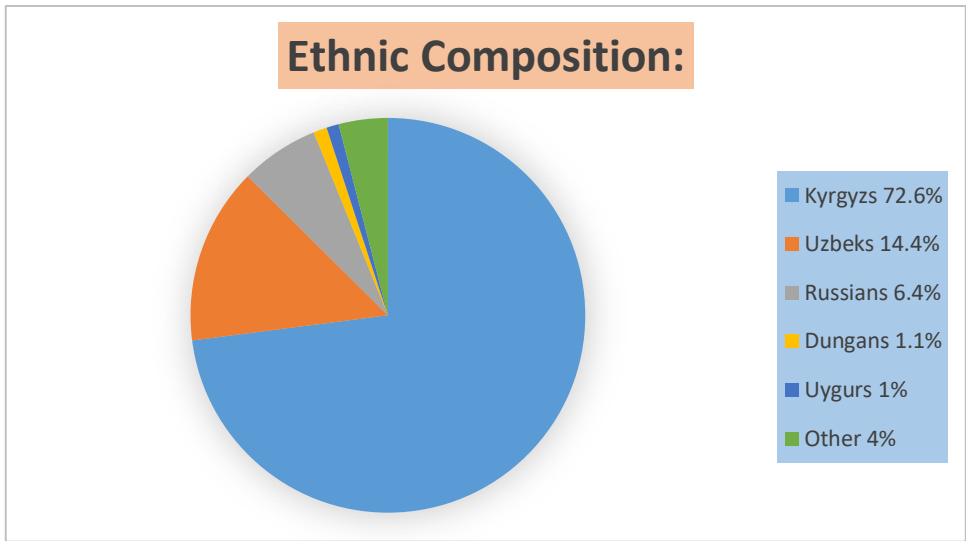
**Foreign Minister:** Chingiz  
Aidarbekov

**Ambassador to United  
States:** Ambassador Kadyr  
Toktogulov

**U.S. Ambassador to the  
Kyrgyz Republic:**  
Ambassador Donald Lu

**Freedom House Rating:**  
Partly Free

in July 2005 to a five-year term as President. The OSCE described the 2005 presidential elections as demonstrating tangible progress towards meeting international standards for democratic polls.

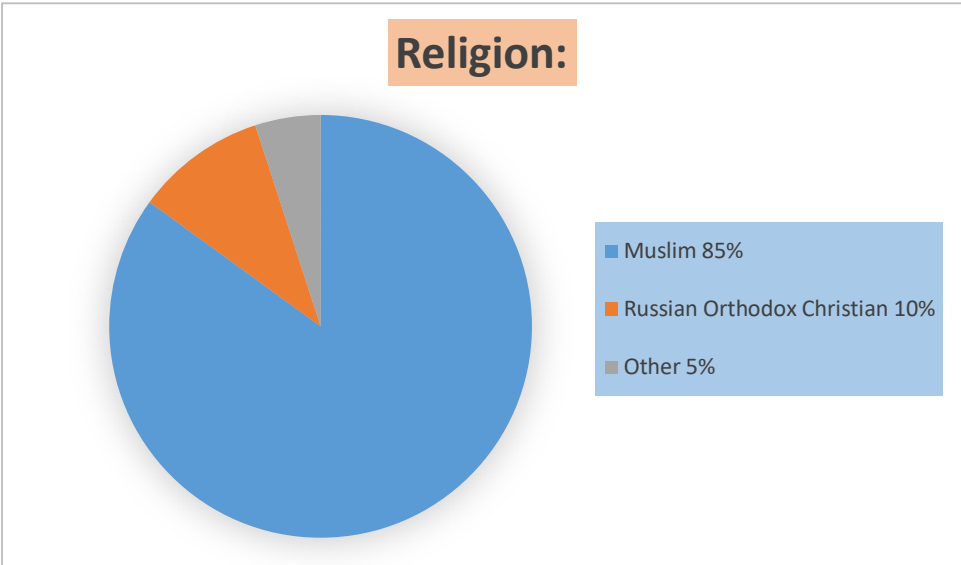


Bakiyev was reelected for another five-year term in the July 2009 presidential election, taking 75 percent of the vote. However, OSCE observers concluded that the poll failed to meet international standards, citing evidence of fraud, intimidation of opposition supporters and the misuse of administrative resources.

President Bakiyev had grown increasingly authoritarian during his term, and was forced from office in April 2010 amid antigovernment demonstrations. An interim government headed by longtime opposition figure Roza Otunbayeva oversaw the adoption of a more democratic constitution, and competitive parliamentary elections in October 2010.

An early presidential election was held in Kyrgyzstan in October 2011 to replace Interim President Roza Otunbayeva. It was won by former Prime Minister Almazbek Atambayev of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan.

Corruption allegations against Prime Minister Omurbek Babanov led to the collapse of the ruling coalition on August 22, 2012.



In March 2014, after only eighteen months in the office, Kyrgyz Prime Minister Zhantoro Satibaldiyev resigned due to corruption scandals over the management of the cities of Osh and Dhzalal-Abad. As a result, the ruling coalition in the Kyrgyz Parliament also collapsed and the president dissolved the parliament.

In April 2014, Djoomart Otorbaev was appointed Kyrgyz Prime Minister. His government faced several challenges, such as suspension of gas deliveries to southern Kyrgyzstan and conflict along the border in

Batkinsk region. Prime Minister Otorbaev was active in the international arena and visited Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Poland.

In October 2015, new parliamentary elections were held. The Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan won the elections receiving 28% of the votes. Six political parties passed the threshold to enter the 120-member unicameral legislature. In April 2016, Sooronbay Jeenbekov assumed the office of a Prime Minister.

Sooronbay Jeenbekov won Kyrgyzstan's presidential election in 2017 after serving as Prime Minister, marking the first democratic transfer of power in a Kyrgyz election. Prime Minister Mukhammedkalyi Abylgaziev assumed his position in April 2018. He had previously served as Deputy Prime Minister under Jeenbekov.

### **Economic Situation:**

The Kyrgyz Republic has been one of the most active successor states in enacting market reforms, and was the first CIS country to be accepted into the World Trade Organization, but political instability and the global economic crisis has slowed its progress. The Kyrgyz economy remains heavily based on agricultural production, such as tobacco, cotton, wool, and meat, and gold export. High unemployment and increasing poverty rates have kept Kyrgyzstan among the world's poorest countries despite its significant progress in transitioning to a market economy. The poverty rate has climbed consistently from 31.7% in 2009 to 38% in 2012 falling again in 2014 to 30.6%. The poverty rate varies across the regions: it is relatively low in Bishkek city (21.4%), and in the Chui region (16.6%) and Issyk-Kul region (28.1%), but in other regions exceeds 50%. The government is attempting to broaden the economy's growth base beyond its gold-sector mainstay, but progress is slow to materialize.

**Currency:** 67.4 Som = \$1 (July, 2016)

**GDP:** \$7.565 billion (2018 est.)

**GDP per capita:** \$1,219 (2018 est.)

**GDP Growth:** 3.5% (2015 est.)

About 500,000 Kyrgyz citizens work abroad, mainly in Russia, according to 2011 statistics, and remittances amount to 29% of GDP. Another income source is tourism, which in 2012 accounted for 9% of total GDP.

The Kyrgyz economy remains particularly vulnerable to regional instability. Economic growth has been repeatedly halted by the 1998 Russian financial crisis, the 2001 war in Afghanistan, and periodic trade and border disputes with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Due to Kyrgyzstan's dependence on mineral, gas, and oil imports from its Central Asian neighbors, growing instability in the region has affected the Kyrgyz economy.

The Kyrgyz Republic participates in trade alliances such as the Central Asian Economic Community (with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan) and the "Shanghai Five" regional cooperation group (with China, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Russia). Germany, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan are the Kyrgyz Republic's largest trading partners. Kazakhstan in particular has increased its investments in Kyrgyzstan's

banking, industrial, and real estate sectors, and growing numbers of Kyrgyz laborers now work in Kazakhstan.

Due to its high foreign debt, after President Akayev's ouster, the government of Prime Minister Kulov expressed interest in Kyrgyzstan joining the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) debt-relief initiative of the IMF and the World Bank. Following Kulov's December 2006 resignation, President Bakiyev and parliament rejected Kyrgyzstan's participation in HIPC in February 2007, claiming that it would have entailed too many conditions and restrictions on the government, and raising questions about Kyrgyzstan's future relationship with Western financial institutions and its debt-service plans.

The Kyrgyz Republic has signed an agreement with China and Uzbekistan to build a railroad along the ancient Silk Road, believing that the tariffs and tolls from transport will provide a much-needed source of revenue. An additional Uzbek-Kyrgyz-Chinese railroad through the mountainous Torugart Pass has also been discussed.

In 2013, the Kyrgyz President approved a 2013-2017 National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS), which aims to increase economic growth, improve political stability, and create a welcoming environment for the private sector. The NSDS recognizes high poverty rate and regional disparity as key challenges.

Economic growth in the Kyrgyz Republic declined to 3.5% in 2015 from 4.0% in 2014 as slower expansion in industry offset gains in agriculture and services. The decline is linked to recession in the Russian Federation and other trade partners. Currency depreciation is fueling inflation and exacerbating a debt problem.

#### **Domestic Issues:**

Corruption is pervasive at all level of society in Kyrgyzstan. The nepotistic practices of President Bakiyev were a significant source of popular dissatisfaction. The current government has begun investigating some members of the Bakiyev regime, but progress is slow.

Five separate agencies are tasked with fighting corruption in Kyrgyzstan, but the lack of cooperation between them creates challenges that hinder prosecution of corrupt officials, and few cases have been brought to trial.

2012 and 2013 reforms and laws increased government transparency, though they have not yet significantly reduced corruption. According to the U.S. Department of State, Kyrgyzstan's anti-corruption laws are not enforced effectively by the government, enabling society to engage in corrupt practices with impunity.

The government has generally respected freedom of religion, but requires registration of all religious organizations. The government has shown a bias against ethnic Kyrgyz Christian and Muslim groups that receive foreign support, but the state is considered relatively tolerant towards minority faiths.

A 2009 law banned private religious education and the wearing of headscarves in schools. Kyrgyzstan's authorities bans ten religious groups, including Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, the Kurdish Peoples' Congress, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Union of Islamic Jihad, and the Unification Church.

The Kyrgyz government has shown increasing concern over the influence of radical Islam on politics in the southern part of the country. The banned Hizb ut-Tahrir ("Party of Emancipation") is of particular concern as it advocates the non-violent overthrow of Central Asia's governments and the creation of an Islamic caliphate, and promotes strongly anti-American and anti-Semitic views. It persists in operating, despite official prosecution, allegedly finding Kyrgyzstan's depressed, agricultural south a fertile recruiting ground. Tahrir activists have connections to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, another radical jihadist organization native to the region, and Kyrgyz security forces have launched several operations against them in recent years, at times jointly with their Uzbek counterparts. According to the State Committee on National Security, in April 2011 there were around 1,900 Hizb ut-Tahrir members in Kyrgyzstan, including 40 detainees and 23 prisoners.

Ethnic tensions with Kyrgyzstan's Uzbek minority, which makes up roughly one-seventh of the population, persist. Uzbeks continuously suffer from ethnically motivated attacks, and are denied proportional representation in the government and some political and cultural rights.

#### **Foreign Policy:**

In its foreign policy, Kyrgyzstan has tried to preserve a delicate balance between its relations with Russia and the United States.

The U.S. has been interested in helping Kyrgyzstan enhance its sovereignty, bolster development and reform measures, improve the situation with human rights, prevent the proliferation of weapons and terrorism, and combat the trafficking of narcotics and people.

Kyrgyzstan also hosts Russian Air Force units at the Kant Air Base. Russia has provided economic support, troops and equipment to Kyrgyzstan.

In February 2009, Kyrgyz President Bakiyev visited Moscow where he signed agreements on financial, economic, and energy cooperation. In response, in 2009, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and other high ranking officials of Russia visited Kyrgyzstan on several occasions.

In May 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Kyrgyz President Atambayev to discuss deepening cooperation in the military and economic spheres, including joint Russian-Kyrgyz projects to develop natural gas fields.

The unfinished demarcation of borders with Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan remains problematic. The Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan have in the past each unilaterally established checkpoints and imposed customs duties at high-volume transit points on their shared border. Tensions also persist over terrorist activity perpetrated by the banned Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a

radical Islamist group with ties both to the Taliban in Afghanistan and to Osama bin Laden. Uzbekistan reportedly gave military aid to the Kyrgyz Republic following IMU attacks in 1998-99, but bilateral relations were strained by Uzbekistan's use of landmines on its borders to deter terrorist incursions.

In 2006, Kyrgyz and Uzbek Special Forces reportedly cooperated in killing and capturing alleged IMU militants in southern Kyrgyzstan. The presence of a large Uzbek minority in southern Kyrgyzstan on the border with Uzbekistan, as well as Kyrgyzstan's partial dependence on Uzbek natural gas, has influenced Kyrgyz policy towards its larger and more powerful neighbor, which has criticized Kyrgyz authorities for allowing refugees and alleged Islamic militants from Uzbekistan to enter Kyrgyzstan.

The presence of several small Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek enclaves in each other's territory contributes to periodic border demarcation and border-crossing disputes among these states. Uzbek authorities closed borders with Kyrgyzstan after mass protests and political turmoil in April 2010, and due to disputes over pasture land. Kyrgyz citizens protested and blocked the main highway connecting an Uzbek with Uzbekistan. Uzbek authorities reacted by sending security forces, police and military troops to the area.

Kyrgyzstan's relationship with China is developing along both economic and security cooperation lines. As Kyrgyzstan's largest non-CIS trading partner, China has staged joint exercises with Kyrgyzstan, and large numbers of Chinese traders have settled in Kyrgyz free trade zones, which has at times alarmed local authorities.

The possible integration of Kyrgyzstan into the Eurasian Economic Union was discussed during the meeting of the Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Prime Ministers in Astana in May 2014. In August 2016, Kyrgyzstan joined the other four Central Asian states in Washington for a C5+1 meeting.

The Kyrgyz Republic is a member of NATO's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. Kyrgyzstan has also actively cooperated with Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In June 2014, Kyrgyz Prime Minister Otorbaev met with the Secretary General of SCO.

The Republic's good relations with Israel are demonstrated by Israeli programs for agricultural and banking reform in Kyrgyzstan. Israel is represented by an Ambassador in Bishkek, and the Kyrgyz Republic has an honorary consul in Israel. In 2000 Kyrgyz First Lady Mairam Akayeva visited Israel. In 2008 the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Israel Majalli Whbee visited Kyrgyzstan to discuss possible cooperation on the issues of counterterrorism, trade and agriculture.

### **Relations with the U.S.:**

U.S. engagement with the Kyrgyz Republic revolves around security and counter-terrorism, promotion of democratic and economic reform, and anti-corruption efforts.

The United States graduated the Kyrgyz Republic from the Jackson-Vanik Amendment to the Trade Act of 1974 in June 2000.

The Peace Corps began its program in the Kyrgyz Republic in 1993.

The Kyrgyz Republic provides intelligence and allowed U.S. and Allied forces to use its Manas airport as a staging ground for military and humanitarian actions in Afghanistan. In response, the United States has provided significant aid to the Kyrgyz Republic. While the Kyrgyz Republic expressed opposition to the U.S.-led war in Iraq, it nonetheless provided unlimited airspace rights to coalition forces.

Bilateral relations were strained by a December 2006 incident in which a U.S. serviceman shot and killed an ethnic Russian Kyrgyz national at the base, claiming self-defense.

In June 2009, Kyrgyzstan reversed a decision to close the Manas air base after the United States acceded to sharply higher rent and to minor restrictions on the site. On 3 June 2014 American troops vacated the base and it was handed back to the Kyrgyzstan military.

In 1992-2010, accumulated U.S. budget assistance to Kyrgyzstan amounted to \$1.22 billion, ranking Kyrgyzstan third in aid per capita among the FSU countries.

After an April 2010 coup in Kyrgyzstan and ethnic violence in June 2010, the U.S. provided \$90 million in urgent humanitarian and other assistance. The U.S. has allocated \$51.8 million for 2014 assistance to Kyrgyzstan.

### **Jewish Communal Life & Anti-Semitism:**

The small Kyrgyz Jewish community, concentrated in Bishkek, is divided between indigenous Bukharan Jews and Soviet-era Ashkenazic immigrants from European Russia. Rabbi Arye Raichman is the current chief rabbi of Kyrgyzstan.

The Menorah Center in Bishkek, funded in large part by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC/ "Joint"), runs a small Sunday school and provides charity services such as food distribution, chiefly for the elderly. The center also contains a small library and publishes the *Ma'ayan* newspaper. An Aish HaTorah education center and a Jewish theater and dance group are located in the capital, and Maccabi organizes youth sports activities.

There is one Ashkenazi synagogue in Bishkek and several Bukharan synagogues in towns in the Ferghana Valley. The country's first Jewish kindergarten opened in 2004 with the support of the Chabad Lubavitch Ohr Avner Foundation. A Jewish elementary school is also operating.

There is no official discrimination against the Jewish community, which reports good relations with the government and with other religious groups. The director of the Menorah Center serves on the Kyrgyz religious council, a federal body. A 2004 law mandates proficiency in the Kyrgyz language for high government positions that may prevent members of some ethnic groups – including Jews – from attaining such positions.

An anti-Semitic article appeared in the "Pyramid Plus" newspaper in February 2006, charging that Jews secretly rule Kyrgyzstan through puppets such as President Bakiyev. After the country's Jewish



community board replied in a public letter, which was also submitted to the authorities, the paper's editor made a public apology to the Jewish community chairman and published their reply in his newspaper. In 2004, a public health textbook written by Boris Shapiro, a prominent local Jewish leader, attracted several anti-Semitic attacks. Islamic activists objected to the textbook's frank discussion of HIV/AIDS and safe sex practices, and publicly charged the West and Jews in general with seeking to corrupt Kyrgyz youth. The Kyrgyz parliament held hearings on this issue in 2004, at which both the book's author and his critics were allowed to speak.

Following mass protests and political turmoil in April 2010, there were some incidents of anti-Semitism. Bishkek's synagogue was attacked, with assailants hurling Molotov cocktails at the building. An anti-Semitic banner was also unfurled near the presidential palace at a central gathering area for protesters, but was quickly removed.

In August 2011, two anti-Semitic articles were published in the mainstream newspaper *Fabula*. One article had the following subheading: "Will a Jew Run the Aluminum Mine?" The second article stated that the deposed chief of Bishkek's traffic police had criticized his replacement for "being disloyal to the Kyrgyz Republic, since he is Jewish and not ethnic Kyrgyz."

Overall, however, manifestations of anti-Semitism in Kyrgyzstan are rare, and the Jewish community enjoys good relations with the government. In March 2017, the Kyrgyz Jewish community honored its citizens who welcomed Jewish refugees during the Holocaust. An estimated 45,000 Ashkenazi Jews found refuge in Kyrgyzstan during the Holocaust, according to the Jewish community in Bishkek. Most refugees settled into their temporary homes with relative ease.