

Kyrgyzstan

by Erica Marat

Capital: Bishkek
Population: 5.7 million
GNI/capita, PPP: US\$3,080

Source: The data above are drawn from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators 2015*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Electoral Process	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.00	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.50
Civil Society	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.75	5.00	4.75	4.75	4.75	4.50	4.75
Independent Media	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.25	6.25	6.00	6.00
National Democratic Governance	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.75	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50
Local Democratic Governance	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.25	6.25	6.25
Judicial Framework and Independence	5.50	5.50	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25
Corruption	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25
Democracy Score	5.68	5.68	5.93	6.04	6.21	6.11	6.00	5.96	5.89	5.99

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 four years since the April 2010 ousting of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, Kyrgyzstan has developed the most dynamic political system in post-Soviet Central Asia. In 2014, 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 striving to represent the interests of specific social groups, such as migrants and entrepreneurs, rather than self-interested political cliques.

In 2013 and 2014, a number of draft laws and an increase in intolerant groups advocating an ultraconservative Kyrgyz identity threatened the overall health of civil society. Some of the proposals were stalled or defeated by significant pressure from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and watchdogs. In May, however, the president signed a bill that de facto recriminalized libel. Later in the year, the parliament discussed labeling organizations and individuals obtaining foreign grants as “foreign agents,” as well as banning the “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations.” Both bills were inspired by similar laws in Russia, and remained on the parliament’s agenda at year’s end.

Additionally, several members of parliament (MPs) as well as President Almazbek Atambayev called for amendments to the constitution. Some criticized these calls, emphasizing that the document serves as a guarantee of Kyrgyzstan’s current political structure. Several MPs put forward proposals to revise the current electoral code, but these suggestions also met with criticism from civil society members and parliamentarians.

Despite some progress toward political pluralization under the 2010 constitution, endemic institutional weaknesses of national and local government agencies, a lack of reform in the judicial sector, and intermittent rule of law continue to hamper Kyrgyzstan’s democratic gains. Frequent changes in the composition of the ruling coalition between 2010 and 2014 undermined the continuity of government policies. The most recent governmental reorganization occurred in March 2014, when the Ata-Meken party left the ruling coalition following a disagreement with then-prime minister Jantoro Satybaldiyev’s government. 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. Four years after their introduction, quotas for female, youth, and ethnic minority representation in parliament have not

been filled—instead, 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.

Russian influence significantly increased in 2014. The U.S. military transit center in Bishkek shut down in June, while in December Kyrgyzstan signed an accession agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and is on track to becoming a full member in 2015.

National Democratic Governance. After two years of institutional stability, Kyrgyzstan's prime minister resigned in March, resulting in a government reshuffle. The parliament discussed a range of legislation that could restrict civil liberties, and the president and MPs considered amending the constitution. The government's inability to reform the energy sector and electricity and gas shortages in the south prompted fears of mass riots. With the accession to the EEU, Kyrgyzstan became more dependent on Russia. *Kyrgyzstan's rating for national democratic governance remains unchanged at 6.50.*

Electoral Process. Across Kyrgyzstan, political parties were gearing up for the 2015 parliamentary elections. Many MPs left their parties to join other groups or political blocks, and several new parties have emerged. A number of MPs put forward revisions to the current electoral code to mitigate some of the shortcomings of previous elections. A controversial government initiative to collect biometric data ahead of next year's elections was met with criticism but its implementation nevertheless started in August. *Kyrgyzstan's rating for electoral process remains unchanged at 5.50.*

Civil Society. Several negative developments narrowed the space for civic activism in 2014. Among them was the rise of nationalist movements such as Kalys and Kyrk Choro that seek to defend an ultraconservative concept of Kyrgyz values. Two controversial laws, the “foreign agents” law and the “gay propaganda” law, were making their way through parliament and remained under discussion at year's end. Additionally, there was an increase in the detention of peaceful protesters and opposition leaders, and civil society activists complained about government surveillance. Due to the deteriorating climate for NGOs and the shrinking space for civic activism, *Kyrgyzstan's rating for civil society declines from 4.50 to 4.75.*

Independent Media. Kyrgyzstan effectively recriminalized libel through an ambiguous amendment to the criminal code in May. The new law is designed to protect individuals from false criminal accusations but received significant international criticism for violating freedom of speech. Independent journalism is in short supply in Kyrgyzstan, and the ombudsman's office criticized biased reporting in April. In December, authorities banned access to the news portal kloop.kg for failing to remove a video containing extremist content. The digital switchover was

underway and two-thirds of the population had access to digital television at year's end. *Kyrgyzstan's rating for independent media remains unchanged at 6.00.*

Local Democratic Governance. The degree of autonomy among local government structures varies across the country. Like national political parties, local parties are often formed around prominent individuals, as opposed to political ideologies. Controversial former Osh mayor Melis Myrzakmatov was replaced by a propresidential candidate in January. A number of local governments remain independent from the central government through informal means. *Kyrgyzstan's rating for local democratic governance remains unchanged at 6.25.*

Judicial Framework and Independence. Attempts at judicial reform continued but no progress was made during the year. Political parties, the president, and individual MPs stalled the reform process to ensure that their own interests were protected. The year saw a rise in charges and accusations related to religious extremism, which often serve as a way to extort bribes and signal politically motivated prosecutions. As a positive development, the government adopted an action plan on the prevention of torture in October. *Kyrgyzstan's rating for judicial framework and independence remains unchanged at 6.25.*

Corruption. President Atambayev's fight against corruption has touched members of almost every political party except his own. In August, courts failed to convict Isa Omurkulov, the former mayor of Bishkek and a member of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK), on corruption charges. Atambayev, however, insists that his anticorruption campaign has been successful and accuses journalists of falsely portraying Kyrgyzstan as a corrupt country. *Kyrgyzstan's rating for corruption remains unchanged at 6.25.*

Outlook for 2015. In 2015, Kyrgyzstan will hold pivotal parliamentary elections. The course of the vote will demonstrate whether the country's constitution, which grants greater powers to the parliament than the president, can survive another election cycle without amendments and amid increasing competition between the two branches of government.

In the most likely scenario, President Atambayev's SDPK will play up its connections to gain a parliamentary majority. There are signs that Atambayev is seeking to ensure that his influence expands alongside a growing SDPK presence in the parliament. And even if the elections proceed without major violations, SDPK will enjoy greater access to the media than other parties, additional publicity from the president and government, and fewer challenges from law-enforcement agencies. Already, in the past two years, SDPK party members have been unscathed by Atambayev's anticorruption campaign.

All political parties competing in the elections will resort to some form of nationalist rhetoric. But unlike the 2010 elections, when some politicians rushed to capitalize on the recent memory of ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan,

the 2015 campaign will focus on the competition around the country's natural resources, and will be framed in nationalistic terms. Opposition political parties might rally around the government's failure to nationalize the Kumtor gold mining company or its inability to ensure a steady flow of cheap natural gas and electricity to consumers.

Opposition members serving in the government, as well as NGOs and mass media will likely experience increased political pressure. In an attempt to garner support, both the parliament and the president will continue to pursue populist agendas and may adopt laws limiting the rights of the LGBT community and the activities of the NGO sector. Kyrgyzstan's accession to the Russia-led EEU might lead to more laws that imitate Kremlin policies and limit civic freedoms. Additionally, Moscow might choose to support political forces that align with Russia's worldview and banish those that advocate for Western values.

On the economic front, Kyrgyzstan will likely suffer from Russia's slowing economy. With roughly one million labor migrants, most of whom work in Russia, the volume of remittances will contract as the Russian ruble depreciates. The economic stagnation might lead to both spontaneous protests and nationalist rallies by the opposition. Kyrgyzstan is also likely to see high rates of inflation due to import tariffs established by the EEU.

MAIN REPORT

National Democratic Governance

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
6.00	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.75	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50

Under current law, Kyrgyzstan's constitution cannot be amended until 2020. The ban on amendments was adopted following the April 2010 regime change and the constitutional referendum of June 2010 to prevent the concentration of power in the president's hands. Previously, both President Askar Akayev and President Kurmanbek Bakiyev accumulated significant power through constitutional changes.

The new constitution grants greater powers to parliament and includes several provisions to prevent the emergence of a single, dominant leader. No 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.

During the first two years under the 2010 constitution, Kyrgyzstan's parliament produced four different ruling coalitions. The most recent government reorganization occurred in March 2014, when the Ata-Meken party left the ruling coalition following accusations of corruption and poor management during the reconstruction of Osh and Jalalabad.¹ The accusations targeted then-prime minister Jantoro Satybaldiyev, who had led the reconstruction project focusing on the two cities after the breakout of ethnic violence in June 2010. The new coalition formed in April included the same political parties—President Almazbek Atambayev's Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK), Ar-Namys (Dignity), and Ata-Meken (Motherland). Respublika and Ata-Jurt (Fatherland) remained in opposition. As a result of the reshuffle, Ata-Meken successfully installed one of its members, Joomart Otorbayev, as prime minister.

Over the course of 2014, several political figures, including President Atambayev, raised the idea of amending the constitution. In October, MP Felix Kulov (Ar-Namys) once again suggested changing the official name of the country, in what some saw as a test of popular support behind constitutional amendments.² Earlier, MP Karganbek Samakov drafted a bill that would remove the ban on amendments altogether. Also in October, President Atambayev called for amending the constitution to create a presidium to the Supreme Court as part of a broader judicial reform effort. Omurbek Tekebayev (Ata-Meken) and other officials argued that the changes would reintroduce a Soviet-era institution into the court system and open the door for the president to make additional changes and potentially extend his term in office.³ Activists from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)

emphasized that the judicial system will not be reformed merely through changing the text of the constitution.

Across Kyrgyzstan, political parties were gearing up for the 2015 parliamentary elections, and many MPs switched political parties during the year. The most surprising political development was an agreement by Respublika and Ata-Jurt to join forces in order to form a robust opposition against SDPK. Kamchybek Tashiev, the leader of Ata-Jurt, said that the new block's main goals included strengthening Kyrgyzstan in the face of the threat posed by the Islamic State, as well as preventing "scenarios" similar to the Euromaidan movement in Ukraine.⁴ The block's individual leaders have strong support across a diverse electorate, with Respublika enjoying popularity mainly in northern Kyrgyzstan and Ata-Jurt in the southern part of the country.

Over the past few years, Kyrgyzstan's government and parliament have regularly proposed legislation impinging on fundamental civil liberties. In May, the president signed a bill that recriminalized libel. Later in the year, the parliament discussed labeling organizations and individuals obtaining foreign grants as "foreign agents," as well as banning the "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations." Both bills were inspired by similar laws in Russia, but it is unclear if they were the result of direct Kremlin pressure on Kyrgyz MPs. Most MPs ignored the bills, and it was up to a small number of legislators to push the initiatives forward. In the case of the "gay propaganda" bill, the majority of MPs—acknowledging the homophobic views of their constituents—were reluctant to block the initiative.

The government's inability to reform the energy sector amid rising electricity rates prompted fears that the opposition might capitalize on riots to oust President Atambayev. Following the buyout of Kyrgyzgaz by Russia's Gazprom in April, Uzbekistan cut off supplies to the country, and parts of southern Kyrgyzstan lacked natural gas from April until the end of December. In October, the wary government dispersed a mass rally in central Bishkek organized by a few activists protesting energy policy.⁵ In an attempt to mitigate public discontent, Atambayev denounced Energy Minister Osmonbek Artykbayev for a lack of professionalism, forcing him to resign the same month.⁶

In June, the U.S. military withdrew from the transit center at the Manas airport following the Kyrgyz parliament's 2013 decision not to prolong the lease. With the departure, Russia's political and economic dominance further increased, and—despite strong opposition among entrepreneurs and objections from several MPs—the country signed an accession agreement in December to join the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The ratification was preceded by an October visit by the Chairwoman of Russia's Federal Council, Valentina Matviyenko.⁷

Similar to previous years, high levels of absenteeism slowed parliamentary work throughout the year, 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 focus on local issues or procedural matters, rather than nationwide interests. Political infighting within and between parties continued in 2014. All parties, with the exception of

SPDK, have lost some of their MPs to new splinter groups since the 2010 elections. Some MPs allege that internal disagreements have considerably weakened Ata-Jurt and Ar-Namys, affecting their performance in the next elections.⁸ The instability of the parliament seems to leave more power to the presidential office than intended under the new constitution, allowing Atambayev to strengthen his position as the parliament continues to fumble and falter.

In April 2013, the government adopted the Concept for the Development of National Unity and Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Kyrgyz Republic, which continues to be the main document promoting reconciliation between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities in southern Kyrgyzstan.⁹ The document'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 Kyrgyz as a "state-making ethnicity," contrary to the demands of the nationalists involved in drafting the concept. Although the document has yet to be presented to parliament for a vote, the administration continued to move forward with its implementation. As MPs drumming up support for elections tend to stay away from controversial issues, the concept might not get on the parliament's agenda.

Electoral Process

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
5.75	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.00	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.50

President Atambayev and most political forces represented in the parliament have expressed their determination to hold Kyrgyzstan's next parliamentary and presidential elections on schedule, in 2015 and 2017, respectively.¹⁰ This would represent a step forward, as Atambayev's predecessors, Askar Akayev and Kurmanbek Bakiyev, consistently used snap elections to bolster their preferred parties' majority in the parliament.

Political parties and individual politicians spent the year preparing for next year's elections. At the end of 2014, the Ministry of Justice listed 192 political parties in the country.¹¹ 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. Since the last elections, the party has gradually turned into the most consolidated political power in the country and is likely to earn wide support in 2015 as well.

Several new political parties have emerged ahead of the parliamentary elections.¹² Altynbek Sulaimanov, an MP elected as a member of Respublika, founded Bir Bol (Stay United) and has campaigned at youth tournaments and charity events. Onuguu (Progress) is led by former deputy speaker Bakyt Torobayev and relies on support from the south of the country. Another new party, Zamandash, was established to represent the interests of labor migrants working in Russia. Most newly created parties have focused on ethnic nationalism and economic development.

A contested issue throughout 2014 was the government’s plan to collect biometric data on the entire population ahead of the 2015 parliamentary elections. President Atambayev, the biggest promoter of the initiative, argued that biometric data would prevent the falsification of voting results. Civic activists warned of possible government surveillance, however, and added that one year was not enough time to collect such a huge amount of data.¹³ Given Russia’s political influence, some experts worried that Russian security services might be interested in keeping tabs on Kyrgyzstan’s population, and others pointed out that with roughly one million labor migrants in Russia and Kazakhstan, the data would be incomplete at best.¹⁴ Despite these reservations, the government started implementing the project at the end of August.

In the meantime, several MPs suggested revisions to the current electoral code in order to eliminate some of the shortcomings of previous elections. Tekebayev put forward a proposal introducing electoral lists that would ensure the representation of parties in all seven regions (*oblasts*) as well as in the two major urban areas, Bishkek and Osh. This way, he argued, political parties would not be divided along the “north-south” axis. However, according to Dinara Oshurahunova, head of the NGO coalition “For Democracy and Human Rights,” Tekebayev’s initiative would actually further polarize Kyrgyzstan’s politics. She argued that by emphasizing regional divisions in the country, Tekebayev’s provision would make them more pronounced without establishing stronger connections between MPs and the local population.¹⁵

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. The quota requiring that one-third of parliamentary seats go to female deputies has been similarly ineffective. To ensure the better fulfillment of quotas for women, ethnic minorities, and young people, Abdyzhapar Bekmatov, an MP from Respublika, proposed that MPs dropping out from these groups should be replaced from the same quota, rather than by the next person on the party list.¹⁶

In another proposal, MP Daniyar Terbishaliev (SDPK) suggested introducing elements of a preferential voting system, allowing voters to cast ballots for specific party members as opposed to a party list. In the current system of closed lists, slots at the top are particularly valuable and can be bought for up to \$1 million. Terbishaliev believes that his suggestion would force parties to place the most popular, not the most financially endowed, candidates at the top of their lists.¹⁷

Civil Society

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
4.50	4.50	4.50	4.75	5.00	4.75	4.75	4.75	4.50	4.75

Although civil society in Kyrgyzstan has become increasingly vibrant in the past years, there were several negative developments in 2014 that narrowed the space for civic activism.

A “foreign agents” bill, modeled on Russia’s 2012 law and shelved in 2013, made a comeback on the parliament’s agenda in 2014.¹⁸ Originally proposed by Tursunbai Bakir Uulu and another Ar-Namys deputy, the legislation would enable the Kyrgyzstani government to brand any NGO as a “foreign agent” if it received financial support from abroad or engaged 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 in September 2013.¹⁹ However, the bill’s authors persisted and the proposal came before parliament again in October 2014. In December, the president spoke in support of monitoring NGO funding, seemingly reversing his stance and alarming activists.

A draft “gay propaganda” law, also reminiscent of legislation in Russia, made its way through parliamentary committees in 2014 and was approved in the first reading in October. The law would punish the dissemination of information promoting “nontraditional sexual relations” with administrative and criminal sanctions. Over the year, Kyrgyzstan saw a rise in nationalist movements. Kalys, a movement that propagates ethno-nationalist and religious views and seeks to defend the Kyrgyz ethnic group through violent means, is notorious for its harassment of LGBT communities. In February, roughly 80 members of the group gathered in front of the U.S. embassy in Bishkek and burned a portrait of Ilya Lukash, a local defender of LGBT rights.²⁰ Fearing for his safety, Lukash fled Kyrgyzstan in March.²¹ The group was active during other events as well. In October, they blocked the dance group Kazaky from performing in Bishkek. According to the event organizer, Kanat Eshatov, Kalys members chanted “no to homosexuality” and “we are an Islamic country” outside the theater.²² The police, according to Eshatov, although present at the site of Kalys’ protest, did not intervene to secure the concert venue and the scheduled performers. A Human Rights Watch report released earlier in the year found that law-enforcement agencies have often been complicit in the abuse of sexual minorities.²³ Apart from Kalys, another nationalist group called Kyrk Choro also openly propagates violence against sexual minorities.²⁴

In 2014, the police detained peaceful protesters on numerous occasions. During Independence Day celebrations on 31 August, they detained a group of civil society activists who were handing out red ribbons with national symbols. According to one of the activists, Marat Musuraliev, who is also a member of the “Kyrgyzstan against the Customs Union” movement, they were detained because of their opposition to the EEU (formerly Customs Union).²⁵ Other NGOs also opposed the accession. To protest the government’s plans, the Council of Human Rights Activists—an organization that brought together prominent activists who monitored the human rights situation in the country—announced in October that it would cease its operations. The Council warned in its last statement that joining the EEU would inevitably lead to a “centralization of political power, violation of human rights and persecution of dissent.”²⁶

Experts argue that the new interior minister Melis Turganbayev, known for his long career in law enforcement, was appointed specifically to quell protests amid

the energy crisis and upcoming parliamentary elections.²⁷ Before being confirmed in October, Turganbayev stated that some peaceful meetings violate the “human rights” of regular citizens and added that the police would only protect meetings that “solve problems and do not interfere with the normal life of citizens.”²⁸ While Turganbayev did not dismiss all meetings, he claimed that his ministry had the authority to interpret what constitutes the “right type” of meeting.

An increased number of opposition leaders and civil society activists complained about government surveillance in 2014. Leader of the National Opposition Movement (formerly *Ata-Meken*) Ravshan Jeenbekov claimed that he was followed by security services everywhere he went. In addition, some of his meetings with voters were obstructed by government-hired provocateurs.²⁹ Prominent civil rights activist Sardar Bagishbekov complained about an alleged attempt by the State Committee on National Security (GKNB) to trick him into committing a crime. According to him, a representative of GKNB at the Bishkek airport insisted that he carry an extra piece of luggage with him, but fearing the bag could contain contraband, Bagishbekov declined the request. The representative continued to insist and provoked Bagishbekov by shouting at him and using foul language.

In October, MP Irina Karamushkina (SDPK), a frequent critic of the West and an open supporter of Russia, called on the security services to investigate an international youth event, *TechCamp*, because of fears that it might spark mass protests similar to the *Euromaidan* movement in Ukraine.³⁰ *TechCamp* was organized by the Community of Democracies and the U.S. embassy in Bishkek and attracted young activists from Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Mongolia, and other countries.³¹ It is unclear whether the security services were indeed present at the event.

The government and parliament collaborate with civil society groups in designing policy programs and election monitoring efforts, and NGOs regularly generate discussions on mass media concerning human rights, political reforms, and other issues. Activists cooperate with like-minded members of parliament on human rights issues such as gender equality, and several leading NGO activists have joined the government’s efforts to reform the police force between 2012 and 2014. As a result, 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 were also complemented by the work of the Alliance of Liberal Youth NGOs, which promotes greater transparency and accountability in police work.³²

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.³³ These grassroots activities, as well as civil society critiques of political processes in the country, are often featured in national and local media. In October, Valentina Gritsenko, the head of the NGO “*Spravedlivost*,” received the prestigious Max van der Stoep Human Rights Award from the Organization for Security and Cooperation

(OSCE).³⁴ Gritsenko's NGO was praised for its efforts to protect the rights of ethnic minorities in areas of Kyrgyzstan that had experienced ethnic conflict.

While Bishkek boasts a diverse and vibrant civil society, with numerous NGOs and international organizations engaged in activism, the situation remains bleak in other parts of the country. In April, approximately 30 people gathered outside a hotel in Osh where Freedom House representatives were holding a meeting with local human rights partners. The protesters accused Freedom House of "propagating homosexuality."³⁵ In September, the GKNB opened a criminal investigation into Freedom House's support for a local NGO that conducted a pilot survey on ethnic tensions in the Jalalabad and Batken oblasts. The investigation was based on charges that the survey allegedly incited interethnic discord. The GKNB searched offices, confiscated equipment, and questioned local employees and staff.³⁶ However, the prosecution decided to drop the case in December due to the "absence of a crime," and ordered that the investigator in the case be disciplined for illegal criminal prosecution.

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.³⁷ Nevertheless, President Atamabayev renewed the councils' tenure in January 2014.³⁸ At the end of 2014, PACs were recruiting experts to monitor several government agencies, including the Interior Ministry and Defense Ministry.³⁹

Independent Media

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
5.75	5.75	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.25	6.25	6.00	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.

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.⁴⁰

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 and 2014, many outlets provided analysis of the increasing political competition ahead of the parliamentary elections, but most of them mainly presented the views of journalists, rather than a balanced and informed survey of experts.

State television and radio stations generally avoid open criticism of the president or SDPK during newscasts, although talk shows are more apt to air opposing views. In April, Kyrgyzstan's ombudsman, Baktybek Amanbayev, criticized the state-owned national broadcaster OTRK (*Obschestvenny teleradio kanal*) for its coverage of protests in support of entrepreneur and political opposition figure Nurlan Motuev. According to the ombudsman, the report failed to mention the unlawful detention of bystanders, and it depicted the protesters as being paid to support Motuev.⁴¹ Amanbayev called for more balanced coverage of opposition protests.

The online media sphere remains mostly free, and some news sites publish criticism of the president, parliament, and government.⁴² 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 lampooning individual political leaders and tackling issues such as corruption and nationalism.⁴³ Online news portal *kloop.kg* was blocked in December after it failed to remove an article featuring footage from an Islamic State (IS) propaganda video. The video showed the training of Kazakh child soldiers, and Kazakhstan strongly opposed its publication.

Although Kyrgyzstan was one of the first countries in the region that decriminalized libel in 2011, a May 2014 amendment effectively reversed the changes. The ambiguous "Law on introducing amendments to some legislative acts of the Kyrgyz Republic" de facto recriminalized defamation through changing the provision on "false accusations" in the criminal code. Charges of defamation under the new law could result in up to three years in prison. The author of the law claimed the legislation would target the sources and not the journalists themselves.⁴⁴ Ombudsman Amanbayev and several international watchdog organizations criticized the law, calling it a setback for freedom of speech. At year's end, no journalist had been prosecuted under the amendment.

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. Most of the outlets have yet to reopen, and most ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan primarily watch television channels from Uzbekistan, reinforcing their cultural marginalization within Kyrgyzstan. Any remaining Uzbek-language media broadcasts in Kyrgyzstan exist because of strong foreign donor support. OshTV, a once-prominent source of Uzbek-language programs, changed owners in 2014. A Russian entrepreneur, Maksim Krotov, unknown in Kyrgyzstan, acquired it in April from the previous owner, who likely had ties to the controversial former Osh mayor Melis Myrzakmatov.⁴⁵ As mayor, Myrzakmatov was notorious for taking control over Uzbek-language media following the June 2010 violence. The channel's new managing editor, Shairbek Mamatoktorov, had previously worked for the Ata-Jurt party and claimed in April that OshTV was not planning to broadcast in Uzbek in the future because such broadcasts would spread Uzbek separatist messages and lead to ethnic violence.⁴⁶

Another worrisome development in 2014 was the loss of *Vecherny Bishkek's* commercial independence. In October, following a Bishkek district court decision, half the shares of the newspaper's main financial supporter were transferred to the paper's former owners, Alexander and Galina Ryabushkin, who both have close ties to President Atambayev.⁴⁷ The newspaper's editorial board said this realignment constituted a "corporate raid" and implied that the ruling was directed by the president's adviser on information policy, Farid Niyazov.⁴⁸ The president's office denied any involvement in the incident, calling the paper's reaction an attempt to unnecessarily politicize a private property dispute.⁴⁹

As part of Kyrgyzstan's Sustainable Development Strategy for 2013–17, the country started the conversion to digital television in 2014, a year ahead of the internationally mandated analogue switch-off date. At year's end, two-thirds of the population could connect to digital broadcasts, and the transition enabled Kyrgyzstan-based broadcasters to reach a nationwide audience.⁵⁰ The government also sought to equip populations in border areas with subsidized digital receivers.⁵¹ The rest of the population can purchase receivers for 1,500–3,000 soms (\$30–\$60). 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.⁵² The Ministry of Culture estimates that the transition to digital broadcasting will cost roughly \$11.3 million to complete.⁵³

Local Democratic Governance

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
6.25	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.25	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.

A number of locally popular political parties came to power in the 2012 local government elections. Similar to national political parties, local parties are formed around prominent individuals, as opposed to political ideologies. For some local parties, representation in city councils is a strategy to continue expanding to the national level.

In January, the Osh City Council elected a new mayor, even though former mayor Melis Myrzakmatov's party, Uluttar Birimdigi, held on to almost half of the council seats. Myrzakmatov, who had been notorious for enjoying informal autonomy from the central government because of his business connections and support from a group of young men in his personal martial arts club, was fired unexpectedly in December 2013. A propresidential candidate, Aitmamat Kadyrbaev, took the mayoral seat. Many local government officials remain independent from the central government through informal means of power. Vice Prime Minister Abdyrakhman Mamyraliev has complained that some local government leaders act as if they were "field commanders" because they control "300–400 fit men ready to defend them."⁵⁴

The degree of autonomy among local government structures varies across the country. However, the work of the local government is well regulated by a legal framework developed over the past few years, and the central government often relies on help from local councils in promoting policies related to healthcare, education, and other social issues.⁵⁵

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.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷

Outside of election season, local governments receive little media attention. With occasional exceptions for developments in Osh and Bishkek, mass media are mostly concerned with 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. Several 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.⁵⁸

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

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
5.50	5.50	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	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.

Judicial reform continued in 2014 without any visible progress. Political parties, the president, and individual MPs have all tried to stall the reform process to ensure that it favors their interests. According to Nurbek Toktakunov, head of the local NGO Precedent Group, the president rejected all of the judges selected through an independent process. A number of prominent human rights activists believe that "judicial reform" in Kyrgyzstan is really just a ploy by the president and parliament to install loyal judges.⁵⁹

Kyrgyz media regularly publish stories about political officials who are allegedly involved in the criminal underworld. In August, the Ministry of Interior named deputies both from local councils and the parliament who according to the ministry have ties to organized crime groups.⁶⁰ As part of a campaign against the blending of politics and crime, the parliament voted on a bill in September that would ban people with criminal records and those who have ties to criminals from holding a public office. SDPK and Ata-Jurt, however, voted against it and the bill did not pass in the parliament. Later, an SDPK representative explained that his party's decision was based on a misunderstanding, suggesting that the party does support the initiative.⁶¹ In October, SDPK supported the appointment of a new minister of energy and transportation, Kubanychbek Turdubaev, who had previously been convicted for abuse of office.⁶²

More than four years after the June 2010 violence, the vast majority of ethnic-Uzbek victims have yet to see their attackers brought to justice. In 2013, Kyrgyzstan's Supreme Court began reviewing appeals cases from regional trials over the last few years to assess whether intimidation tactics had interfered with due process. There was no progress on pending cases in 2014; for the most part, the Supreme Court simply returned them to lower courts for additional review.⁶³

In a worrisome development, the number of accusations and convictions of religious extremism saw a rise over the past few years. The charges often serve as a

way to extort bribes or support politically motivated prosecutions, and the trend is particularly widespread in the southern parts of the country. Sometimes the victims are men and women from poor economic backgrounds or ethnic minorities, who can only rely on the help of pro-bono lawyers.⁶⁴

Azimjon Askarov, an ethnic-Uzbek human rights activist, remained in prison throughout 2014. 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 the ethnic violence of 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. In April 2014, the Oktyabrsky District Court agreed to reopen the case, but the decision was overturned in June by the Bishkek City Court. An appeal sent to the Supreme Court was again denied in September 2014.

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. The Constitution Chamber has yet to deal with nationally significant issues. In 2014, it helped interpret several legal issues regarding the privatization of public property.

One positive development during the year was the government's adoption of an action plan on the prevention of torture.⁶⁵ The plan, which was adopted in October, is based on the recommendations of the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. It divides reforms into three main categories: improving legislation, raising awareness, and providing organizational and technical support. The plan proposes a number of legal amendments and additions to the protocols on the detention of suspects. One proposed amendment seeks to prevent delays in filing charges and potential torture by requiring suspects to be arraigned immediately upon arrest, rather than within three hours as the law currently stands. Detainees must also be able to speak privately with a lawyer; be permitted one phone call with relatives; and any censorship of their correspondence with lawyers, MPs, the ombudsman, or international human rights bodies is prohibited. The majority of the plan's provisions are to be implemented by the first quarter of 2015.

In addition, the action plan calls for amendment of the Criminal Procedure Code regulating conditions of detention to ensure timely access to independent medical examination at all stages of the criminal process. The Ministry of Health is tasked with developing a single medical standard for determining the health status of prisoners and documenting any injuries at the time of their admission to the detention center and prison. Medical services must also include psychological and psychiatric care, particularly for victims of torture.

Kyrgyzstan's judicial system is monitored by a group of civil society activists who regularly report abuses and corruption in police and detention centers. There are several websites, mainly supported by international donors, dedicated to compiling reports of unfair trials and cases of torture.

Corruption

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25

The level of corruption in Kyrgyzstan has declined slightly since the 2010 ousting 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.⁶⁶ 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.

Shortly after his election in 2011, President Atambayev declared corruption to be a top priority and a matter of national security. In order to insulate high-level corruption investigations from political maneuvering 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.⁶⁷

Still, several years into Atambayev's presidency, Kyrgyzstan has no unified anticorruption policy. Instead, ad hoc measures are used to prosecute corrupt officials. In 2013, President Atambayev's fight against corruption touched members of almost every political party except his own. This trend continued in 2014, when in August courts failed to convict Isa Omurkulov, former mayor of Bishkek and a member of SDPK, on corruption charges.⁶⁸ Omurkulov's case was closely watched by other political parties and regarded as a litmus test of Atambayev's commitment to fight corruption. The acquittal was interpreted by many as a testament to the invincibility of the president's loyalists.⁶⁹ Atambayev, however, continues to insist that his anticorruption campaign has been successful and claims that journalists falsely portray Kyrgyzstan as a corrupt country.⁷⁰

In 2014, Kyrgyzstan received a score of 27 on the Corruption Perceptions Index, a small improvement from the year before (from 24 in 2013).⁷¹ At the same time, the World Bank's *Doing Business 2015* report downgraded Kyrgyzstan by 3 points, primarily due to a decline in tax collection and the ability to secure credit.⁷² The country is a major trade hub for drug trafficking, and experts claim that the authorities have been coopted into the drug trade through bribes.⁷³

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