

# Kyrgyzstan, COVID, & Civil Society: The Case for Crisis Journalism in an Unstable Democracy

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## Introduction

Central Asia's "Last Democracy," or the last semi-free country in the region, has been in political turmoil for the last couple of years. The COVID crisis unlocked the full state powers and paved a way for extrajudicial policies that do not seem to have an expiration date. Kyrgyzstan is consequently burning off the last bridge connecting the people and the state through increased crackdowns on various media workers. In times of uncertainty, confusion, and turmoil, the journalists and news agencies were stepping in to temporarily take on government duties on clarifying and enforcing anti-COVID awareness. The situation has changed, with the Kyrgyzstani authorities turning back on this contribution to saving public health and, instead, abusing the deeply rooted fear of the pandemic against the media and its workers to the benefit of authoritarianism. Through the analysis of the media and government activities, this article closely examines the shifting tendencies in Kyrgyzstan, where the power dynamics grow more problematic than ever.

## Kyrgyzstan and its significance in the region

In Western media, the Kyrgyz Republic is known as the sole democratic state within the landlocked territory of Central Asia. However, the state of things has not been so firm. Civil unrest, which many see as the fight for democracy, but others observe as a power struggle between elites can substantially complicate the routine work of the government. Kyrgyzstan is known as the only Central Asian country that manages to host NATO military bases in the country as a part of the fight against terrorism.<sup>1</sup> Due to arbitrarily settled borders by Soviet authorities, Kyrgyzstan also consists of substantial national minorities, and many ethnic Kyrgyz happened to be on the other side of the border in its neighboring states. The pandemic hit Kyrgyzstan just as hard as any other country in the world, presumably even worse with its immediate border shared with China, as well as political turbulence inherent to the Kyrgyzstani political system. To determine the effectiveness of the battle with the COVID-19 pandemic, one does not need to judge on the grounds of the sole numbers, as state-provided numbers and statistics are often not the most accurate indicator of the efficiency of public health policies enforced by the governments. The statistical miscalculations and underlying systematic measurement errors might be present in a

state where the vast majority of citizens live in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, COVID-19 cases might be either under-reported or simply have no possibility of being delivered by the local government or doctors to the higher authorities.

Although it has been the case that autocratic states, in a general sense, are more decisive and timelier in responding to the public health crisis, Kyrgyzstan took its time. Initially, Kyrgyzstan was at the crossroads between democratic and autocratic paths, slowly but surely leaning toward the one-person rule. The continuous struggle between the opposition and the establishment, several regime changes, the resignation of parliaments, and the quasi-democratic Tulip Revolution all demonstrate how the nation has been paving the way and struggling for something seemingly better than just one-person rule. But COVID-19 has tipped that balance, unfortunately, toward the authoritarian side.

## The political turmoil of 2020 and forwards.

On March 22, 2020, Kyrgyzstani authorities declared a state of emergency.<sup>3</sup> The premise of protecting public health unlocked a wide range of powers and undisputed government policies that are likely to stay even with the end of the pandemic. This premise has a long-lasting legacy that, at any point in time, allows authorities to claim complete control over the people, the country, and the national politics. Every political decision in the country became tied to public health concerns, limiting the opposition to the establishment and enabling the government to execute authoritarian measures. Having started the public vaccination campaign last in Central Asia<sup>4</sup> and advocating for untested and unproven traditional medicine against COVID-19,<sup>5</sup> Kyrgyzstan seems to be staying for long in that emergency position. With the pandemic seeing no foreseeable end in the region, the informally claimed extrajudicial powers of the Kyrgyzstani government are likely to be prolonged with no expiration date.

The locals depicted the presidential resignation of 2020 as the resignation of a politician who lost all influence and was not able to do anything for the country.<sup>6</sup> For all that is known, the opposition's hostile strategy was fuelled by the public outrage against the residing President Sooronbay Jeenbekov. Still, maybe there were more deep-rooted internal political struggles between elites that remain unknown. Sadyr Japarov, one of the leading opposition figures from 2020 and the newly elected president in 2021, recently signed

a new constitution that strengthened the presidential powers against the parliament, giving rise to a new era in Kyrgyzstani politics. How does the COVID-19 crisis fit into all of this?

*The consequences and opportunities of the COVID-19 pandemic*

First and foremost, the fundamental functioning of the state apparatus was paralyzed due to political uncertainties and feuds. Even without considering for a moment the massive civil unrest on the Kyrgyzstani streets of 2020, the conduct of government affairs was fundamentally interrupted. Only the next presidential elections could have granted enough legitimacy to any government decisions, otherwise, the civil unrest would just persevere. It has been no surprise that the websites were out of order when the COVID-19 cases were peaking and regulations were needed the most.<sup>7</sup> When governmental institutions were unable to serve the very purpose of their existence, the Kyrgyzstani government partly became replaced by other actors, like non-governmental organizations and the media.

In Kyrgyzstan, COVID-19-related policies relied largely on direct communication between journalists and officials. News articles and journalists did not refer to any legal documents, written texts, or posts from officials, which happened on rare occasions because access was difficult. In neighboring countries, Russia has strictly published all its decrees and legal documents for public access through the “official Internet-Portal of Legal information of Russia.” It demonstrates that autocratic regimes had different extents of transparency present during the pandemic, some willing to publish all legal decrees, others willing to be more restricted on the public access to public health documents.

Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstani articles and news outlets mainly reference briefings given by officials (i.e., “Сообщила пресс-служба мэрии/комманданта” - “The press service of the city hall/commandant reported”), usually directly citing the words of public figures. In such cases, for average readers, it is impossible to fact-check those articles and news due to the absence of any primary sources, so one must rely on the reputation of the news agencies. Since the referendum on the constitution on January 10, 2021, the state mobilized austere measures against the press, which involved politically motivated legal persecution, physical offenses against independent news agencies, and more similar tactics employed.<sup>8</sup> Regime cracking down on the free press<sup>9</sup> endangers not only the freedom of speech and several other civil rights but also the nation’s public health. Journalists and news analysts were forced to become the national enlighteners in the times of the pandemic, risking their own health for obtaining information directly from officials because there were no other sources of law and instructions available. When the government authorities use all the COVID-related terminology interchangeably, confusing, or not paying attention to the difference between lockdowns/quarantines or simple restrictions of businesses, journalists and news analysts were

the ones who carried the whole communication burden and made sure to clarify the confusing moments that emerged because of the government officials.

Nevertheless, the media could not wholly replace the government. Until very recently, the citizens of Kyrgyzstan experienced liberal space for interpretation of COVID restrictions due to confusing public messages that came from the officials. Because there was no unified public message or interpretation of the restrictions, citizens acted on their own versions of the COVID-19 restrictions. During the pandemic, enacting timely and appropriate policies are only half of the deal. The other half is to ensure that those goals and decrees are deliverable and understandable to the public. Media could have been the most efficient tool for communication and raising awareness thanks to large and different platforms. However, Kyrgyzstani officials, by criminalizing journalists and news agencies, are burning the last bridge between the state and the people, resulting in a whole new set of even more significant problems. Fake news and conspiracy theories spread among the citizens of Kyrgyzstan due to the state’s blatant ignorance of communication issues, despite attempted measures against fake news. Instead of addressing the root of the problem, which is that there is no proper communication from the state to the citizens of Kyrgyzstan, the government has enforced criminal liability and other types of punishment on people who spread fake information regarding the origins of COVID-19 and treatment methods for it. The extreme punishment from those decrees might include several years of prison time.<sup>10</sup> An approach that does not effectively deliver the correct information to the people but punishes the alternative explanations and interpretations of COVID regulations increases the popularity of conspiracy theories.<sup>11</sup> Threatening jail time only deepens suspicions that have emerged over the Kyrgyzstani government and further public distrust toward the state.

*Self-detrimental and controversial stance of authorities on the media.*

The media is one of the few efficient tools and institutions in countries with a low functioning state capacity. In Kyrgyzstan, the media serves as the primary source for informing citizens. It has been one of the pillars of functioning society in a sense that the livelihood of the press in Kyrgyzstan depends on how effective and understandable it is; therefore, it is in the best intentions of different media outlets to deliver the right information in the most coherent and straightforward formulations as possible. One instance of such impactful work is how the media workers have organized media literacy sessions, where the religious figures have a dialogue on the critical approach to the news and dissemination of fake information.<sup>12</sup> Journalists are the ones who shed light on regional problems in Kyrgyzstan, where the official news coverage is otherwise filled with sugar-coated news from major cities like Osh and Bishkek. Media workers have also sought to alleviate the informa-

tion desert in rural regions.<sup>13</sup> During the conflict on the border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyzstani media organizations embraced and advocated for rational, appropriate and neutral coverage of the conflict by journalists from both sides, propagating a guiding principle “Do No Harm.”<sup>14</sup> The media organizations realize the importance of the Internet as a platform for communication and a main source of information. There is also an implicit trust that media workers have from the public, which leads to self-regulation among the media community so as not to fuel further conflicts or offend anyone from their audiences. Such maturity of media in Kyrgyzstan comes from the fact that there is no other body or institution that can handle such a burden appropriately.

### Theorizing the case of Kyrgyzstan

There are no doubts about the vitality of a strong civil society presence in democratizing states. Yet, the case of Kyrgyzstan is worth considering for its own sake and through the prism of weak institutionalism and civil society dynamics. Its constantly fluctuating and changing political scene serves as a peculiar case for how quickly political mobilization accelerates. To narrow down the focus, journalists and media workers have historically been a key component in times of unrest and uncertainty be that a revolution, war, or an AIDS epidemic. A widespread approach to Central Asia has been to perceive the regimes in the “transitional” framework.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, the situation in the region, and Kyrgyzstan in particular as a country that used to be considered somewhat free, has tilted to the autocratic side, where some freedoms do exist but are not allowed to be fully exercised. Anderson<sup>16</sup> argued that the case for civil society of Kyrgyzstan (which includes more elements apart from journalists and media) would only be reliably constructed if the supportive political, economic, and regulatory situation in the country allows it. The 2020 pandemic and revolution in Kyrgyzstan demonstrate that it is possible for civil society to develop fairly to the extent of government institutions.

### Conclusion and the legacy

Free media is the last barrier before the country descends into total authoritarianism. The authorities have limited the presence of journalists and reporters at important political events and gatherings and justified it by citing public health concerns. The case of Kyrgyzstan demonstrates that the media has the potential to serve as the immediate feedback mechanism on the government policies since the authorities are not motivated to explore the consequences of their decrees, while the media serves as an amplifier of local voices and their stories. Central Asia’s last democracy, or the last semi-free country in the region, faces a new challenge in the political arena. The country becoming a presidential system and replacing the parliamentary order served as a huge milestone toward the centralization and consolidation of power.

To a great extent, all of this was enabled by the health crisis that played into the hands of the establishment. Legitimately shutting down any rising protests, blocking journalists and media workers from accessing national events and persecuting them one by one based on the variety of artificially made-up reasons all suddenly became an issue of national health. Such a securitizing of regime policies most likely plays only for a benefit of the regime, and not of people.

Meanwhile, the fact that the Kyrgyzstani government has shown a harsher stance on civil liberties and control over the nation is appealing to its neighboring countries. President Sadyr Zhaparov’s publicly stated alliance with authoritarian governments comes with benefits.<sup>17</sup> Strongmen like President Vladimir Putin of Russia and President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan are showing support to Zhaparov’s regime in various ways. During the gathering of the EAEU countries in 2021, President Putin highlighted his intention of starting the production of the “Sputnik” vaccine in Kyrgyzstan,<sup>18</sup> while the President of Kazakhstan has personally instructed direct humanitarian aid in the form of wheat to Kyrgyzstan.<sup>19</sup> Chinese officials too have been active in the endorsement of a solidified autocratic regime: Kyrgyzstan welcomed the “Sinopharm” vaccine into the region after Kyrgyzstani and Chinese officials’ successful negotiations.<sup>20</sup> Such undisputed support from Kyrgyzstan’s neighbors with resources only strengthens autocratic tendencies, making it far more difficult for people to fight against authoritarian policies in the future.

The political turmoil and clashes between the former and new presidents of Kyrgyzstan have had a destructive impact on the functioning of the whole state apparatus. Still, even with the bureaucratic recovery of those institutions, the COVID-19 crisis gave further rise to authoritarianism, seeds of which were already in the ground before 2020. With the crackdown on media workers, journalists, and news analysts, Kyrgyzstani authorities are decreasing the survival of the independent media when the public may need it the most. Yet the government of Kyrgyzstan has a variety of invisible but real dangers starting with being uninformed on regional problems of citizens and going all the way to jeopardizing the national public health.

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ENDNOTES

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