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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Arbeitspapier / working paper

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Sharshenova, A. (2021). *Mapping Russia's Influence in the Kyrgyz Republic*. (Policy Brief / OSCE Academy in Bishkek, 69). Bishkek: OSCE Academy in Bishkek. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-78469-7>

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POLICY BRIEF

#69, FEBRUARY 2021

Mapping Russia's Influence in the Kyrgyz Republic

by Aijan Sharshenova

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief maps how Russia intentionally and unintentionally influences Kyrgyz politics, economy, society and culture, while exploring what challenges this influence might pose for the Kyrgyz government if it is left unchecked and unaddressed, and provides recommendations on how Kyrgyz policy makers could address these challenges. In particular, three key challenges are identified. First, the Kyrgyz Republic demonstrates a strong path dependence in its decision and policy making. While 2021 marks the 30th anniversary of the country's independence, Kyrgyz policy makers continue the course of their Soviet predecessors, who largely depended on Moscow to design and implement legislation and policies. In the independent Kyrgyz Republic, this practice borders on state-level plagiarism. Second, there is a challenge of overwhelming dependence on Russia. Kyrgyz financial, economic, military and security dependence on Russia is conditioned by the Kyrgyz Republic's economic and geopolitical position. However, this dependence is excessive and serves neither Kyrgyz nor Russian long-term interests. Finally, the Kyrgyz leadership needs to understand, take stock and make the most of Russia's soft power instruments in the country. Using soft power in third countries has become a conventional foreign policy tool to pursue the national interests and global aspirations of soft-power superpowers. Russia's use of soft power is more defined and assertive than it has been, which calls for a shift of long-term strategic thinking on the Kyrgyz side.

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Introduction

Often referred to as the 'big brother', Russia is the Kyrgyz Republic's former colonial power and a current strategic partner (Mazhikeev & Edwards 2020). Kyrgyz-Russian relations are rooted in a shared path and conditioned by the dynamics of Kyrgyzstan's omnipresent dependence on Russia. In this policy brief, I analyse Kyrgyz-Russian relations from the vantage point of the Kyrgyz Republic and explore what challenges the Kyrgyz Republic faces in its cooperation with Russia, a powerful regional actor. In the following part, I explore three key challenges posed by the current state of Kyrgyz-Russian relations and discuss the Kyrgyz government's current responses to these challenges. Based on this analysis, I suggest some recommendations that could help improve and upgrade Kyrgyz-Russian relations for long-term gains. Due to the scope of this work, it does not cover or address a wide range of issues as the subject of Kyrgyz-Russian relations is broad and requires a much larger format to understand the complexity of these issues. This work aims to spark a policy discussion and touch upon some challenges.

Path dependence

In the history of Kyrgyz-Russian relations, one finds a persistent trend: Russia leads and the Kyrgyz Republic follows. This applies to almost all areas of public life, and has been the case throughout the last two centuries. Through a series of negotiations, cooperation, conflict, and military conquest in 1855-1876, the territory of the contemporary Kyrgyz Republic has become a part of the Russian Empire and an object of Russian colonial policies. The 1917 Revolution launched a slightly different dynamic under the framework of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). During this period, the USSR developed mechanisms of cultural, linguistic, societal and economic assimilation of traditionally nomadic and semi-nomadic Kyrgyz communities. Several generations of Kyrgyz and other ethnic groups living in the USSR have gone through full cycles of Soviet education and socialisation. The Soviet Union actively and successfully pursued policies of fostering shared language, culture, values and social norms, which integrated Russian language, culture, values and norms into Kyrgyz communities.

In the late 1980s to early 1990s, the USSR has witnessed a "parade of sovereignties", when Soviet republics started declaring their sovereignty and demanding secession. The Kyrgyz Republic did not push for political transition, nor was it eager to leave the USSR. The Kyrgyz Republic was the last one to declare its sovereignty on October 15th, 1990.¹

In the immediate post-Soviet period, Russia's policy towards Central Asia largely aimed to ensure a peaceful disintegration of Soviet ties. Russia was going through a tumultuous period of economic, political and social reforms, and had limited capacity to enforce a defined policy towards Central Asia. After a period of slight stagnation in Russian-Central Asian relations, Russia has reinvigorated its foreign policy, including the policy in the so-called Near Abroad. By the 2010s, Russia has shifted its attitude to the Central Asia countries from seeing them as states characterised by "oriental despotism", to highlighting normative solidarity (Lo 2015, p.9).

Decades of vigorous assimilation of ethnic groups into the shared, largely Russian, Soviet community has resulted in a certain path dependence that lingers long after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many Kyrgyz military, education, healthcare, governance, public policy, administrative territorial regulation, normative and legal acts are built upon or just straightforwardly inherited from the Soviet Union.

The Kyrgyz Republic has largely adopted principles of governance, policy making, and legislation drafting from the USSR and Russia. The Kyrgyz Republic followed this logic and used the templates of Russian policy documents (Marat 2007, p.89). The Kyrgyz political leadership² continues with the replication of Russian bills and policies, hires Russian policy experts, and consults with Russian officials and diplomats in many areas of work. In this regard, a notable example is the 2020 bill on information manipulation proposed by Member of Parliament Gulshat Asylbaeva.

¹ Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, dated October 15th, 1990, is available here: <http://soveticus5.narod.ru/85/sborn91.htm#p184>

² This policy brief often refers to Kyrgyz leadership or Kyrgyz policy makers. Given the blurred lines between branches of power, it seems to be more accurate to use these two terms than to refer to president, parliament, government or judiciary.

A large portion of the bill has been copy-pasted from Russian Federal Law “On information, information technologies, and information security”.³ The amount of borrowed text was such that no anti-plagiarism checker would have allowed it for publication if it were an academic piece of work. This case is neither unique nor surprising. Kyrgyz leadership at various levels lacks the independence, responsibility and competence to produce local legislation, policies or decisions. This lack of political responsibility often leads to borrowing Russia’s work as was the case during the Soviet times. This path dependence affects the quality and the possibility to implement ‘borrowed’ or plagiarised legislation, policies and decisions on the ground. If left unchecked, this trend could significantly impede the country’s ability to govern itself.

Overwhelming dependence on Russia

In addition to the various subtle ways that link the Kyrgyz Republic to Russia (such as shared past and language), the latter has quite formidable leverage over the small donor-dependent country. This leverage includes Russia’s considerable engagement in the military and security provision of the Kyrgyz Republic, and the Kyrgyz Republic’s increasing economic dependence on Russia.

The Kyrgyz Republic’s economic dependence on Russia rivals only its dependence on China. Trade with Russia amount to 70.5% of the total trade volume.⁴ Labour migrant remittances in 2019 constituted almost a third of the annual GDP.⁵ Somewhere between 600,000 and 800,000 Kyrgyz citizens work in Russia.⁶ Russia’s GazProm owns and manages the natural gas industry, one of the key natural resources in the country.⁷ Russia shapes economic development in the Kyrgyz Republic through institutional frameworks too,

via the Eurasian Economic Union and the Eurasian Customs Union. The Kyrgyz Republic joined the EAEU in 2015, and, since then, the EAEU regulations shape trade and labour flows to/from Russia.

Russia is a major development donor in the Kyrgyz Republic. A large part of its assistance either goes through the Russian Kyrgyz Development Fund⁸ or the UN agencies;⁹ the financial assistance is mostly debt relief, and there are development projects too.¹⁰ Russia’s assistance is quite vital for the cash-strapped Kyrgyz Republic. However, it goes beyond conventional development and humanitarian assistance and extends to support for the military and security services of the Kyrgyz Republic. The city of Kant in Northern Kyrgyzstan hosts a Russian airbase, which doubles as a logistics and transport hub for the Collective Security Treaty Organisation’s forces. Russia also trains Kyrgyz national security officers. Russia’s Academy of the Federal Security Service

(FSB) admits up to 20 recruits annually to train them for the State National Security Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic. Training fees, accommodation and maintenance stipends are covered by the Russian side.¹¹

Trade partnership, multilateral relations within regional organisations and security cooperation are natural elements of bilateral relations between regional actors. However, the Kyrgyz Republic’s dependence on Russia is increasingly excessive and overwhelming. Such dependence constricts Kyrgyz foreign and domestic policy choices, compels Kyrgyz policy makers to guess and second-guess Russian interests and opinions, and creates an unhealthy and unbalanced relationship that suits nobody.

³ Fact Check Kyrgyzstan Information portal 2020, available at <https://factcheck.kg/manipulyaczii-i-plagiat-v-zakonoproekte-gulshat-asylbaevoy-o-manipulirovanii-informaczij/>

⁴ Kabar Information Agency, available at <http://kabar.kg/news/ob-em-vneshnego-tovarooborot-a-kyrgyzstana-sostavil-931-4-mln-natcstatkom/>

⁵ World Bank database, available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=KG>

⁶ Russkaya Gazeta newspaper, available at <https://rg.ru/2019/01/10/tret-trudovyh-migrantov-iz-kirgizii-hotela-by-ostatsia-zhit-v-rossii.html>

⁷ Ak Chabar information portal, available at <https://www.akchabar.kg/ru/article/economy/kyrgyz-gaz-gazprom/>

⁸ Russian-Kyrgyz Development Fund, available at <http://www.rkdf.org/ru/>

⁹ An example of this is Russian sponsorship of provision of school meals via the WFP: <https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-expands-school-meals-programme-kyrgyzstan>

¹⁰ The Moscow Times newspaper, available at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/10/15/russia-suspends-aid-until-kyrgyzstan-stabilizes-rbc-a71761>

¹¹ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Kyrgyz Service, available at <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/28143638.html>

Excessive dependence on Russia goes against Russia's interests in the region. The Kyrgyz Republic has proved itself a loyal ally as it has little choice and capacity to act otherwise. Excessive dependence makes the Kyrgyz Republic an expensive liability rather than a practical investment.

Russia is not likely to be interested in filling in all budget gaps¹² left by the Kyrgyz government's corruption and incompetent management of resources. This is not likely to appeal to the Russian public or make sense in terms of foreign policy gains for Russia.

Dealing with Russia's soft power

Russia's foreign policy has significantly changed in the past decade. One of key developments was the creation of more defined soft power instruments to support Russian foreign and security policies and pursue national interests abroad. Russia has only recently joined the soft power race and established or revived institutions that promote Russian culture, language and interests abroad. These include Russky Mir Foundation (established in 2007), and Rossotrudnichestvo (established in 2008).

Established in 2007, the Russky Mir Foundation¹³ built a robust infrastructure worldwide. It might not be an established brand like the British Council or Confucius Institute, but it is certainly claiming its place among soft power nations. The network of the Russky Mir Foundation has doubled to 171 centres from just 82 in 2013 (MacDonald 2018, p.26).

The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation, or Rossotrudnichestvo, is a Russian federal government agency under the jurisdiction of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁴ This is a government agency primarily responsible for administering civilian foreign aid and cultural exchange. Rossotrudnichestvo operates in Central Asia, Latin

America and Eastern Europe. Rossotrudnichestvo's work is implemented through the Russian Centres of Science and Culture in third countries, including one in the Kyrgyz Republic. Rossotrudnichestvo is probably the oldest and most regulated institution of Russian soft power. While its presence on the ground and online outreach remains limited, it is a good indication that Russia has started investing in soft power mechanisms and joined the ranks of other soft power superpowers, nations that can afford and have an interest to reach out to the hearts and minds abroad.

In addition, Russia runs a plethora of programs, projects and initiatives in the areas of education, culture and science exchange. For example, the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund creates a discussion platform for students, academics and professionals. There are bilateral cooperation projects between schools and university departments to encourage cultural and education exchange. While these efforts might often seem small scale and underfunded, they operate in very fertile soil as the Kyrgyz Republic has Russian as an official language, strong cultural ties and social connections that make intentional instruments of influence easy to enforce.

Given this, Kyrgyz policy makers face the challenge of understanding and dealing with Russia's soft power instruments. They need to be aware of the soft power instruments Russia employs, how this might affect Kyrgyz national interests, and how the Kyrgyz Republic should position itself against this background. There is a need to shift foreign policy thinking to take into account this aspect of bilateral relations and make the most of it for the interests of the Kyrgyz Republic.

Conclusion

Approaching the 30th anniversary of its independence, the Kyrgyz Republic still struggles to find its path of development and identify a balanced interest-based approach to its relations with neighbours. Socio-economic and political development in the past 30 years was underwhelming and affected the state's capacity to ensure adequate employment, healthcare, education and social support to its citizens. Against this background, the increasing dependence on labour migrant remittances, external budget support and donor assistance,

¹² Most recently, Kyrgyz government requests Russia to provide a 20 million USD loan to cover pension payments, source Azattyk: <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31024006.html>

¹³ Russkiy Mir Foundation, available at <https://russkiymir.ru/>

¹⁴ Rossotrudnichestvo, available at <http://rs.gov.ru/en>

as well as reliance on third countries for its military and security provision, is unsurprising. However, the all-permeating dependence on Russia, coupled with corrupt and incompetent domestic governance, creates a rentier state which is more a liability than an asset for its partners. If unchecked, the Kyrgyz Republic's excessive long-term reliance on Russia might lead to an unhealthy economic and political dependence, and, eventually to imminent loss of independence and national identity.

Recommendations

The challenges discussed in this brief only touch upon the wider, deep-rooted, systemic issues that undermine the Kyrgyz Republic's overall development and constrict its ability to act as an independent foreign policy actor. Competent governance, transparency, poverty reduction, diversification of economy, employment and investment opportunities, basic rule of law and justice are just few major developments that need to make the Kyrgyz Republic less reliant, more self-sustainable and equal partners in international relations. Nevertheless, there are ways to address some of the above-mentioned challenges with a more informed, educated and smart approach in policy and decision making.

- First, Kyrgyz policy makers need to break the long-standing path dependence pattern and shift from the mindless copying of Russian legislation and policies. While it is good practice to learn from other countries' experiences, Kyrgyz policy makers need to analyse what policies and legislation Russia adopts and why, see whether elements of these policies and legislation are applicable to the Kyrgyz context, and tailor Russia's experience to the Kyrgyz conditions. This certainly applies to other countries' experiences too. Generally, there is a need to apply a more structured and focused approach to policy and decision making in the Kyrgyz Republic based on expert analysis and understanding of the bigger picture of where the Kyrgyz Republic heads in terms of its development.
- Second, there is a need to address the overwhelming dependence on Russia.

Unhealthy economic, political and security dependence is problematic for a variety of reasons. In the case of the Kyrgyz Republic, consequences of such dependence are many-fold as the country lags in terms of development, relies on the external provision of its defence and security, and makes itself vulnerable to factors beyond its control.

- Finally, the Kyrgyz leadership needs to revise its conventional approaches to bilateral relations and accept soft power as an inevitable part of foreign policy. It needs to understand, acknowledge and become practical with Russia's soft power policy and instruments in the country. The Kyrgyz leadership needs to see where to draw a line in this soft power influence as borders are essential for developing a healthy relationship with such a large strategic partner as Russia. For example, if nation-building and civic identity are at the core of Kyrgyz policies, the Kyrgyz government needs to see where Russia's influence might affect those. The majority of available television and radio broadcasting channels in the Kyrgyz Republic are Russian – maybe it is time to invest in increasing quality and accessibility of local knowledge and entertainment production. Banning and censoring would not help in this case, but it is important to be a conscious and informed consumer of soft power policies. The Kyrgyz leadership also needs to see how to make the most of soft power instruments. For example, if dependence on labour migrant remittances is a part of the government's short-term survival strategy, it needs to ensure labour migrants have access to Russian educational and cultural programmes as this might make their adjustment and employment in Russia easier.

All regional powers with global ambition actively develop and pursue soft power policies in third countries. There is nothing ethically right or wrong about it. It is time to acknowledge that the Kyrgyz Republic is a place where several soft-power superpowers operate, understand the dynamics of these operations, and make the most of this.

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