

World Watch Research

# Kyrgyzstan: Background Information

September 2024



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September 2024

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World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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## Map of country



Kyrgyzstan: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
6,840,000	263,000	3.8

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

## Recent history

When Kyrgyzstan became an independent country in 1991 its ruling Communist regime remained in power. In March 2005 the people of Kyrgyzstan started to revolt against the regime in what became known as the “Tulip Revolution”. The result was a bloodless coup after which President Askar Akayev fled the country with his family. The subsequent democratically elected government was headed by Kurmanbek Bakiyev. These keywords “bloodless coup” and “democratic elections” need to be emphasized because this is unique in the entire region.

The new regime soon ran into the same issues that had ousted the Akayev regime, namely corruption, ineptitude and heavy-handed rule. On top of that, Kyrgyzstan experienced an extremely weak economic situation, high levels of crime and the growth of Islamic militancy in the Fergana Valley. In April 2010 this led to large-scale demonstrations organized by the political opposition. While the country was in uproar, violence between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz broke out in the cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad in the Fergana Valley. The clashes killed nearly 420 people, mostly Uzbeks, and another 80,000 were displaced. President Bakiyev fled with his family in the same month (Reuters, 15 April 2010).

A provisional government was formed in 2010, headed by Roza Otunbayeva, who became interim president, making her the first female ever to achieve such a high position in Central Asia. The ensuing political changes turned Kyrgyzstan into the first - and so far only - parliamentary democracy in Central Asia. Roza Otunbayeva announced that she did not intend to run for the presidential elections in November 2011. The election was won by Almazbek Atambayev, leader of the Social Democratic Party

and prime minister at that time. Atambayev was sworn in as president on 1 December 2011 and Omurbek Babanov was appointed as new prime minister on the same day. Sooronbai Jeenbekov became Kyrgyzstan's fifth president after winning more than 54% percent of the vote in the October 2017 election to replace outgoing leader Almazbek Atambayev.

However, the government does not have complete control in Kyrgyzstan. A demonstration calling for the release of ex-deputy Sadyr Japarov was organized on 2 March 2020 in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek. The rally was attended by over two thousand people and ended with clashes between demonstrators and the police, with 170 people arrested (but with charges only being brought against 4 of that number). In addition to the release of nationalist politician Sadyr Japarov from prison, the protesters presented a list of 20 requests to the authorities, effectively calling for regime change and free elections (Source: [Asia News, 4 March 2020](#)).

In early October 2020 there were large-scale protests over parliamentary election results. This led to the resignation of President Jeenbekov on 15 October 2020 ([BBC News, 15 October 2020](#)). According to the BBC News report, more than 1,200 people were injured and one person was killed in street clashes. Japarov was released from prison during the protests and took over as interim president until elections could take place in 2021 ([The Guardian, 16 October 2020](#)). After winning the presidential election on 10 January 2021, he vowed to fight corruption and allow more transparency into government operations. The Central Election Commission reported that Japarov received slightly more than 79% of the vote. There were 17 candidates in the presidential race and the closest rival only received 6.7% of the vote (Source: [RFE/RL, 10 January 2021](#)). Pro-government parties then went on to win a majority in the Jogorku Kenesh (Kyrgyzstan's legislature) in November 2021 elections.

Continuing concerns for Kyrgyzstan include the trajectory of democratization, endemic corruption, a history of tense (and at times violent) inter-ethnic relations, border security vulnerabilities and potential threats from radical Islamic elements. (Source: [World Factbook Kyrgyzstan](#), accessed 29 August 2024)

In an article published on [3 November 2022](#) RFE/RL stated that the regime of President Japarov was imposing more and more restriction on his country. Many who protested against the border deal concluded with Uzbekistan had been sent to jail. New laws were restricting foreign media. "It's not a big secret that Kyrgyzstan is becoming more authoritarian," Temur Umarov, a fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told RFE/RL. "Nearly everything that Japarov has been doing with the country's domestic and foreign policy is aimed at strengthening his hold on power as much as possible."

### **New 2024 Foreign Representatives Law**

On 13 March 2024 the Kyrgyz parliament approved without debate the third and final reading of a controversial bill that will allow authorities to register organizations as "foreign representatives" in a way that critics say mirrors repressive Russian legislation on "foreign agents." Five lawmakers voted against the bill. Nongovernmental organizations in Kyrgyzstan had called on lawmakers to reject the bill, insisting it merely substitutes the term "foreign representative" for "foreign agent." Russian authorities have used the law on "foreign agents" to discredit those labeled as such and to stifle dissent. (Source: [RFE/RL, 13 March 2024](#)) On 2 April 2024 President Japarov signed the bill into law (Source: [RFE/RL, 2 April 2024](#))

## Political and legal landscape

In 2005, Kyrgyzstan was the first country to replace its post-Soviet regime with a democratically elected government – unique in the entire region. Unlike other countries in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan has a democratically elected president and parliament, with the president being elected by popular vote for a single six-year term. Since 2010, Kyrgyzstan’s parliament has been made up of representatives of five different political parties. However, such democracy does not mean that the country has freedom of religion. Since 2009 restrictive religious legislation began to be introduced. Drafts for a new, more restrictive, religion law were issued in 2014, the most important change being the requirement that 500 citizens need to sign registration applications, which would make registration as good as impossible for most churches, since they do not have that many members. However, implementation has currently been delayed.

In October 2020 President Sooronbai Jeenbekov resigned as president of Kyrgyzstan. He was succeeded by Sadyr Japarov who won the January 2021 elections by a large margin (see above: *Recent history*). President Japarov submitted a draft constitution to the Kyrgyz Parliament on 9 February 2021. Human Rights Watch pointed out that the draft undermines human rights norms and weakens checks and balances necessary to prevent abuses of power (Source: [HRW, 5 March 2021](#)).

In April 2021, Kyrgyzstanis voted in favor of draft constitutional changes that consolidated power in the presidency. On 5 May 2021, President Japarov signed into law a bill on constitutional amendments approved by the nationwide referendum. This has been criticized by his opponents as being a move to increase his power as president (Source: [RFE-RL, 5 May 2021](#)).

According to [Amnesty International](#) on 8 February 2024:

- “The space for freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association in Kyrgyzstan has shrunk significantly in recent years. Over the past 18 months in particular the authorities have intensified their campaign to stifle all forms of legitimate public criticism and peaceful dissent in defiance of significant and substantiated objections from civil society and international governmental and non-governmental organizations. Journalists and activists critical of governmental policy have faced increasing attacks on social media, arbitrary detentions, unfounded prosecutions, and unfair trials. The authorities have deployed discriminatory legislative initiatives promoting vaguely defined notions of cultural traditions and national values to undermine the rule of law and unduly restrict freedom of expression. They have also used overly broad definitions of political activity to curb the right to freedom of association.”

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Kyrgyzstan](#)):

- “The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religion and bans religious groups from undertaking actions inciting religious hatred. It establishes the separation of religion and state and prohibits pursuit of political goals by religious groups. The law requires all religious groups to register with the government and prohibits activity by unregistered religious groups.”
- “The government maintained bans on 21 ‘religiously oriented’ groups it considered to be extremist, including Muslim groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and Yakyn Inkar. Under the law, banned groups may not conduct any activities within the country, including publishing material online. According to local press, the government arrested at least 43 individuals it said were members of

Hizb ut-Tahrir during the year, compared with nine the previous year. The 39 were detained under suspicion of distributing banned religious materials, either through in-person meetings or via social media networks, or for holding leadership positions in the organization. From March through June, local media reported that a total of 25 Yakyn Inkar members were arrested in the capital of Bishkek and in Chui and Jalalabad regions. According to the security services, four Yakyn Inkar members were charged with financing the organization's activities. In March, State Commission on Religious Affairs (SCRA) representatives and security personnel raided St. Nicholas Catholic Church in Talas after Sunday evening Mass. Persons leaving the state-registered church were forced back into the church by officers, some of whom were carrying weapons. Security personnel accused two Slovak nuns of 'illegal missionary activities' and did not allow congregants to depart the church until the two nuns signed a statement admitting to "illegal missionary activities" and "spreading their ideology." In August, the government raided houses of worship in the southern Osh region and shut down 39 mosques and 21 madrassahs. According to government statements following the raid, the mosques that were closed did not have official documents or registration and were built in violation of established architectural and construction standards. Minority religious groups continued to report the SCRA registration process was cumbersome, in particular the requirement to collect 200 signatures from citizens who identify as adherents. Some groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses and Tengrists (traditional religion adherents), had applications pending for years without official action. While the law does not require examination by authorities of all religious literature and materials, religious groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, again stated the SCRA required they submit all of their imported religious material for review."

- "According to Christian activists, harassment of minority religious groups continued to occur, for the most part in cities outside the capital that had majority Kyrgyz populations. The Baptist Union reported that local residents continued to harass the office of a Christian organization in Karakul, throwing stones and threatening legal action to evict them from their property on multiple occasions during the year because the residents were upset that religious activities were taking place in a residential building."

The USCIRF classified Kyrgyzstan as 'recommended for Special Watch List'. According to [USCIRF 2024 Kyrgyzstan chapter](#):

- "In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Kyrgyzstan worsened as authorities increasingly enforced long-existing restrictive legislation regulating religion. Authorities rigorously penalized religious practices, including online religious expression, collective religious worship and studies, and, relatedly, the possession of unauthorized religious materials."
- "Throughout the year, government officials also targeted and penalized non-Muslims, including Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and devotees of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), for their religious activity. Authorities fined individuals for participation in prayer services, closed churches, prevented the import of religious materials, and denied certain religious groups registration or intimidated others from even attempting to apply. Sources continued to report that members of certain religious groups were reluctant to report religiously based hate crimes for fear of government retaliation or non-response."

- “In July, a court sentenced Aytbek Tynaliyev, a Protestant Christian, to six months in prison for ‘inciting religious enmity’ through his online activity. In social media posts, Tynaliyev shared his religious beliefs and criticized official religious policies, which, according to authorities, insulted Islam. Tynaliyev was released in September after completing his sentence. Authorities had previously targeted Tynaliyev for his online activities criticizing the government's religious policies. In another case, authorities detained Arstanbek Abdyl daev for ‘inciting religious enmity’ in December. According to officials from the State Committee for National Security (SCNS), Abdyl daev owned books and brochures and authored social media pages that contained calls for religious hatred. In such materials, Abdyl daev called himself a ‘new God’ and a ‘savior’ and criticized other religions. On January 5, 2024, Abdyl daev reportedly killed himself while in detainment, although the circumstances around his death remain unconfirmed.”

Politicians in Kyrgyzstan have for years attempted to push through controversial legislation that would impose restrictions on non-governmental organizations that receive funding from abroad. But lawmakers have rejected multiple draft bills, fearing it would harm the Central Asian country's democratic credentials and lead to donors pulling foreign aid. However, the authorities' latest effort to force through a Russian-style "foreign agents" law could succeed, with observers citing growing authoritarianism in Kyrgyzstan and attempts by Russia, Bishkek's ally, to stamp out Western influence in the country. (Source: [RFE/RL, 3 June 2023](#))

On 10 November 2023, the government's draft legislation website posted the Kyrgyz and Russian texts of two proposed new laws which would continue to restrict freedom of religion or belief. A proposed new Religion Law would replace the 2008 Religion Law and subsequent amendments. An associated proposed new Amending Law in the Area of Religion would introduce amendments to the 2021 Violations Code, as well as the laws on political parties, on elections to and deputies of local *keneshes* (administrations), and on parliamentary deputies. (Source: [Forum 18, 28 November 2023](#))

There are no religious political parties in Kyrgyzstan. As a result, Christians are not involved in Kyrgyz politics at party level.

### **Gender perspective**

Kyrgyzstan's legal protection for women and girls is often overridden by social and cultural norms. Whilst forced marriages and child marriage are illegal, both practices continue. According to [Girls Not Brides](#), (accessed 29 August 2024), 13% of girls are married before the age of 18, and according to a 2017 study, one in five girls is targeted for abduction and forced marriage ([Thomson Reuters, 2 August 2017](#)). Despite bride kidnapping being outlawed in 2013, convictions are rare and women remain unwilling to report cases for fear of reprisals ([BBC News, 8 April 2021](#)). Representing a positive development, Kyrgyzstan's parliament recently banned a tradition whereby families pressurized the victims of domestic violence into reconciling with their abusers to avoid the situation of a divorce ([RFE/RL, 27 January 2021](#)). The bill also calls for tougher punishments for perpetrators of domestic violence, who previously enjoyed impunity for their actions.

## Religious landscape

Kyrgyzstan: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	263,000	3.8
Muslim	6,061,000	88.6
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	34,400	0.5
Ethnic religionist	28,800	0.4
Jewish	390	0.0
Bahai	2,200	0.0
Atheist	85,100	1.2
Agnostic	361,000	5.3
Other	4,150	0.1
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to the [World Christian Database](#) (accessed 17 May 2024), Muslims make up 86.6% of the population and are predominantly Sunni. The influence of traditional Sufi Islam is considerable, especially in the mountainous countryside – trees full of prayer flags can often be seen along major roads and people visit the tombs of past Muslim leaders and saints regularly. The government of the country, however, is strictly secular.

The initial growth of Christianity in Kyrgyzstan in the wake of independence in 1991 has come to a halt and numbers are now declining. As in many other countries in Central Asia, churches in Kyrgyzstan are experiencing the emigration of Russian, Ukrainian and German members. One of the major problems for Christians in Kyrgyzstan and the other countries in Central Asia is the fact that there is little cooperation between the various denominations, which plays into the hands of the government.

Christians in Kyrgyzstan experience more freedom than those in other Central Asian countries. The laws may be restrictive, but congregations which do not manage to obtain registration can still often function as house-churches. They know their meetings may be stopped, but this does not occur on a regular basis. The planned restrictions on registration (drafted in 2014) have still not been implemented. This means that 'only' 200 signatures are currently needed for a church registration application, instead of the proposed 500.



## Economic landscape

According to [World Bank Kyrgyzstan data](#) (accessed 17 May 2024) - all data refers to the year 2023:

- **GDP (current US\$) (billion):** 13.99
- **GDP growth (annual):** 6.2%
- **Personal remittances, received (% of GDP):** 18.6
- **Inflation, consumer prices (annual):** 10.8%
- **Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) modeled ILO estimate):** 6.2%

According to the [World Factbook Kyrgyzstan](#) (accessed 17 May 2024):

- The Kyrgyz republic is a “landlocked, lower-middle-income Central Asian economy; natural resource rich; growing hydroelectricity and tourism; high remittances; corruption limits investment; COVID-19 and political turmoil hurt GDP, limited public revenues, and increased spending.”

Kyrgyzstan is increasingly turning to Russia and away from the West. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is a cooperation between Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Armenia. At the same time Kyrgyzstan has adopted [legislation](#) that requires Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that receive funding from abroad to register as “foreign agents” (the old Soviet term for describing spies). This also affects religious organizations that receive funding from abroad (Reuters, 4 June 2015).

The COVID-19 crisis had a big impact on the Kyrgyz economy, despite the fact that the number of infections were relatively low. However, many Kyrgyz migrant workers in Russia could not go to work. This meant that the amount of remittances dropped immensely. Hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyz work in Russia and many who lost their job and income wanted to return home. In August 2020, Kazakhstan allowed the transit of thousands of Uzbek and Kyrgyz migrant workers who had been stranded in Russia for months along the border with Kazakhstan due to the travel restrictions imposed to restrict the spread of the COVID-19 virus (Source: [RFE-RL, 6 August 2020](#)).

In November 2022 the Kyrgyz government took steps to boost Kyrgyzstan’s weak economy. The plan was to make the legal framework more transparent to encourage the inflow of foreign investments. President Japarov promised “all forms of protection for those who want to do business in Kyrgyzstan” (Source: [AsiaNews, 30 November 2022](#)).

The war in Ukraine offered Kyrgyzstan the opportunity to boost its economy. Exports to Russia more than doubled, imports from next-door China almost tripled, and a whole range of products that Kyrgyzstan was not known for exporting in the past were sent abroad (Source: [RFE/RL, 18 February 2023](#)).

### Gender perspective

Like all other citizens, Christians in Kyrgyzstan are affected by the deteriorating economy. Women are, broadly speaking, more economically vulnerable in Kyrgyzstan as they are more likely to assume traditional domestic responsibilities in the home. Whilst there is gender parity in relation to access to education, employment opportunities remain restricted ([UNDP Human Development Report Kyrgyzstan](#), data updates as of 13 March 2024). Despite legal provisions that provide men and women

with equal inheritance rights (Land Code Art. 37; Civil Code Art. 1118-1166), in practice patrilineal inheritance practices dominate, as men are usually considered the heirs to family land. Christian men may face economic discrimination on the grounds of their faith, often through business boycotts or state fines.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Kyrgyzstan](#) (accessed 17 May 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Kyrgyz 73.8%, Uzbek 14.8%, Russian 5.1%, Dungan 1.1%, other 5.2% (includes Uyghur, Tajik, Turk, Kazakh, Tatar, Ukrainian, Korean, German) (2021 est.)
- **Main languages:** Kyrgyz (official) 71.4%, Uzbek 14.4%, Russian (official) 9%, other 5.2% (2009 est.)
- **Urban population:** 37.8% of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.5% (male: 99.7%, female: 99.5%) (2018)

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Kyrgyzstan](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.701 (0.690 for females, 0.707 for males), ranking 117 (2022)
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 70.5 years (74.9 for females, 66.2 for males) (2022)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 12.99 years (13.2 for females, 12.8 for males) (2022)
- **Gender Inequality index:** 0.345 (2022)
- **Labor Force Participation Rate (% ages 15 years and older):** Female: 52.5, Male: 78.0 (2022)

According to [World Bank Kyrgyzstan data](#) (accessed 29 August 2024):

- **Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines (% of population):** 33.3 (in 2021). In February 2023, the government decided to take strong measures to combat poverty at a time of severe economic crisis, also looking to the example of Chinese policies. A subsidy of 100 thousand som (about 1,000 euros) was made available to 10,000 needy families in 2023. In 2022, a similar policy reached 2,800 families, and according to the authorities it proved very effective (Source: [AsiaNews, 1 February 2023](#)).

## Corruption

Kyrgyzstan ranked #141/180 in the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index with a score of 26/100 ([CPI 2023 Kyrgyzstan](#)). Corruption is widespread and reaches the highest political strata, as was shown by the resignation of Prime Minister Mukhammedkalyi Abylgaziev in June 2020. Lawmakers had raised suspicions over his involvement in the sale of radio frequencies involving a leading cable television company and a major telecoms company, even though he was not named in the official investigation (Source: [RFE/RL, 15 June 2020](#)).

## Other information

- The COVID-19 crisis that hit Kyrgyzstan in early 2020 had severe social repercussions and at first there was concern there would be shortages of medical professionals, hospital beds, drugs and equipment (Source: [RFE/FL, 11 July 2020](#)). However, according to World Health Organization (WHO) figures, COVID-related deaths were very low at 1,024 (Source: [WHO, accessed 1 September 2023](#)).

- Kyrgyzstan had trade deals for importing electricity from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In November 2021 all three of those countries stopped sending electricity to Kyrgyzstan and it was unclear if any of them would be able to help keep the lights on in Kyrgyzstan in the winter months (Source: [RFE-RL, 22 November 2021](#)).
- A major factor that dominates social life in Kyrgyzstan is the culture founded on Islamic values and traditions. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era did not succeed in wiping this out. Rural parts are particularly affected and, as a result, Christians in these areas - especially those Christians with a Muslim background - not only have to cope with oppression from the government, but also from society around them. For instance, there have often been reports over the years of burials for converts to Christianity being blocked by Muslim villagers.

In general, Christians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and are not especially targeted economically or socially. The only exception to this is the pressure from the social environment (family, local imams, villagers) on Christians with a Muslim background. The high literacy rate means that people who are interested in the Christian message can read material in their own language. The restrictions imposed by the government (all materials must be officially approved and only registered groups may be active in distribution) mean that most of this work must be done unofficially.

### **Gender perspective**

On 14 December 2023 [Human Rights Watch](#) released a 63-page report, "'Abused by Relatives, Ignored by the State': Domestic Violence against and Neglect of Women and Girls with Disabilities in Kyrgyzstan." The report documents how violence by family members or partners often goes unreported and unaddressed due to widespread discrimination against people with disabilities in Kyrgyzstan, especially women and girls. Families often perceive their existence as shameful and hide them from society. Law enforcement and judicial bodies often ignore or downplay reported cases, and a shortage of shelters and other services for survivors of domestic violence who have disabilities makes it harder for them to escape abuse.

Kyrgyzstan has deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Within this context women typically adopt subordinate roles and are stereotypically tasked with domestic duties. Domestic violence has long been a hot topic in Kyrgyzstan, particularly following high-profile cases, such as 33-year old Aruuzat who committed suicide following abuse from her husband and pressure from her family to reconcile with him ([RFE/RL, 27 January 2021](#)). At least three women were killed by their husbands or partners in the first 14 days of 2020. According to the Interior Ministry, of nearly 6,145 domestic violence cases registered by the police in 2019, only 649 resulted in criminal cases. Their deaths resulted from abuse including kicks to the head, burns, stabbing and severe beatings. Human Rights Watch added that domestic violence is underreported and reliable data is lacking. HRW's research in 2015 and 2019 found that poor police and judicial response, lack of services such as shelters, and social pressure from families and authorities inhibit victims from coming forward. Those who do seek help and justice often do not receive the needed support or protection (Source: [HRW, 5 March 2020](#)). Within the context of COVID-19, domestic violence cases reportedly soared ([Majlis Podcast, 5 July 2020](#)).

Outcries also continue over so called ‘bride-kidnapping,’ whereby men abduct women with the intention of marrying them ([Asia News, 10 April 2021](#)). Female converts in conservative regions remain at risk of being abducted and married to a Muslim man.

## Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Kyrgyzstan](#) (23 February 2024) / Survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 79.8% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 43.5% of the total population. As of January 2024, 57.7% of social media users were female, while 42.3% were male.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 163.1% of the total population

Because the state controls the media, Christian communities cannot freely use the media to present their faith, but they can use the Internet for that purpose. Some registered churches have a Facebook page and their own website. However, non-registered churches do not openly use the Internet to present their faith.

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (Publication date: August 2024):

- “The Kyrgyz Republic (more commonly known as Kyrgyzstan) has enjoyed relatively strong economic growth over the last decade – at least in terms of other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries in Eastern Europe and Asia that formed following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.”
- “The country’s telecom sector (specifically the mobile segment) has likewise been able to prosper. However, ongoing political tension, increasing repression of the media and information, and continuing problems with corporate governance may be putting a strain on further growth by reducing the country’s appeal to much-needed foreign investors.”
- “Kyrgyzstan has been reasonably successful in its attempts to liberalise its economy and open up its telecom market to competition. The privatisation of state-owned entities – particularly the fixed-line incumbent provider Kyrgyztelecom and the mobile operator Alfa Telecom – has been less well received, with government ownership continuing despite repeated attempts to offload its stakes in those companies. They simply haven’t been able to generate enough interest from the private sector.”
- “Still, the Kyrgyzstan mobile market has achieved high levels of penetration (140% in 2021) along with a fairly competitive operating environment with four major players. Mobile broadband, too, has come along strongly, reaching over 125% penetration in 2019 before falling back slightly during the Covid-19 crisis. Slow-to-moderate growth is expected for both segments in coming years, supported by the anticipated rollout of 5G services starting from late-2022.”

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net 2023](#), Kyrgyzstan is listed as being 'Partly Free' with a score of 52 points:

- “Internet freedom worsened in Kyrgyzstan during the coverage period. The government enforced the Law on Protection from False Information, which was enacted during the previous coverage period, to block news sites and force online news outlets to remove content. Radio Azattyk, the Kyrgyzstan service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), was blocked after it posted a

video depicting border clashes between the militaries of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The Ministry of Culture also tried to shut down the outlet; the parties reached a settlement after the coverage period. Courts also issued prison sentences to journalists and social media users who criticized the government online and deported Bolot Temirov, a prominent investigative journalist. In a positive development, internet access continued to improve, according to some measurement sources."

- "After two revolutions that ousted authoritarian presidents in 2005 and 2010, Kyrgyzstan adopted a parliamentary form of government. Governing coalitions proved unstable, however, and corruption remains pervasive. Unrest surrounding the annulled 2020 parliamentary elections led to significant political upheaval and the violent repression of opponents of nationalist politician Sadyr Japarov. Major constitutional changes adopted in 2021 significantly increased presidential authority, concentrating political power in the presidency and reducing the size and role of the parliament. Both the judiciary and vigilante violence are increasingly used to suppress political opponents and civil society critics."

Recent developments show that the regime of President Japarov is imposing more and more restrictions on the media. "Freedom of media and expression are once again under siege in Kyrgyzstan today with a slew of highly restrictive legislative initiatives, as well as a spate of criminal cases against independent journalists and media outlets," said Syinat Sultanalieva, Central Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The authorities should stop trying to control and censor journalists work and withdraw these bills" (Source: [Human Rights Watch, 27 June 2023](#)).

## Security situation

### Tajikistan border clashes (2019 - 2023)

There were a number of clashes between Tajik and Kyrgyz border guards and civilians in 2019 (Source: [RFE/RL, 16 September 2019](#)). In June 2020 a Kyrgyz national was hospitalized with a gunshot wound received near a disputed segment of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border in the southern Batken region (Source: [RFE/RL, 2 June 2020](#)). On 28 April 2021 new clashes erupted. The situation rapidly escalated, leading to Kyrgyz and Tajik forces exchanging gunfire in the Leylek district of Kyrgyzstan's southwestern Batken region. At least 13 people were killed and 134 injured (Source: [RFE/RL, 30 April 2021](#)). Authorities in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan reached a cease-fire after border clashes between the Central Asian neighbours' security forces left at least two people dead and many more wounded. The fighting on 27 January 2022, the most intense outbreak of violence between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan since a similar clash last year killed dozens, erupted along a segment of the countries' poorly demarcated border in a standoff over a blocked road. (Source: [RFE/RL, 28 January 2022](#)) Another incident occurred on 12 April 2022 when a Tajik guard was wounded and died a day later. (Source: [RFE/RL, 13 April 2022](#)) Several clashes and shootings occurred in June 2022 between Tajik and Kyrgyz border guards in the Kekh locality, 15 km from the *dzhamoat* (agricultural center) of Vorukh, part of the Tajik town of Isfar. (Source: [RFE/RL, 20 June 2022](#))

Similar violent incidents also occurred along the border with Uzbekistan. In May 2020 clashes destroyed several homes and vehicles and left more than 200 people injured in the village of Birlik in the Kadamzhai district, which borders the Uzbek exclave of Soh (Source: [RFE/RL, 1 June 2020](#)). In March 2021, successful talks were held between the governments of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to

settle outstanding border issues (Source: [RFE/RL, 2 April 2021](#)). However, regional experts expressed their doubts as to whether all issues were in fact resolved. Uzbek border guards shot dead two men at a disputed segment of the border with Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyz Border Guard Service said the incident took place late on 5 April 2022 when a group of Kyrgyz men tried to illegally smuggle goods into Uzbek territory on horses. (Source: [RFE/RL, 6 April 2022](#)) Uzbek Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov and his Kyrgyz counterpart, Jeenbek Kulubaev, signed a number of documents on border delimitation, including an agreement on jointly managing the Kempir-Abad water reservoir, an issue that has been a source of contention between the two Central Asian neighbors over the past years. The Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry said the documents were signed on 3 November 2022 in Bishkek (Source: [RFE/RL, 3 November 2022](#)).

On 22 September 2023 [AsiaNews](#) reported: "Against the backdrop of the endless war between Russia and Ukraine, and the latest chapter in the ongoing confrontation between Azeris and Armenians over Nagorno Karabakh, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are also relaunching their differences on border issues, another open problem that remains from the post-imperial Soviet phase."

At the end of 2023 the tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan dropped significantly. The security chiefs of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan stated that the two Central Asian nations had preliminarily agreed on more than 90 percent of the border between the two former Soviet republics during negotiations held in Kyrgyzstan's southern region of Batken. (Source: [RFE/RL, 13 December 2023](#))

### **Islamic State group (IS) recruitment and other Muslim militant activities**

A senior Kyrgyz official stated that 150 Kyrgyz nationals had been killed in Syria, fighting on the side of Islamic militants since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011. Kanjarbek Bakaev, deputy head of Kyrgyzstan's Anti-terrorist Center, told lawmakers in Bishkek on 28 June 2018 that an estimated total of 850 Kyrgyz citizens had joined IS to fight in Syria (Source: [RFE/RL, 28 June 2018](#)). Repatriation began in 2021 (Source: [RFE/RL, 16 March 2021](#)). On 3 October 2022 Kyrgyz officials said seven members of the banned *Hizb ut-Tahrir* Islamic group had been detained. (Source: [RFE/RL, 3 October 2022](#))

The Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry said on 8 December 2023 that 96 Kyrgyz citizens, including 31 women and 65 children, returned to Bishkek from Syria with assistance of international organizations. Earlier in October, 21 Kyrgyz women and 62 children returned to the Central Asian nation through a special program. Before that, two repatriation missions had been organized since January 2023, during which 49 and 105 children returned to Bishkek. (Source: [RFE/RL, 8 December 2023](#))

In 2024, the Kyrgyz Interior Ministry stated that four "leaders" of the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* Islamic group and several of the banned organization's members had been apprehended in Bishkek and other locations inside the Central Asian nation. (Source: [RFE/RL, 17 May 2024](#))

## Christian origins

In the 7th and 8th centuries, Nestorian Christianity spread through southern Central Asia and reached Kyrgyzstan. According to Islamic tradition, this was about the same time that Islam entered the country. After the invasion by the Mongols, Nestorian Christians continued to live in peace until the Mongol rulers converted to Islam. One of them was Timur Lenk (1336-1406) - also called Tamar Lane - and he eradicated Christianity from the region in the 14th century.

From the 16th century on, Kyrgyzstan became part of the Uzbek khanates of Khiva and Bukhara. In 1867 the Russian Empire expanded its territory into Central Asia during a number of military campaigns, conquering the two khanates. The regime brought in ethnic Russians, who belonged mostly to the Russian Orthodox Church. During the Second World War, Joseph Stalin ordered the deportation of large numbers of ethnic Germans, Ukrainians, Poles and Koreans to Central Asia. With them, various Christian denominations found their way into Kyrgyzstan.

Since the late 1980s, and especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, many of the non-Kyrgyz Christians emigrated. This caused several churches to struggle for survival. But there was also a positive development: Since there was now much more religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan, non-traditional Christian groups used the opportunity to reach out to the Kyrgyz. Evangelism in Kyrgyzstan was much more successful than in other countries in Central Asia.

## Church spectrum today

Kyrgyzstan: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	208,000	79.1
Catholic	570	0.2
Protestant	21,000	8.0
Independent	27,200	10.3
Unaffiliated	9,700	3.7
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-4,200	-1.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>262,270</b>	<b>99.7</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	2,500	1.0
Pentecostal-Charismatic	23,300	8.9

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who

identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

According to the World Christian Database (accessed May 2024) the biggest denominations in Kyrgyzstan are:

- The Russian Orthodox Church
- Unaffiliated Christians

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Kyrgyzstan>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

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