

# THE PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES: ASSESSING SADYR JAPAROV THROUGH THE OPINIONS OF HIS CONSTITUENTS

by Jonathan Meyer



Photo: AFP



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On October 5, 2020, Kyrgyzstan's third revolution in fifteen years began as mass protests against fraudulent parliamentary elections broke out in Bishkek and in cities around the country. Within eleven days of chaos, Sadyr Japarov, a former member of parliament, had been sprung from jail, ushered into the presidential office by his groups of supporters, and appointed both prime minister and interim president under dubious circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

Since his formal election as president on January 10, 2021, Japarov has implemented sweeping reforms, most notably changing the constitution to return the country to the presidential system that was in place before 2011.<sup>2</sup> His authoritarian tendencies, populist and nationalist ideologies, and disregard for rule of law have garnered comparisons to contemporaries like Donald Trump<sup>3</sup> and Viktor Orbán.<sup>4</sup> However, he is a hugely popular figure in Kyrgyzstan, with 64% of people declaring support for him in a December 2020 survey.<sup>5</sup> This popularity makes it critical for anyone tracking developments in Kyrgyzstan to understand Japarov, the views of his constituents, and the dynamics of his support.



**CENTRAL ASIA  
PROGRAM**

This paper uses information collected from twelve interviews with citizens of Kyrgyzstan as well as supplementary survey data, news articles on Japarov and Kyrgyzstan, and social media investigation. Together, these resources give a better understanding of the diversity of perspectives on the president, the ways in which people consume information, opinions on various pressing issues in Kyrgyzstan, and how Japarov fits into a broader global trend toward autocratic rule (see Appendix 1). The interviews, conducted anonymously in English and Kyrgyz with people across the political spectrum and from six different cities/oblasts of Kyrgyzstan, are not meant to represent views of the country's entire population but highlight a wide variety of opinions in Kyrgyzstan and provide insight into how and why people hold certain opinions about Japarov (see Appendix 2).

I will first analyze information and perspectives gathered from the twelve interviews I will then use takeaways from the interviews and supplemental research to evaluate key findings, including to what extent the Kyrgyz president is part of the global trend of democratic backsliding into authoritarianism or whether he represents something truly different.

## Three Phases of Japarov

Most respondents first heard about Sadyr Japarov during one of three time periods. The first was in 2005 when he was elected to parliament for the first time and in the same election that led to the Tulip Revolution and the overthrow of Askar Akayev's government.<sup>6</sup> He became part of the delegation of the transitional government following the resignation of President Akayev,<sup>7</sup> and then became a somewhat prominent figure in the Bakiyev administration, serving as Commissioner of the National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption from 2008-2010. Three of the twelve respondents said they first heard about Japarov in 2005.

<sup>1</sup> Maria A. Blackwood, *Kyrgyz Voters Approve Strong Presidential System in Constitutional Referendum*, CRS Report No. IN11650, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, April 21, 2021), 2, <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1390481/download>.

<sup>2</sup> Georgy Mamedov, "'Japarov is our Trump': Why Kyrgyzstan is the Future of Global Politics," *Open Democracy*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/japarov-is-our-trump-kyrgyzstan-is-the-future-of-global-politics/>.

<sup>3</sup> Aijan Sharshenova, "Kyrgyzstan Elects a Potential Strongman: Implications for International Partners and the Future of Kyrgyz Democracy," *The Foreign Policy Centre*, March 1, 2021, <https://fpc.org.uk/kyrgyzstan-elects-a-potential-strongman-implications-for-international-partners-and-the-future-of-kyrgyz-democracy/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Public Opinion Poll on the Upcoming Presidential Elections and Constitutional Referendum in Kyrgyzstan, December 9-17, 2020," (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia Barometer, 2020), 4, <https://ca-barometer.org/assets/files/froala/25d7a093f01c9a969bdc57d488ebbaddf6bd9592.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Leonard, "Kyrgyzstan: Taking Power One Building at a Time," *Eurasianet*, October 7, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-taking-power-one-building-at-a-time>.

<sup>6</sup> Sadyr Japarov, "Perevod knigi Sadyra Japarova: 10 let v politike (chast' I)," (unpublished book, January 9, 2015), [https://www.gezitter.org/economics/36347\\_perevod\\_knigi\\_sadyira\\_japarova\\_10\\_let\\_v\\_politike\\_chast'\\_I/](https://www.gezitter.org/economics/36347_perevod_knigi_sadyira_japarova_10_let_v_politike_chast'_I/).

<sup>7</sup> "Askar Akaev ofitsial'no podal v otstavku s posta prezidenta Kirgizii," *Deutsche Welle*, April 4, 2005, <https://www.dw.com/ru/аскар-акаев-официально-подал-в-отставку-поста-президента-киргизии/a-1541970>.

The second period was during 2012 and 2013, when Japarov was most active in advocating for the nationalization of the Kumtor gold mine. As of 2021, Kumtor production accounted for 12.4% of the country's GDP, making its ownership by Canadian company Centerra Gold a frequent point of contention.<sup>8</sup> Following the fall of Bakiev's regime in 2010, Japarov co-founded the nationalist Ata-Jurt party with his close ally Kamchybek Tashiev, who now heads the security services.<sup>9</sup> When his party won a low plurality in the October 2010 parliamentary elections, Japarov rejoined the Jogorku Kenesh (Kyrgyz parliament). There he focused his energies on Kumtor, becoming head of a parliamentary commission on the gold mine and organizing pro-nationalization rallies. Most respondents noted hearing about protests to nationalize the mine or about Japarov's subsequent self-induced exile following allegations of his involvement in the kidnapping of then Issyk-Kul regional governor Emilbek Kaptagaev.<sup>10</sup> Japarov fled the country in 2013 and upon his return in 2017, he was sentenced to over eleven years in prison. Four of the twelve respondents said they first heard about Japarov during this period.

The third period was during the October 2020 "revolution," when he was sprung from jail and began a rapid ascent to power. Out of the political tumult, he emerged as the newly appointed prime minister and acting president. Four of the twelve respondents said this was the first time they heard about him, indicating that before 2020, he was still a relative unknown for many people.

## Media Wars

Much of Japarov's success rests on his effective social media campaigning, which has only grown more massive since his ascent to the presidency. In a January 2021 interview with *Kommersant*, Japarov talked about how from 2017 to 2020 he built a power base from within prison, creating social media groups on Odnoklassniki, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp.<sup>11</sup> When asked how he did this from prison, he responded that "according to the law it is impossible, but we found a way out." However, three years of illegal social media outreach did not seem to permeate widely across the Kyrgyz population as none of the respondents mentioned hearing about him during this time. But given the mobs of supporters on the streets of Bishkek who helped muscle him into power, it seems these efforts gave him a committed group of followers. It also built a foundation for the strong media presence that has been driving his popularity since he came to power.

Many respondents spoke at length about several ways in which social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Telegram, drive political division, misinformation, and disinformation in the country. On Facebook, for example, a public "Sadyr Japarov" group that

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<sup>8</sup> "Contribution to the Economy," Kumtor Gold Company, accessed August 23, 2021, <https://www.kumtor.kg/en/contribution-to-the-kyrgyz-economy/>.

<sup>9</sup> Florian Coppenrath, "Rise and Fall . . . and Rise: The Career of Kyrgyzstan's Sadyr Japarov," *Novastan English*, January 29, 2021, <https://novastan.org/en/kyrgyzstan/rise-and-fall-and-rise-the-career-of-kyrgyzstans-sadyr-japarov/>.

<sup>10</sup> Joldosh Osmonov, "Kyrgyz Opposition Leaders Sentenced For Attempt To Overthrow Government," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, March 20, 2013, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/12685-kyrgyz-opposition-leaders-sentenced-for-attempt-to-overthrow-government.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Soloviev and Kabai Karabekov, "'V tyur'me ty 24 chasa v sutki svobodnyy chelovek,'" *Kommersant*, January 11, 2021, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4639707>.

has over 182,000 members as of December 2021 regularly features posts, videos, and articles supporting the president.<sup>12</sup> On the other side of the political spectrum, many interviewees mentioned a popular anti-Japarov Instagram page called Tajadymm, which has over 56,000 followers as of December 2021.<sup>13</sup>

Disinformation and misinformation are prevalent on the social media pages of both sides of the political spectrum. A frequent poster on the Sadyr Japarov Facebook group, who lists herself as living in Russia and working for Japarov’s Mekenchil party, often posts news updates related to Japarov and Kyrgyzstan, usually with no links or source references (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Pro-Government Post on Sadyr Japarov Facebook group, 2021.**



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1412264215689407><sup>14</sup>

The photo’s text in Figure 1 says, “Record! Kyrgyzstan has gotten rid of 21.8 billion som [around \$250 million] of debt this year.” However, the post says the record is not that 21 billion som was

<sup>12</sup> “Sadyr Japarov,” *Facebook*, accessed on December 21, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1412264215689407>

<sup>13</sup> “Tajadymm,” *Instagram*, accessed on December 21, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/tajadymm/?hl=en>

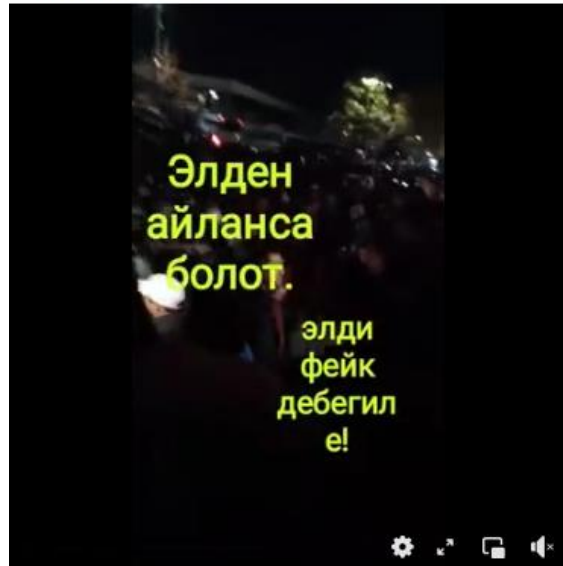
<sup>14</sup> Original post deleted, repost by several users on Sadyr Japarov Facebook group, August 10, 2021: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1412264215689407>

actually paid off in 2021, but that the government *plans* to decrease debt by 37 billion som (around \$440.5 million) by the end of the year. Upon further research, it appears the information in the post commentary was originally cited by Russian-owned newspaper *Sputnik*.

Her posts have often made their way onto other media outlets as well, such as the YouTube channel KG Pressa, which has 312k subscribers as of December 2021.<sup>15</sup> One video on the channel reads one of her posts on the Sadyr Japarov Facebook page; in it she argues that “not all supporters of Sadyr Japarov are fake, we support him without receiving a penny . . . only this person [Sadyr Japarov] can fix Kyrgyzstan” (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Pro-Japarov Post on Sadyr Japarov Facebook group, 2021.**

Садыр Жапаровдун ар бир колдоочусу фейк эмес бир тыйын албай эле колдоп келгенбиз колдой беребиз , колдогонубуздун себеби ушу инсан гана оңдойт кыргызстанды , сатылбаган сатпаган , эрки күчтүү инсан , айтканын акырындап аткарып келе жатат , дагы аткарат буюрса кыргызстанды саздан сууруп чыгарып өнүктүрүп тарыхта алтын тамга менен калат . Биз жоголуп бара жаткан өлкөнү тапшырып бергенбиз Дубайдай өлкөнү эмес , көрө албас ичи таар кресло үчүн жулунгандар албетте жакшы иштеп жатса да көргүсү келбей ар кайсыны сүйлөй беришет аларга көңүл бурбагыла.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/mr.mamytov><sup>16</sup>

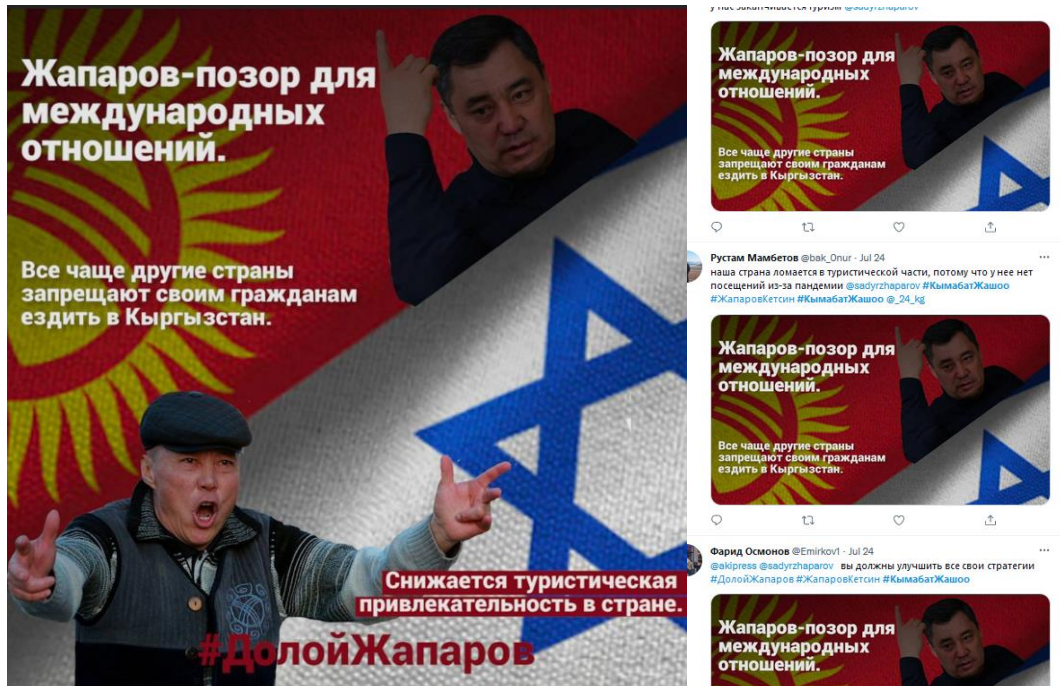
On the other side of the political spectrum, one anti-Japarov interviewee lamented the negative impact of anti-Japarov “bots” that commandeered originally activist-organized Twitter hashtags such

<sup>15</sup> “Srochno! Abal kurchudu kol saluu boldu! Putin khandyn bashyn belek kylat!” YouTube video, KG Pressa, July 4, 2021, news clip, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9IGL2Mo81U&t=600s>.

<sup>16</sup> Original post deleted, quoted post on 07/4/2021 on page of Kanatbek Mamytov: <https://www.facebook.com/mr.mamytov>

as *#КымабатЖашоо* (expensive life), referring to reports about Japarov's expensive clothing;<sup>17</sup> *#ДолойЖапаров* (down with Japarov); and *#ЖапаровКетсин* (leave, Japarov). A common post claims Japarov is causing other countries to ban its citizens from traveling to Kyrgyzstan. This message is sometimes accompanied by a picture of the Israeli flag, an apparent reference to Israel's ban in July 2021 that prevented its residents from traveling to fourteen countries, including Kyrgyzstan, due to COVID-19 restrictions (see Figure 3).<sup>18</sup> Interviewees feel the anti-Japarov bots have only served to harm the legitimacy of genuine movements criticizing Japarov.

**Figure 3. Posts criticizing Sadyr Japarov on Twitter, 2021.**



The widespread disinformation in the country made one neutral interviewee supportive of the new law, “On protection against false and unreliable information,” passed on July 28, 2021 as a way to combat disinformation and fake accounts.<sup>19</sup> Another interviewee, however, argued that since many bots operate from outside of Kyrgyzstan, the legislation will be unable to effectively target them. More likely, as suggested by interviewees and other civil society groups, the law will be used to target government critics, especially those exposing corruption.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> “‘Drug Kamchy prines mne kurtku, ya tsenu ne sprashival’: Sadyr Zhaparov rasskazal, otkuda u nego dorogaya odezhda,” *Today Press*, November 4, 2020, <https://today.kg/news/366667/>.

<sup>18</sup> “Israelis Banned from Travel to UK, Turkey, Georgia, Cyprus,” *The Times of Israel*, July 22, 2021, [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/israelis-banned-from-travel-to-uk-turkey-georgia-cyprus/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/israelis-banned-from-travel-to-uk-turkey-georgia-cyprus/).

<sup>19</sup> Islav Rosiev, “Deputaty prinjali skandal'nyy zakonoproekt o zashchite ot feykov,” *Kloop Media*, July 28, 2021, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/07/28/deputaty-prinyali-skandalnyj-zakonoproekt-o-zashchite-ot-fejkov/>.

<sup>20</sup> “Kyrgyzstan: ‘False Information’ Law Threatens Free Speech,” *Human Rights Watch*, August 3, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/03/kyrgyzstan-false-information-law-threatens-free-speech>.

While the political battles on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are waged largely among young people, the older population in Kyrgyzstan get their information through another means: WhatsApp. According to a 2020 survey in Kyrgyzstan, 58% of people 50- to 59 years old and 44% of people 60 years and older use any social media sites, compared to 73% of the total population.<sup>21</sup> WhatsApp is far more pervasive: 89% of people said WhatsApp was their most-used chat room/messaging service, including 83% of people 50 to 59 years old and 74% of people 60 years and older. Instead of following pages or joining groups on social media sites, people are receiving chain messages, videos, and news links through personal and group messages from friends and colleagues. This medium is far more difficult to monitor or fact check than public social media pages and news sites, especially given WhatsApp’s message encryption. Therefore, the WhatsApp platform would be almost impossible to regulate under Kyrgyzstan’s new disinformation laws. The dynamics of news sharing through WhatsApp adds another layer of difficulty in addressing disinformation, especially since its use is pervasive across a demographic that is traditionally less savvy about identifying fake or biased news.<sup>22</sup>

## Sources of Agreement: Kumtor and Kusturuu

While polarizing political differences dominate the media landscape and the responses of interviewees, there were a few topics on which interviewees agreed. One topic was the Kumtor gold mine. Many interviewees first heard about Japarov during a period of activism to nationalize the mine that ended with his arrest. Many respondents, including those who disliked Japarov, supported movements to nationalize the gold mine or at least renegotiate the agreement with Centerra, the Canadian company operating the mine. One interviewee said, “When the deals were made in the 90s, people didn’t know much about the mine or how much money the mine would make, nor how much environmental damage it would cause.”<sup>23</sup>

Another interviewee agreed that a renegotiation of terms is necessary but cautioned against focusing only on Kumtor.<sup>24</sup> While Kumtor had everyone’s attention because it was on Japarov’s agenda, the interviewer explained, there are many other similar contracts that require attention and renegotiation, including Chinese extraction of resources in Chatkal. Data from the Oxus Society’s Central Asia Protest Tracker supports this. Between 2018 and 2021, several protests broke out across Kyrgyzstan, particularly in Naryn, Jalal-Abad, and Osh oblasts, over exploitative mining operations, especially those run by Chinese companies.<sup>25</sup> The Kyrgyz government has since fully seized the Centerra gold mine, with Japarov announcing in December 2021 that “Kumtor was

<sup>21</sup> “Central Asia Barometer Survey Wave 8,” (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia Barometer, November 2020), <https://www.ca-barometer.org/en/projects/central-asia-barometer-survey-wave-8>

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Guess, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua Tucker, “Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook,” *Science Advances*, January 9, 2019, <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.aau4586>

<sup>23</sup> Interview #7, August 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Interview #12, August 2020.

<sup>25</sup> “Central Asia Protest Tracker,” Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, accessed August 23, 2021, <https://oxussociety.org/viz/protest-tracker/>.

now 100 per cent owned by Kyrgyzstan.”<sup>26</sup> It remains to be seen how the government will approach other mining operations, particularly those run by Chinese companies.

How to address the country’s corruption is both a source of agreement and division for interviewees. Nearly all respondents mentioned corruption as a major problem in Kyrgyzstan and hoped President Japarov would address these issues. However, opinions about whether corruption would improve or worsen under Japarov varied widely. Many spoke about *kusturuu* (literally translated as “making someone vomit”), a Japarov government strategy of arresting known criminals and businessmen, forcing them to “donate” money to the government and releasing them again.<sup>27</sup> Respondents disagreed over whether this short-term strategy reflects a lack of clear direction on Japarov’s part or whether the president is simply using the arrests to simultaneously boost his image as a corruption fighter and raise the cash to pay the government’s ballooning debt. Kyrgyzstan is in a desperate fiscal situation, one that has only worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>28</sup> As of April 2021, Kyrgyzstan’s external debt stood at \$4.18 billion,<sup>29</sup> which is equal to 54% of the country’s total GDP in 2020 (\$7.7 billion).<sup>30</sup> This dangerously high level of debt owed to other countries has forced Kyrgyzstan to use a large proportion of its annual budget to pay off debts.<sup>31</sup> Although in October 2020 the IMF originally forecasted Kyrgyzstan’s GDP to bounce back with over 9% growth in 2021,<sup>32</sup> those forecasts have dwindled to a mere 2.3% GDP growth by the World Bank as of December 2021.<sup>33</sup> The 2020 economic downturn also resulted in the depreciation of Kyrgyzstan’s currency: from around 70 Kyrgyzstani som to 1 U.S. dollar before the pandemic to around 85 to 1 as of December 2021.<sup>34</sup> This makes Kyrgyzstan’s debt more difficult to repay and has resulted in higher prices across the country, despite stagnant wages, one interviewee noted.<sup>35</sup> This desperate situation makes it difficult to assess Japarov’s performance and the efficacy of his reform efforts.

<sup>26</sup> Neil Hume, “Kyrgyzstan says it seized mine over alleged environmental and safety breaches,” *Financial Times*, December 21, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/cf26a247-58ab-4fe4-b36a-a3a886423895>

<sup>27</sup> Interview #1, July 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Nazik Imanbekova, “Could the Growing National Debt of Kyrgyzstan Lead to Default?,” *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting*, November 4, 2020, <https://cabar.asia/en/could-the-growing-national-debt-of-kyrgyzstan-lead-to-default>.

<sup>29</sup> “Struktura Gosudarstvennogo Vneshnego Dolga KR 1992-2021: Novosti vedomstva,” *Kyrgyz Republic Ministry of Finance* (press release), accessed August 18, 2021, <http://minfin.kg/ru/novosti/mamlekettik-karyz/struktura-gosudarstvennogo-vneshnego-dolga-kr-1992>.

<sup>30</sup> “Kyrgyz Republic: Overview,” *World Bank*, accessed August 18, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/kyrgyzrepublic/overview>.

<sup>31</sup> Imanbekova, “Growing National Debt.”

<sup>32</sup> “World Economic Outlook Database,” *International Monetary Fund*, October 2020, [https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2020/October/weo-report?c=917,&s=NGDP\\_R,NGDP\\_RPCH,NGDP,NGDPD,PPPGDP,NGDP\\_D,NGDPRPC,NGDPRPPPC,NGDPPC,NGDPDPC,PPPPC,PPPSH,PPPEX,NID\\_NGDP,NGSD\\_NGDP,&sy=2018&ey=2025&ssm=0&scsm=1&ssc=0&ssd=1&ssc=0&sic=0&sort=country&ds=.&br=1](https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2020/October/weo-report?c=917,&s=NGDP_R,NGDP_RPCH,NGDP,NGDPD,PPPGDP,NGDP_D,NGDPRPC,NGDPRPPPC,NGDPPC,NGDPDPC,PPPPC,PPPSH,PPPEX,NID_NGDP,NGSD_NGDP,&sy=2018&ey=2025&ssm=0&scsm=1&ssc=0&ssd=1&ssc=0&sic=0&sort=country&ds=.&br=1)

<sup>33</sup> “Kyrgyz Republic Overview: Economy,” *The World Bank*, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/kyrgyzrepublic/overview#3>

<sup>34</sup> Imanbekova, “Growing National Debt.”

<sup>35</sup> Interview #11, August 2021.



This ambiguity of Japarov's success or failure is reflected in other recent issues as well, such as the April 2021 violence in Batken oblast, a southern region bordering Tajikistan, that resulted in over fifty deaths, most of them civilians.<sup>36</sup> Some respondents believed Japarov's response was all talk and no real action. He came to the region and promised to solve the situation, the interviewees explained, but then he returned to Bishkek with little progress made.<sup>37</sup> Others noted how Tajikistan's lack of cooperation in resolving the situation meant that Japarov has little space to work on an issue that has existed since both countries became independent.<sup>38</sup>

Many have also found it difficult to assess whether Japarov's efforts to tackle corruption are genuine or not. It is particularly hard to know how deep Japarov's ties to corruption and crime are, especially given the lack of effective asset reporting mechanisms in Kyrgyzstan, which have only further deteriorated in recent years.<sup>39</sup> One respondent noted that despite the large sums of money coaxed from corrupt businessmen and criminals, the amounts are tiny compared to what has actually been stolen.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the government has not been clear about where the money from *kusturuu* goes. One interviewee offered a long-term approach to evaluating Japarov's work, suggesting that while it is difficult to measure honesty in the short term, over the next five years of Japarov's presidency, it will be more apparent whether the money has gone into politicians' pockets or toward tangible benefits for the people of Kyrgyzstan like new infrastructure or educational programs.<sup>41</sup>

## The Uzbek Community: More of the Same with Some Positive Developments

An interview with an Uzbek-Kyrgyzstani revealed insights into the Uzbek community's perspective.<sup>42</sup> For instance, many Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan are wary of Japarov's administration, less because of himself but because of his right-hand man, Kamchybek Tashiev, the former leader of the Ata-Jurt party whose followers and associates reportedly played a role in instigating the June 2010 violence in southern Kyrgyzstan against ethnic Uzbeks.<sup>43</sup> They also worry because the former mayor of Osh Melis Myrzakmatov, one of the key instigators of the 2010 violence, returned to Kyrgyzstan during the tumult of October 2020 after seven years of avoiding corruption charges in a self-imposed exile.

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<sup>36</sup> "Deadly Fighting on Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Border Kills at Least 31," *BBC News*, April 30, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56940011>.

<sup>37</sup> Interview #12, August 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Interview #11, August 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Alexandra Li, "Asset Declarations of Kyrgyz Officials Increasingly Useless as Anti-Corruption Measure," *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, April 8, 2021, <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/asset-declarations-of-kyrgyz-officials-increasingly-useless-as-anti-corruption-measure>.

<sup>40</sup> Interview #1, July 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Interview #11, August 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Interview #12, August 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Franco Galdini, *The June 2010 'Events' Four Years On: Past, Present, and Future*, Central Asia Security Policy Briefs #15, (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan: OSCE Academy, August 2014), 14, [http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/Policy\\_Brief\\_15.pdf](http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/Policy_Brief_15.pdf).

However, as of summer 2021, those interviewed have not yet seen any actions by the administration that targets Uzbeks. In fact, they have seen some improvements under Japarov, namely improved relations with Uzbekistan (although much of the credit should go to Uzbekistan).<sup>44</sup> The warming of relations between Japarov and Uzbekistan president Shavkat Mirziyoyev and constructive dialogue over border delineation has, one interviewee claimed, led to noticeably better relations between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz within Kyrgyzstan, though this is difficult to verify given its subjective nature.<sup>45</sup> The interviewee also noted that conditions today are certainly better for Uzbeks than they were in 2010, as they can at least carry on with their daily business.

Despite some potential reductions in ethnic tension, structural issues for Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan remain largely unchanged. Most Uzbeks live as second-class citizens with no realistic access to due process in the judicial system.<sup>46</sup> For example, as Uzbeks are typically found guilty of any dispute between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, Uzbeks are forced to solve disputes out of the courts, immediately paying off the aggrieved Kyrgyz party to prevent any escalation. One interviewee expects this system to continue for the foreseeable future but hopes Kyrgyz leaders will eventually shift away from ethnic Kyrgyz nationalist rhetoric and move toward highlighting the ethnic diversity of Kyrgyzstan.

## Levels of Optimism Among Interviewees

The interviewees generally displayed high levels of optimism about Kyrgyzstan's future, regardless of their opinions about Japarov. On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being most pessimistic and 10 most optimistic), seven of twelve respondents gave a rating of 6 or higher. One respondent believed that, despite an unfavorable opinion of Japarov, every president offers an opportunity for the country to learn.<sup>47</sup> Even if Japarov does not deliver on his promises, the interviewee explained, the country will learn from those failures and hopefully improve with the next leader.

Several others placed optimism in the country's youth, highlighting the increased activism and political development of Kyrgyzstan's young people since October 2020. A new political party Reforma was founded leading up to the 2020 parliamentary elections largely by students who had spent time studying and working abroad (Note: Reforma merged with the Ata Meken party ahead of the November 2021 parliamentary elections).<sup>48</sup> Once these students make their way into government, respondents felt optimistic about their potential for change.<sup>49</sup> Another respondent, despite giving an overall rating of 4, agreed that "when I see so many people who live and study

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<sup>44</sup> Interview #12, August 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Catherine Putz, "Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Border: 'Resolved 100 Percent,'" *The Diplomat*, March 30, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-border-resolved-100-percent/>.

<sup>46</sup> Interview #12, August 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Interview #5, July 2021.

<sup>48</sup> Darya Podolskaya, "Elections 2021: Reforma and Ata Meken parties decide to merge," *24kg*, September 2, 2021,

[https://24.kg/english/205847\\_Elections\\_2021\\_Reforma\\_and\\_Atta\\_Meken\\_parties\\_decide\\_to\\_merge/](https://24.kg/english/205847_Elections_2021_Reforma_and_Atta_Meken_parties_decide_to_merge/)

<sup>49</sup> Interviews #6, 11, August 2021.

abroad it gives me a lot of hope and makes me want to say 10.”<sup>50</sup> This optimism is reflected in larger opinion polls as well: 69% of Kyrgyzstan residents said in September 2021 that they felt the country was heading in the right direction.<sup>51</sup>

## Evaluation Within Authoritarianism Context

In his autobiography, which he wrote while in exile in 2015, Japarov outlined his vision for government reform.<sup>52</sup> He has already carried out many of these reforms through the new constitution, such as abolishing the parliamentary system and reinstating a presidential system, reducing the number of representatives in the Jogorku Kenesh, introducing a neo-traditional *kurultai* system of local consultation with the national government, and consolidating the power of the presidency. While he argues these sorts of reforms will help Kyrgyzstan adjust to modern needs and more effectively tackle issues in the country, they also provide an easier path to authoritarian governance.

There are certainly some worrying trends in Japarov’s presidency thus far. A few interviewees pointed out that many of his actions, including his aforementioned ascension to the presidency, indicate that he either does not respect or understand the rule of law.<sup>53</sup> Japarov, to his credit, directly addresses rule of law in his autobiography: “What does the Kyrgyz people expect from the state? Waiting for fair governance and compliance with the rule of law. *It is clear that if the rule of law and fair governance is not established in society, the fate of the two former presidents will repeat itself* [emphasis added].”<sup>54</sup>

He also notes the importance of an independent parliament and supreme court. This provides some insight into Japarov’s mentality and intentions. While it would not be surprising for a politician to say something he or she does not mean, this quote suggests that Japarov has at least a rudimentary understanding of the rule of law and its importance in establishing good governance and prosperity in Kyrgyzstan. He also recognizes that failure to uphold it will likely end with his removal from power, as was the case for three previous presidents. But if Japarov understands the importance of protecting the rule of law and recognizes the dangers of neglecting it, why has he shown a proclivity for ignoring it?

There are two potential answers to this question. First, Japarov and his followers believe the system is so mired in corruption that it is nearly impossible to make any progress against corruption through the normal processes of government. The only way to fight high-level corruption, in their

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<sup>50</sup> Interview #12, August 2021.

<sup>51</sup> “National Poll of Kyrgyzstan: September 11-September 26, 2021,” Center for Insights in Survey Research, (Washington, DC: International Republican Institute, October 28, 2021), [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/en\\_slides\\_kgz-21-ns-01-pt\\_1.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/en_slides_kgz-21-ns-01-pt_1.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> Sadyr Japarov, “Perevod knigi Sadyra Japarova: 10 let v politike (chast’ X),” (unpublished book, January 9, 2015), [https://www.gezitter.org/society/36355\\_\\_perevod\\_knigi\\_sadyira\\_japarova\\_10\\_let\\_v\\_politike\\_chast\\_X/](https://www.gezitter.org/society/36355__perevod_knigi_sadyira_japarova_10_let_v_politike_chast_X/).

<sup>53</sup> Interview #7, August 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Sadyr Japarov, “Perevod knigi Sadyra Japarova: 10 let v politike (chast’ VI),” (unpublished book, January 9, 2015), [https://www.gezitter.org/society/36355\\_\\_perevod\\_knigi\\_sadyira\\_japarova\\_10\\_let\\_v\\_politike\\_chast\\_VI/](https://www.gezitter.org/society/36355__perevod_knigi_sadyira_japarova_10_let_v_politike_chast_VI/).

eyes, is to have a strong figure, backed with overwhelming public support, come in and overhaul the system even if it means temporarily disregarding the rule of law. His followers believe that, once corruption has been quashed and the system of government is remade according to his vision, Japarov will return the country to a system of rule of law.

Second, Japarov feels he is unique and will not face the same consequences of prior presidents. His actions thus far follow a well-worn path of new presidents in Kyrgyzstan: disregarding the rule of law and suppressing civil society actors under the pretense of new anti-corruption initiatives.<sup>55</sup> But instead of actually tackling corruption, these leaders use the opportunity to consolidate power and establish their own patronage networks. Japarov seem to be doing the same. Article 10.4 of the new constitution declares that “actions that contradict the moral values and consciousness recognized by the people of the Kyrgyz Republic shall be limited by law.”<sup>56</sup> This gives Japarov broad authority to wield power arbitrarily against opponents outside the scope of anti-corruption efforts. Additionally, as many interviewees pointed out, Japarov’s track record does not inspire a great deal of confidence, especially given his former role as Commissioner of the National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption in the notoriously corrupt Bakiyev regime.<sup>57</sup> In his biography and in a 2020 interview with the *Economist*, Japarov insists he is a reformer doing what is necessary to root out corruption (the first answer), but his actions suggest an inclination toward authoritarian rule (the second answer).<sup>58</sup>

Regardless of Japarov’s intentions behind consolidating power, he will still need to contend with the consequences of breaking the lofty promises he made to his constituents. Pro-Japarov interviewees were enamored with the idea of eliminating corruption and reaching Western levels of economic success.<sup>59</sup> Even if he is somehow able to navigate the country’s economic, pandemic, and border crises, it is unlikely that his supporters, let alone his detractors, will be content with the status quo. Given the past history of Kyrgyzstan’s leaders and the country’s tendency for protest,<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Gulzat Botoeva, “‘Revolutions’ in Kyrgyzstan and the Vacuum of Law,” in *Ten Years Gone: The Legacy of the 2010 Revolution and Ethnic Violence in Kyrgyzstan: A Roundtable*, eds. John Heathershaw and Edward Lemon (Washington, DC: Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, January 13, 2021), 8-9, <https://oxussociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ten-years-gone-the-legacy-of-the-2010-revolution-and-ethnic-violence-in-kyrgyzstan-a-roundtable.pdf>.

<sup>56</sup> “Kyrgyz Respublikasynyn Myyzamy,” Registration no. 6-1082/20, Jogorku Kenesh, November 17, 2020, <http://kenesh.kg/ky/article/show/7324/kirgiz-respublikasinin-konstitutsiyasi-zhonundo-kirgiz-respublikasinin-miyzam-dolbooru-boyuncha-referendumdu-butkul-eldik-dobush-beruunu-dayindoo-tuuraluu-kirgiz-respublikasinin-miyzam-dolbooru-2020-zhildin-17-noyabrinan-tarta-koomduk-talkuuga-koyulaton>.

<sup>57</sup> Coppenrath, “Rise and Fall.”

<sup>58</sup> “Is Kyrgyzstan’s President Saving or Smashing the Rule of Law?” *The Economist*, November 12, 2020, <http://www.economist.com/asia/2020/11/12/is-kyrgyzstans-president-saving-or-smashing-the-rule-of-law>.

<sup>59</sup> Interview #2, July 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Zhibek Aisarina, Emma Wilbur, Natalie Simpson, Elvira Kalmurzaeva, Jonathan Meyer, Doniyor Mutalov, and Huma Ramazan Ali, “Covid-19, Worker Strikes and the Failure to Protect Citizens: An Update on the Central Asian Protest Tracker,” *Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs*, August 3, 2021, <https://oxussociety.org/covid-19-worker-strikes-and-the-failure-to-protect-citizens-an-update-on-the-central-asian-protest-tracker/>.

if Japarov does not improve Kyrgyzstan's economy or its democratic institutions, he may also find himself removed from power.

## Lessons Learned from Interviews

There are several lessons to learn from these interviews that reflect wider trends. One key finding is that people's opinions about Japarov are not set in stone. Four out of the twelve interviewees had neutral opinions of Japarov and two interviewees' opinions shifted from positive to negative after they learned more about him. This kind of ambiguous support is reflected in the January 2021 presidential election: Japarov won nearly 80% of the vote, but only 39% of eligible voters turned out.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, in September 2021, 35% of people in Kyrgyzstan listed Japarov as one of their top three most trusted politicians, while another 22% said they did not trust any politicians.<sup>62</sup> This weak support was also demonstrated in the November 2021 parliamentary elections, which garnered only 35% voter turnout.<sup>63</sup> While pro-Japarov parties won commanding control of parliament, this was with only about 42% of the vote (33.4% of votes went to parties who did not reach the threshold of entry to parliament). The strong pro-Japarov victory in these parliamentary elections therefore belies the high levels of indifference and division in the country.

In addition, the interviews demonstrated that there are areas on which Kyrgyzstanis on both sides of the political spectrum agree, including nationalization of the Kumtor mine and the need to tackle corruption. However, there is intense disagreement over what kind of politician Japarov is. The interviews highlighted that there is a social media war being fought over information as disinformation from both sides is making it difficult to discern a clear picture of the truth.

Given the myriad of economic, political, social, and health challenges Kyrgyzstan now faces, Japarov will find it difficult to fulfill the lofty promises he made to his supporters. If he is unable to solve issues such as the country's debt crisis, border tensions, and corruption, his supporters may quickly become disillusioned with him and look in another direction. The next few years will illuminate whether Japarov is worsening corruption and criminal enterprise or whether he's genuinely trying to improve the system despite a difficult situation. Hearing the perspectives of his constituents is an important way to gauge how his decisions are affecting the country and its people opinions moving forward.

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<sup>61</sup> "Voter Turnout at Kyrgyzstan's Presidential Polls Exceed 39%," *TASS Russian News Agency*, January 10, 2021, <https://tass.com/world/1243199>.

<sup>62</sup> "National Poll of Kyrgyzstan: September 11-September 26, 2021."

<sup>63</sup> "Parlament 2021," *AKIPress*, accessed on December 21, 2021, <https://akipress.org/elections/parlament2021/results-united/reg:99/?hl=ru&place=bottom-link>

## Appendix 1: Interview Questions, in English and Kyrgyz

	English	Kyrgyz
1	When is the first ever time you heard about President Sadyr Japarov?	Сиз Кыргыз Республикасынын Президенти Садыр Жапаров жөнүндө биринчи жолу качан уктуңуз эле?
2	How did you hear about him? (Whatsapp, Word of Mouth, Internet News)	Жапаров жөнүндө каяктан маалымат алдыңыз эле? (Мисал үчүн Ватсаптан, элдердин оозунан чыккан сөздөн, интернет жаңылыктарынан....)
3	What did you first hear and what were your first impressions?	Жапаров жөнүндө биринчи эмне окудуңуз/уктуңуз эле жана кандай ойдо калдыңыз эле?
4	What is your current opinion of Japarov?	Жапаров жөнүндө азыркы оюңуз кандай?
5	Where did these opinions come from/Why do you have this opinion?	Бул ойду каяктан алдыңыз эле? Эмнеге сиздин оюңуз мындай?
6	Did you vote in the past election?	Өткөн Президент шайлоодо добуш бердиңизби?
7	What are you hoping Japarov will do during his presidency?	Президент болуп турганда эмне аткарат деп үмүттөнөсүз?
8	What actions would make you like Japarov more?	Кайсы аракеттери үчүн аны көбүрөөк жактырмаксыз?
9	What actions would make you like Japarov less?	Кайсы аракеттери үчүн аны азыраак жактырмаксыз?
10	What characteristics do you look for in a president?	Президентте кайсыл мүнөздөрдү көрөт элениз?
11	From a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being very pessimistic and 10 being very optimistic) how optimistic are you about Kyrgyzstan's future?	Бирден онго чейин Кыргызстандын келечегин кандай баалайт элениз (1 өтө төмөн, 10 абдан жогору)?

## Appendix 2: Demographics of Interviewees

Interviewee	Oblast	Gender
1	Osh/Bishkek	Female
2	Jalal-Abad	Female
3	Talas/Bishkek	Female
4	Jalal-Abad/Bishkek	Male
5	Bishkek	Male
6	Naryn/Bishkek	Female
7	Osh City	Female
8	Talas	Male
9	Talas/Bishkek	Female
10	Talas	Male
11	Talas	Female
12	Osh	Male