

Kyrgyzstan: a multiple stakes digitalization

Description

If Kyrgyzstan aims to become a technological hub in Central Asia, this country is yet characterized by a high dependence in the cyber sphere towards foreign actors. [Its late digitalization](#) doesn't make this assessment any better but the challenges related to this movement make it a priority for the public authorities.

Some aspects of Kyrgyz digitalization appear to be particularly urgent. Mainly financed by foreign powers, it tends to reflect the influence struggles at work in the region, between China, Russia and the West.

Combating human trafficking

During the preparation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in May 2024, the head of the Kyrgyz Supreme Court mentioned digitalization as a tool [to combat human trafficking](#). Taking this challenge into consideration seems to be a regional trend as the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, [signed a law in July of the same year](#)

on this topic. The digitalization of procedures, notably civil registration and the assignment of a unique identification number to citizens, strengthen the fight against identity theft. As of 2024, the Kyrgyz government still did not have a unified database regarding anti-trafficking efforts, ["which continued to hinder planning and coordination of initiatives"](#). This is one of the main challenges of the country's digitalization.

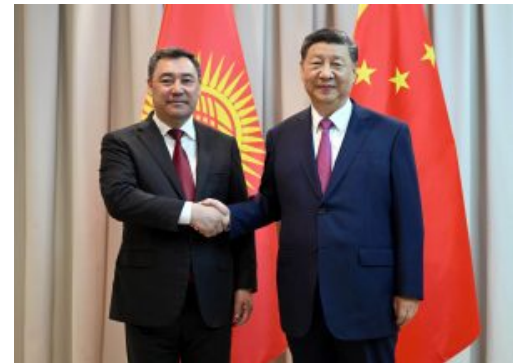
Due to the high level of corruption, cases of collaboration between authorities and traffickers are frequent. There has been a decrease in the number of trials and convictions for human trafficking, notably due to the mislabeling of crimes, sometimes deliberately to close cases more easily. The figures should be revised upwards. Kyrgyz abroad are particularly vulnerable: some of the victims of trafficking in persons and illegal workers are fraudulently recruited or even forced by Russia to fight in Ukraine.

The most developed form of human trafficking in Kyrgyzstan remains forced marriage, particularly through the practice of *"ala kačuu"* ("to take and run away" in Kyrgyz), marriage by abduction, leading [to migrations](#), both internal (rural exodus) or external (mainly towards Russia), to escape kidnapping. Child marriage is also a real scourge: [between 7,000 and 9,000 very young girls are married each year](#). The digitalization of the administration can prevent the registration of these forced marriages but not the practice itself, which is difficult to eradicate, especially in rural areas.

Child protection is an important part of digitalization: the registration of dates of birth using the digitalized system prevent declaratory manipulation regarding age. The 2005 law criminalizing "adoption of children for commercial purposes" reflects the importance of combating child labour. An ILO project carried out between 2017 and 2019 focused on Central Asia as a whole, indicating that the problem was widespread in the region (on this matter, [Kyrgyzstan is not the worst case in Central Asia](#)).

The threat of foreign meddling

Cyber is a sphere of meddling *par excellence* because of the difficulty of attribution of the attacks, their low cost and the scale that they can take. Digitalizing the country means exposing it to new threats. A [State agency for personal data protection](#) was established at the end of 2021 to compensate the lack of structures to secure e-government and user data. However, digital security has an impact on territorial security, especially as the Plan for 2024-2028 considers the digitalization of the Armed Forces (analysis of operational capabilities, registration of logistics and location of equipment, interconnection with other databases in order to complicate the avoidance of conscription...)⁽¹⁾.



Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan is marked by a significant cyber-dependency, which the digitalization of the government will surely amplify. Legacy of the Soviet era, the country is part of the *Runet*⁽²⁾, which is not without strategic implications. The country's digitalization is not necessarily an issue of de-russification and decolonization: researcher Kevin Limonier highlights that “these countries have never turned digital independence from Russia into a political issue”⁽³⁾. Data from Central Asia is mostly routed by Moscow to Europe or America, which makes it an almost mandatory processing point, in addition to the physical paths of optical fiber backbone networks which, although diversifying, still largely transit through the northern giant (see map).

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, this exposes it to interference from both Russia and Kazakhstan, which is almost an inevitable passage for Bishkek. For example, in 2016, Astana decided to increase the price of bandwidth sold to Kyrgyzstan (the megabit then went from 13 to 30 USD). The New Silk Roads designed by China pass for the most part through Kazakhstan because of topographical issues (the border between China and Kyrgyzstan is made of high mountains), which does not offer Bishkek any prospects of resolving this dependence, except for the section linking Artux (in western Xinjiang) to Sary-Tash (Osh region).

Terrestrial Optical Fiber Backbone Map of Eurasian connexions (simplified)



Influence struggles and geopolitical reorganization

Due to increasingly interconnected systems, security challenges and the fight against corruption tend to concern the entire international community⁽⁴⁾. In the digital sphere, the opposition between “the West” (countries of NATO, the EU and the G7) and “the South” (led by the BRICS) is almost institutionalized through two UN *fora* on cybersecurity: “the Open-ended Working Group (OEWG) created at the initiative of Russia with, notably, the support of China, and the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) founded by

the United States and a majority of European states”⁽⁵⁾.

However, the digitalization of Kyrgyzstan oscillates between these two influences. At the beginning of the project, the OSCE, the UNDP and South Korea were among the main funders. The United States and Estonia provided technical and financial assistance, notably regarding data exchanges. From 2021 on, [the EU allocated 2 million euros to the project](#) and technical assistance through a consortium led by the Estonian company eGA with the participation of Finnish and Italian companies and the Kyrgyz Ministry of Digital Development. The cable projects in the Caspian Sea, of which the Baku-Aktau section is already in service, allow Kyrgyzstan to bypass Russia. In 2023, the EU program was extended until 2027. The West, main partners in Kyrgyz digitalization at the start of the project, are seeing their spot increasingly contested by China, particularly in the judicial field. While Kyrgyzstan is not directly on the axis of the new connections that pass through Kazakhstan, it has other interests for Beijing in the context of the New Silk Roads.

In October 2023, [a Kyrgyz delegation](#) was invited to the “International Maritime Silk Roads Forum on Judicial Cooperation.” As a result, Kyrgyzstan's projects seem to be evolving towards the Chinese security model: its Strategy for 2028 plans to use facial recognition in public surveillance⁽⁶⁾.

The country is still far from implementing this system since the state does not yet have a centralized database for its law enforcement agencies or an electronic criminal records system (goals for 2028). For China, the digitalization of Kyrgyzstan is part of its broader New Silk Road project, notably with [the ambition to relocate the production](#) of microchips and to install datacenters. While Beijing is already developing datacenters in Russia, it would be interesting to diversify the location of its servers. If it becomes a technological hub as it intends, Kyrgyzstan could serve as a low-cost host. For Bishkek, the benefits are obvious: better connectivity, technological solutions, technical and financial assistance, support for its digitalization, and job creation.

However, Kyrgyzstan risks amplifying its dependencies in both digital and energy spheres – the two being linked. Domestic policy issues could also emerge (in Kazakhstan, the rise of energy prices was one of the reasons for the January 2022 riots). If the Kyrgyz Strategy for 2018-2040 thought the energy aspect, it mentions a “gasification of the country” (task 7.13) by Gazprom Kyrgyzstan, which has the monopoly on the country's natural gas exportation and its distribution network, leading to supply agreements [until 2040](#). In other words, it is an additional opening to Russian

meddling. Influence struggles in the country are thus turning to the advantage of China and Russia at the expense of the West.

Notes :

(1) With the issues that this can cause, as observed in Ukraine [when the Russians hacked the Ukrainian system](#), giving away the position of military installations and personnel, and [vice versa](#).

(2) Blend word referring to the Russian-language internet, which has its own culture in many respects.

(3) Kevin Limonier, *Ru.net : géopolitique du cyberspace russophone*, L'Inventaire, Paris, 2018, pp. 55 and 64.

(4) As recently [observed in Moldova](#) where organized crime tried to have Interpol red notices erased (of which Kyrgyzstan is a member country).

(5) Anne-Thida Norodom (2022), « Multilatéralisme et numérique : lorsque le multilatéralisme ne suffit pas », in Julian Fernandez, Jean-Vincent Holeindre (dir), *Nations désunies ? La crise du multilatéralisme dans les relations internationales*, CNRS éditions, Paris, 2022, p. 222.

(6) It has also been [in use](#), unlawfully, in [France](#) since at least 2015.

Vignette : Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Japarov (on the left) meets with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping (on the right) ahead of the SCO summit in Astana (2024), leading to a deepening of bilateral relations between these countries. (source: [Presidency of Kyrgyzstan](#)).

[Link to the French version of the article](#)

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[Back to the top of the page](#)

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