Kyrgyzstan: Next technological hub in Central Asia?

Description

If 2019 has been declared the Year of Digitalization of Kyrgyzstan, this process is a goal regularly reiterated by the government since the *National Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2018-2040*. What assessment should be made of the measures already in place and what challenges are emerging?

Kyrgyzstan aims to become a major technological hub in Central Asia, notably by developing the New Digital Silk Roads. However, this country is experiencing a late digitalization of the administration (2014), which only became an official priority in 2018. If the *Concept of Digital Transformation of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2024-2028* promised that the country's digitalization "*will make it possible to maximize the potential of digital technologies for the benefit of all citizens*," what is the situation at the moment?

Assessment of Kyrgyz digitalization

COVID-19 has accelerated the digital transition of numerous countries, including Kyrgyzstan. It is stressed as a measure of transparency, anti-corruption and combatting crime, in addition to contributing to the general productivity of the administration by optimizing procedures. The data collected by the Kyrgyz e-government allows more accurate analyses to facilitate political decision-making. The problem of compiling statistics is recurrent in several countries of the region (for example, in the field of energy production in Kazakhstan). Digitalization creates skilled jobs positions, notably data analysts, in a context of struggle against unemployment. The country's digitalization initiatives are part of the *Taza kuum* project ("Transparent Society" in Kyrgyz), supported by the EBRD, that aims to digitalize the country to increase its public services efficiency and to centralize procedures.

The first step was assigning a unique identification number to each citizen, allowing the establishment of a unified population registration system from 2014 on. Until 2009, the paper system inherited from the Soviet era still prevailed. While the first complete database is the civil registry, the first database to have been partially digitalized is the register of beneficiaries of the social fund, another Soviet legacy.

The *National Strategy for 2018-2040* promised the digitalization of all public services by 2021, which coincides with the transfer of the application *Tunduk* (portal allowing a centralized access to public services and communication of state databases with each other), to the state-owned enterprise that was developing *e-Kyzmat* ("e-government", this was only available to civil servants) since 2014 and the connection of municipal services to the application. The main points of the country's digitalization program were the creation of the necessary infrastructures, implementation of the e-government, training, and awareness campaigns on the use of these technologies, and a government agency in charge of data protection.

The reports automatically generated by *e-Kyzmat* increase the administration's productivity through an automated data analysis process. The budget savings achieved by the digitalization of services are estimated at 300 million USD per year (1). Since 2023 *via Tunduk*, in the field of health, patients' eligibility to social security, insurance and medical history are centralized. This implementation was urgent, particularly regarding the quality of patients' care or simply regarding access to their identities *via* a centralized file, which is a challenge in struggle against human trafficking. Similarly, the registration of deaths in a unified database prevents identity theft.

The stated goals for 2028 are the connection of the various government services to the ecosystem already in place, the development of e-commerce, minimizing bureaucratic procedures, eliminating data duplication through better

communication between departments and thus saving storage, and developing the private sector to be competitive internationally. This strategy isolates the development of AI as a key component to achieve these goals, notably through the development of an AI that "*understands and speaks*" Kyrgyz. Digitalization of the judiciary is conducted through the automatic information system (AIS) *Sud* ("Court" in Russian), an integral part of the *Tunduk* ecosystem, which allows access to additional information from the cadaster or the various ministries. This project is part of a program "*founded by the European Union and the Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development of the German Federation, which covers all courts in the Kyrgyz Republic*".
The key projects of digitalization of the judiciary are: the creation of a centralized database of past or ongoing judgments, the possibility for the parties to have access to the elements of the file and to submit documents through a cloud service to avoid paper procedures, the online broadcasting of Court's sessions, an online payment system for state expenses, the training of judges and civil servants in the use of these tools, the possibility to sign documents online by the parties to the case and "*access to the texts of decisions, analytical reports by category of cases, statistics regarding the work of the Courts*". The automatic attribution of cases according to the availability of judges is part of the fight against corruption.

A limited digitalization

The digitalization of Kyrgyzstan faces its limits. Regarding the digitalization of the judiciary, the equipment is obsolete(2) and the use of audio and video recordings during trials is still optional as not all courts are equipped. A centralized database of criminal records is yet necessary.
Digitalization is partial: it exists in theory, is not necessarily accessible in practice, and lacks a properly defined legal framework. In 2023, for example, it was still necessary to develop an equivalent status between electronic and paper documents. The prosecutor theoretically has no power online, and the required forms are not always available online. A voluminous *Digital code* is in the project, which is supposed to complete the laws already in force. Western countries are taken as an example, especially in terms of data protection.
It is a key issue: an intrusion in AIS *Sud* would give access to the names, addresses, and other sensitive data of the parties to the case, which could allow a malevolent third party to pressure either party. This issue can be extended to the entire *Tunduk* ecosystem, including banking, biometric, and medical data. Despite these limits, it should be noted that the digitalization of Kyrgyzstan is an example of the success and rapidity that has inspired Turkmenistan.

Fight against corruption and inequalities

Digitalizing procedures eliminates intermediaries. In a culture marked mainly by corruption, that means removing the *blat*, paying a sum of money to a civil servant to obtain a public service or a job. The limits of digitalization in the fight against corruption are expressed through some persisting institutionalized forms of corruption, such as "*kusturizatsia*" (a word derived from "vomiting" in Kyrgyz). This practice is an agreement between the Security Services, the President of the Republic, and the perpetrator of embezzlement, which is meant to force him to refund part of the damage caused. This practice is opaque regarding the eligibility criteria or what is to be done with the funds recovered. In case of refusal or opposition, pressures on the partners of the targeted individual harm his business when forced sharing of the company with people close to the government or prison sentences are not used. Far from the priorities given to transparency and economic attractiveness, investors are fleeing the country due to widespread corrupt practices at the highest level of the State.
The elimination of *blat* is an issue of accessibility to public services for the most vulnerable fringe of the population. Digitalization aims to reduce inequalities. The support for digitalization of rural areas has an inclusive dimension, mainly through remote access for less integrated regions into the administrative network. The need for decentralization can be illustrated by the density of inhabitants(3). Developing a widespread and affordable high-speed internet network is one of the priorities of the 2028 strategy. Other programs to support rural areas digitalization are emerging, such as the *Coding Caravan* supported by UN Women and the US Embassy, aimed at attracting young girls from the regions to digital professions.
One of the stated goals of the *Strategy for 2018-2040* is the possibility for Kyrgyz citizens to remote-work, especially for foreign companies. While remittances still contribute to 20% of the GDP(4), this issue is essential to fight unemployment.

In 2018, Kyrgyzstan joined the World Bank's *Digital CASA* program aimed at creating a framework (legal, logistical, infrastructural) favorable to digitalization and Internet access. Since then, the share of the population to access internet has increased from 51% (2017) to 75% (2021).

Notes :

(1) Almaz Nasyrov, « Civil Service Reform in Kyrgyzstan: Challenges and Threats », in Alikhan Baimenov, Panos Liverakos (ed), *Public Service Evolution in the 15 Post-Soviet Countries: Diversity in Transformation*, Palgrave MacMilan, Singapore, 2022, p. 281.

(2) The session recording system only supports DVDs as storage media and the recordings are sometimes unusable due to their low quality.

(3) The number of inhabitants per km² was 24 in 1992 and 37,5 in 2024, consistently increasing. In comparison, in France, it is 121,5 inhabitants/km², according to OurWorldinData.

(4) About 33% in 2018 and 2021 but declining since then (20% in 2023, the latest year available according to the data of the World Bank, last consulted in 03/11/2024).

Illustration : Chyngyz Amanatov, director of *Tunduk* (on the right), and Alekseï Rogov, ambassador of the OSCE in Bishkek (on the left), during the signature of the cooperation plan for 2022 (1rst July 2022) (Copyright: State Agency in charge of *Tunduk* – Kyrghyz Ministry of Digital Development).

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