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# POPULISM A LA KYRGYZ. SADYR JAPAROV, NATIONALISM, AND ANTI-ELITE FEELING IN KYRGYZSTAN



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**Populism à la Kyrgyz:  
Sadyr Japarov, Nationalism, and Anti-Elite  
Sentiment in Kyrgyzstan**

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*Photo Cover: A seized fire truck outside the White House on 6 October 2020, EmirKydyrmyshov, Wikipedia.*

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On October 5, 2020, ordinary citizens stormed Bishkek’s White House in a popular uprising against rigged elections and corrupt elites.<sup>1</sup> This popular mobilization against the central authorities was followed by a struggle for power among political groups, a struggle eventually won by Sadyr Japarov, a politician of middling caliber who had been a political outcast since 2013. On January 10, 2021, 79.2 per cent of voters, with record low voter turnout of 39.3 percent, chose him as Kyrgyzstan’s sixth president. Japarov’s first act after seizing power in October was to initiate a constitutional change that would pave the way for a return to the kind of strong presidentialism that society opposed in previous insurrections.

The victory of the 52-year-old Japarov, who capitalized on unprecedented popular support among those on the streets, is a triumph of populism following a struggle for power that was devoid of ideological orientations. In the ideologically sterile but politically dynamic Kyrgyzstani context, his case embodies conservative, religious, and nationalist values and ideas. However, his impressive and unexpected rise from prison inmate to president of the country conceals several important issues that are the focus of this paper. First, the “unexpectedness” of his popularity should not disguise the longstanding popularity of nationalist ideas in society. Japarov’s nationalist populism is flourishing on fertile ground long prepared by political parties—including his own—and more recently by new ultra-right groupings. Second, to understand the phenomenon of populism in Kyrgyzstan that became so apparent during the recent massive mobilization, we should focus not only on Japarov’s leadership, but also on his party, Mekenchil (Patriot). His populism rests on both his charismatic personality *and* a party program. After expanding on these points, the paper lays out the prospects for the country and the shape of its future politics under his rule.

## **The Gradual Rise of Nationalist Populism in Kyrgyzstan**

Sadyr Japarov is, of course, not the first populist leader in Kyrgyzstan. Nationalism as a national ideology has been on the rise since the 1990s as “the inescapable ideological context for ordering politics” in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>2</sup> Even before Japarov’s rise to power, political elites and opposition figures regularly advanced nationalist claims.

The former mayor of Osh, Melis Myrzakmatov, is a great example of a politician who was buoyed by the nationalist wave, to the point of threatening the central authorities in the capital city. Another long-established politician, Adahan Madumarov—with his party Butun Kyrgyzstan—has long played

on the nationalist sentiments of his constituency, most of whom are labor migrants working in Russia. In 2012, a political movement known as Eldin Unu (The People's Voice) which brought together such "bulldozers of revolutions"<sup>3</sup> as Azimbek Beknazarov and Nurlan Motuyev, demanded, among other things, changes to the constitution and the nationalization of mines.

Such politicians exploited the opposition between rich and poor, pitting the poor against corrupt elites. They have also criticized the parliament as the seat of holders of ill-gotten fortunes, recipients of bribes, and incompetent cadres. However, the authorities skillfully silenced these politicians and movements, sending Beknazarov and Madumarov to serve the state abroad, Japarov to jail, and Myrzakmatov into exile.

The period following the ethnic clashes of 2010,<sup>4</sup> which coincided with the so-called "conservative turn" in Russia,<sup>5</sup> paved the way for the formalization of both grassroots and elite nationalism. This period saw the emergence of ultra-right groups (with connections to state bodies) and nationalist political parties. These new right-wing actors took up typical nationalist topics—such as the place of women in society, the role of ethnic and sexual minorities, and territorial integrity and borders—as well as condemning Western and Chinese influences.

For example, the notorious nationalist group Kyrk Choro (Forty Knights) organized unprecedented punitive raids on female sex workers who provided services to foreigners. These raids were picked up and imitated by diverse vigilante groups among those Kyrgyz labor migrants working in Russia, who entertained themselves by surveilling Kyrgyz women hanging out with members of other ethnicities.<sup>6</sup> Another ultra-right-wing group, Kalys (Justice), chose to go after NGOs and LGBT+ people, decrying them as agents of Western propaganda and enemies of Kyrgyz traditions and values.<sup>7</sup> These groups were active when Kyrgyzstan imported from Russia a package of conservative laws that strengthened state control of the Internet, targeted NGOs as foreign agents, opposed so-called "LGBT+ propaganda," and so on. While the genuine activism and sponsorship of these ultra-right groups can be questioned, they were nevertheless praised by many impoverished social groups within Kyrgyzstan.

## Japarov and Party Ideology

Public beliefs hold that Kyrgyzstani political parties are ideologically shallow and that the constitutional reform of 2010 failed to yield increased ideological diversity despite imbuing the emergent party system with increased powers. This assumption overlooks the existence of nationalist ideas, which, in their various forms, appeal to broad swaths of society.<sup>8</sup> These sentiments and ideas gained traction in the aftermath of the inter-ethnic clashes of June 2010, catapulting Sadyr Japarov and his nationalist party, Ata-Jurt (Homeland), into the parliament in fall 2010. This was the first "unexpected" victory of nationalist populism: the "revolutionary" parties lost to Kurmanbek Bakiyev's old cadres instead of capitalizing on the ousting of the dictatorial regime. In the third regime removal, ten years later, nationalist populism has once again triumphed.

Within the Ata-Jurt party, Japarov, together with like-minded politicians, continued to promote nationalist views of the titular nation and ethnic minorities, as well as advocating in the parliament for the nationalization of the country's largest and oldest operational gold mine, Kumtor. In 2012, members of the party tried to organize an insurrection by mobilizing supporters and storming the presidential palace.<sup>9</sup> This was part of a larger series of protests the party staged in Bishkek and Issyk-

Kul region, home to the Kumtor mine. In the aftermath of the protests, when several local activists received long sentences and Japarov and members of his party were charged with kidnapping, Japarov fled the country. He remained in exile in Poland and Cyprus until 2017, when he decided to return voluntarily to Kyrgyzstan, knowing that he would face immediate arrest and imprisonment.

While in jail, Japarov continued his political activism and—together with his old friend Kamchybek Tashiyev<sup>10</sup>—formed a new party, Mekenchil. In 2018 and 2019, their followers organized a series of protests against Japarov’s imprisonment, calling on the justice system to review his criminal record. Whereas the authorities did not take the protests seriously, the party’s supporters were already talking openly about seizing power.<sup>11</sup> In the meantime, the party was preparing to run in the parliamentary elections of 2020, despite not being in any political coalitions and having only modest financial resources.<sup>12</sup> During the campaign, Tashiyev exploited the traumatic ethnic clashes of 2010, dissatisfaction about Chinese migrants marrying Kyrgyz girls, and the Kumtor mine issue to appeal to popular nationalist sentiment. Tashiyev had laid the groundwork for this the previous year, when he traveled to areas affected by inter-ethnic clashes in the southern regions that border Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, focusing in his discourse on sovereignty, language, and the perceived imperiled status of the titular group.

For Tashiyev, the recent events mark the culmination of a decade of continuous work that dates back to the inter-ethnic clashes of 2010, when he was personally involved in preventing the spread of violence in his native Jalal-Abad province, an ethnically mixed region. That experience bestowed on Ata-Jurt a reputation for being “real patriots” and gave them a strong mandate in the parliamentary elections that year. Ten years later, its successor party, Mekenchil, continues to capitalize on people’s insecurities related to territorial integrity in the face of real and imagined enemies, a fear that is heightened by the processes of out-migration and globalization and expressed in violence against women, foreigners, and recently LGBT+ people.

Thus, Japarov’s meteoric rise in October 2020 should not blind us to his—and his party’s—decade-long adherence to nationalist ideas. Unlike many other politicians, who have trouble committing to consistent programs, Japarov and his fellows have been working systematically on their vision. The book by Sadyr Japarov, *Ten Years in Politics*, tells the story of the party’s history and ideals.<sup>13</sup> This consistency presents an important contrast to the institutional weakness of most political organizations in Kyrgyzstan.

Some clauses of Japarov’s new constitutional design come from his followers and rank-and-file party members. The idea of institutionalizing *kurultay* (popular assembly in Turkic languages) as an official representative body is for instance pushed by his party, as are other symbolic gestures such as stripping the Russian language of official status, removing the notion of “secular state” from the constitutional preamble, and introducing customary law based on Kyrgyz traditions.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the nationalist vision of the country’s future development stems not only from Japarov personally, but from his followers and the political organization that stands behind them.

Contrary to what some local commentators have suggested, it is Japarov’s offline infrastructure, not merely the online activism of trolls and fake accounts, that explains his spectacular rise and capture of power. Mekenchil stands out as a party that cannot be simply bought off by central authorities which wish to imitate political pluralism. Like populist leaders around the world, Japarov may opt for post-modern politics that involves keeping his base energized through the unprecedented power

of social media. The nascent party ideology might, therefore, be more salient for his consolidation of power.

Despite all these important signals, the authorities did not take Mekenchil's campaign in the summer of 2020 seriously, doubting its capacity—lacking significant financial resources—to garner sufficient support to reach the 7 percent electoral threshold. This was a serious failure to recognize that politics are not determined by money alone; a nationalist agenda matters. In the meantime, nationalist rhetoric was spreading across the countryside, where the COVID-19 pandemic had brought ordinary life—with the exception of farming activities—to a halt and migrants were less able to remit money, if not stuck at home entirely.<sup>15</sup> When Mekenchil and other opposition parties failed to surpass the electoral threshold,<sup>16</sup> ordinary people associated their failure with the authorities' efforts to promote the “parties of power,” which allowed them to occupy 107 of the 120 parliamentary seats.<sup>17</sup> This usurpation of power did not end well for then-president Sooronbai Jeenbekov.

## Context: Luck, Popular Resentment of Elites, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Although nationalism was on the rise in Kyrgyzstan, this is not alone sufficient to explain Sadyr Japarov's popularity. The context that propelled him to the forefront of politics on October 5, 2020, offers a salient additional explanation. As the results of the parliamentary election started to come in, Jeenbekov's regime was already unpopular due to its mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic, corruption, and usurpation of legislative power, not to mention Jeenbekov's own perceived weak charisma.

These criticisms were by no means without foundation: in 2019, a consortium of independent mass media published a series of investigations unraveling massive corruption schemes that involved the former deputy head of the State Customs Service, Raimbek Matraimov, whose illegal business allegedly helped him to expropriate \$700 million and move it abroad.<sup>18</sup> In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a devastating effect on citizens' livelihoods, the usurpation of power by the ruling regime and oligarchs sparked powerful anti-elite sentiment.<sup>19</sup>

Ordinary citizens traced these inequalities to the excesses of the post-revolutionary party system, fostering public perceptions of the degradation of national elites and the state system. By the time of the elections, deputies were referred to as *chimkiriki* (snot), reflecting people's deep repugnance toward elites. In August 2020, prior to the parliamentary elections, 53 percent of the Kyrgyz population thought that the country was heading in the wrong direction, while just 41 percent saw it as going in the right direction.<sup>20</sup>

The popular anger at elites was all-consuming, not differentiating between “system” elites and the opposition. This powerful anti-establishment mood was key to Japarov's rise, and he skillfully capitalized on it, as will be shown below. Indeed, Japarov was not alone in seeking to grab power in the wake of the popular uprising against the regime; many other political figures that were illegally released from prison on the night of October 5, as well as opposition leaders, sought to do so.

Two opposing groups quickly formed in the days after the peaceful demonstration began: a nationalist group led by Japarov and an amalgam of “liberal” forces that included the country's richest person—former Prime Minister Omurbek Babanov—and former president Almaz Atambayev.<sup>21</sup> Babanov had a real chance of taking over, as he was twice as popular (16 percent) as Sadyr Japarov



(eight percent) in August.<sup>22</sup> Yet while Japarov's group quickly moved to consolidate protesters around their claim to power by framing the uprising as anti-regime and anti-elite, the liberals were hesitant to adopt similar muscular strategies. Babanov's indecisiveness led him to align with the controversial Atambayev, which not only provoked a split within the liberal youth wing, which was the driving force behind the street pressure, but also repulsed many other protesters who were not yet pro-Japarov. The first week after the start of the peaceful uprising was decisive, as coalescence with Atambayev sent a strong signal to protesters that the Babanov government would be no better than the old guard of politicians.

Facing off against the immensely discredited old guard gave Japarov *carte blanche*. Despite having enjoyed just eight percent popular support in August, he skillfully tapped into public frustrations and exploited the authority vacuum to reach 51 percent support by December.<sup>23</sup> His effective social media campaign and muscular street politics were designed to send a strong signal to society that he was the people's leader, an outsider fighting against the establishment, and a man of strong will. The fact that Japarov had lost his closest family members during his prison sentence made his candidacy an easier sell to ordinary citizens, whose trust in leaders could be rehabilitated only by tragedy. Of course, Japarov is far from a political outsider, if only because he served as anti-corruption commissar under the notorious authoritarian regime of Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Prior to his ouster during the April Revolution of 2010, Bakiyev's son, Maxim, was turning his father's regime into a family kleptocracy by siphoning rents from state-owned companies and private businesses on Japarov's watch.<sup>24</sup>

## Japarov's Support Base

The unprecedented early support shown to Sadyr Japarov by the majority of protesters cannot be ignored, but it is difficult to gauge his support base at this early stage, especially in the absence of sociological surveys. Moreover, domestic commentators quickly labeled Japarov's supporters as lacking agency and being organized in a top-down manner. There were for instance reports in the mass media that his supporters were bused to, lodged at, and fed at one of the capital's hotels.<sup>25</sup> Such reports were designed to cast aspersions on Japarov's leadership and discredit his mobilization infrastructure. However, most elites—including his opponents—were quick to acknowledge his popular support by “the people” (*narod* in Russian) and have refrained from openly resisting his ongoing efforts to change the constitutional design due to their fear of his base.

I carried out participant observation of several peaceful protests in support of Japarov during the October events, where I was able to talk to ordinary participants and ask about their motivations and backgrounds. These observations might help to draw a preliminary picture of his support base.

In the week that followed the storming of the Kyrgyz White House, between October 5 and 13, the public squares around Ala-Too plaza transformed into “speaking corners” where participants competed to get the microphone to tell their stories and explain why they came out to support Japarov. Although the speaking spaces looked more organized than organic, the stories brought up by citizens were too real to be fake. The area was filled with citizens from modest socio-economic backgrounds: salaried employees, small shopkeepers, labor migrants, unemployed people, petty agrarian producers, and suburban poor from informal settlements. Migrants spoke out publicly about their broken lives spent in migration; internal migrants shared the suffering inflicted by the lack of housing and jobs; residents of settlements spoke endlessly about their struggles against bureaucracy

and corruption. They expressed their deep resentment toward the government and the ruling elites, who were perceived as unresponsive and corrupt. The hopes that they attached to Japarov were clearly rooted in economic and social justice: they hoped that the new leader would lift the poor from their humiliating position and restore their dignity. It was a week when the dispossessed were finally given a voice.

Protesters shared tales of Japarov's personal suffering at the hands of a corrupt regime. This shared experience created powerful connections between the populist leader and many people across the country.<sup>26</sup> Japarov's image as a martyr and a "simple guy" resonated strongly with the protesters, as if only someone who had suffered as much as ordinary people could understand them fully. His self-portrayal as a victim of the regime bestowed on him a strong mandate as a man of the people, not of the establishment. Legends about him were skillfully nurtured and widely spread via social media such as WhatsApp and YouTube, which are preferred information channels in the countryside.<sup>27</sup>

Japarov's support base also includes religious citizens, as he has managed to construct an image of himself as a pious Muslim who devoted himself to regular prayers and acquired religious knowledge while in prison. This appeals to many of the "newly pious" generation and capitalizes on another important identity shift that has been taking place in Kyrgyzstan. Further research should explore Japarov's electoral base through the lenses of poverty, religion, and nationalism.

Significantly, many people did not know who Japarov was prior to the October events, yet they supported him due to "collective preference." Prior to the presidential election of January 10, 2021, one often heard people say, "The majority supports him, so do I"—as if the majority, the core of the people, could not be wrong. This led to the construction of him as a true people's leader, unlike the many "fake" politicians who had forged their election by buying votes.

Counter to his own expectations, therefore, Japarov grew to become a man of the poor, a protector of single mothers and orphans, and a surrogate father for a million labor migrants who lacked either state care or a left-wing party. In their eyes, he represents a promise to liberate the nation from the "blood-suckers" who have saturated the public sphere with private interests and to put an end to the constitution that allegedly allowed former politicians to behave with impunity.

Japarov has provoked not only hopes, but also citizen activism. Grassroots mobilization in the form of "people's control" committees, local militia groups, and "people's watchdog" associations, latent since the last uprising, have been given new life. In a village south of Bishkek where I conducted several interviews, members of one such local people's committee shared their plans in connection with Japarov's accession to power. Existing independent of Japarov's will and knowledge, they were galvanized by the populist claims of another political party, Chon Kazat (a term meaning "big fight," borrowed from an important event in the Manas epic). The latter's leader, Siymyk Japykeyev, became famous for his "kitchen talks" shortly before the parliamentary election, in which he not only criticized the rich and corrupt, but also called on citizens to storm and seize their ill-gotten properties.<sup>28</sup>

Such populist calls have recently become hugely popular among the impoverished Kyrgyz population in response to rampant corruption at the highest echelons of power. After the rigged election, Japykeyev joined Japarov's ranks, calling on peaceful protesters to storm the White House, and was rewarded with a position at the top of the State Financial Police after the coup. To ordinary people, his new position on Japarov's team represented a natural continuum in which pre-electoral promises were translated into real retribution against corrupt elites.

Ordinary members of the aforementioned local people's committee voted for Japarov in hopes that this new leadership, about which they knew little, would punish the elites.<sup>29</sup> Today, these local groups stand ready to attack private property, claiming that their acts against the rich are dictated by "the people's demands," the same slogan Japarov employed in his rise to power. The present punitive muscular attacks by Special Security on members of the establishment, led by Japarov's old friend Kamchybek Tashiyev, seem thus to be more than welcomed by ordinary people. Although such grassroots activism characterizes every violent change of government in Kyrgyzstan, the present anti-elite sentiments exceed even Japarov's popularity and will only be contained if he is able to put an end to corruption.

## Constitutional Changes toward Stronger Presidentialism

Sadyr Japarov's success was also linked to his lack of fear of taking responsibility for his acts—namely, grabbing power. He first removed other competitors, then tricked then-president Sooronbai Jeenbekov into forcing the Parliament to accept him as a new Prime Minister, then forced the president to resign, and then appointed his loyalists to head the Parliament and the security forces, all while organizing a constitutional referendum on super-presidentialism—not to mention that his own presidential candidacy was entirely outside legal norms.<sup>30</sup>

For liberal civil society, which is still recovering from the shock of the October events, Japarov's disregard for fundamental constitutional norms represents a retrograde step and a rejection of Kyrgyzstan's democratic achievements. But outside this minority group of Russophone urbanites, people understand legitimacy differently. The calls for a return to legality and constitutionality do not resonate with them, as that very constitution failed to protect the rights of the poor. In their view, a legitimate leader need not necessarily act within a legal framework dictated by the laws of the rich and powerful, but within a moral framework of social justice dictated by the people's interests. In line with Georgy Mamedov's analysis of right-wing politicians,<sup>31</sup> by grabbing power Japarov simply exercised politics while his opponents on the liberal side were afraid of responsibility. By showing his resoluteness, Japarov was able to swiftly convey the message that he is a doer and intends to put his acquired power to work in the service of ordinary people.

For ordinary men and women, supporting Japarov meant becoming part of a grandiose political project in the making, something that the liberal opposition, with their hesitation to take power, severely lacked. This desire to become part of the project—to become a source and holder of power, if even temporarily—rallied many citizens around their leaders in the early days. Thus, when, on October 10, his supporters slaughtered a horse on the capital's main plaza—an act decried by liberal civil society as barbaric—Japarov's supporters were celebrating nothing but their own significance, their temporary agency as history makers in contrast to their usual status as a disenfranchised marginal class.

As a result, when Japarov proposed changing the constitution to facilitate "strong man" rule, his supporters across the country perceived this reform as a continuation of the people's exercise of power.<sup>32</sup> He presented the seductive idea that presidential rule is tantamount to popular sovereignty. Within this distorted populist idea, he repeatedly claimed that strong presidentialism will restore "state responsiveness," since such a system makes one person responsible, not an endless rotation of ministers and 120 deputies hiding behind shallow political parties. People enthusiastically supported

his constitutional changes, producing their own fantasies. “We, the people, brought him to power. We, the people, can also bring him down if necessary” was a widespread saying during those days.

Perceptions of “state unresponsiveness” are linked to negative popular assessments of the current party system. The post-revolutionary constitutional design of 2010 led to further oligarchization of politics, as rich people began using representative government to access state resources in order to enrich themselves. Positions on party lists were available for sale and the “tariffs” for the top 20 positions on these lists were publicly known.<sup>33</sup> Party bosses turned elections—which gave victors access to state resources—into a lucrative business in full view of the public. These developments fomented strong feelings of anger, frustration, and indignation among the population into which Japarov was able to tap.

Outside of this popular support for constitutional changes, local commentators point to revanchist forces behind Japarov’s project, linked to his former boss, the dictatorial Kurmanbek Bakiyev, to reverse the achievements of the 2010 revolution. Whether his plan to grab power is spontaneous or premeditated needs to be seen. However, for the country, given its history of authoritarian regimes, this dramatic move raises the important question of whether Japarov himself will, in the absence of strong institutions and independent courts, turn into a dictator.

## Kyrgyzstan’s Prospects under Populist Rule

Sadyr Japarov’s stylized image as a heroic enemy of the establishment and rough-hewn man of the people certainly places him among the ranks of the world’s populists. His efforts to rule without checks and balances amid disarray show classical traits of populism, which mobilizes mass support by playing on nationalist, religious, and moral sentiment. His unexpected rise to power therefore begs us to rethink traditional approaches that look at politics along authoritarianism/democratization lines alone.<sup>34</sup> His populism provides further avenues for reflecting on future governance in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia in the context of the unprecedented power of social media in the post-modern era.

As for immediate political developments in Kyrgyzstan, the future of Japarov’s populist regime will depend on whether he can offer substantive policy solutions beyond his token symbolic politics. Even his new constitutional design has limited performative effect in the absence of the “greater Kyrgyzstan” vision. Japarov is a charismatic leader but not necessarily more literate or experienced in governance than his predecessors. His mandate of 31.38 percent of the voting population does not provide him with comfortable security.

Kyrgyzstan is a country haunted by a loss of sovereignty due to massive out-migration, the phantom threat of the Uzbek minority’s secession, unresolved borders, and the specter of Chinese land grabs to pay off the country’s debts. It is a country where the absence of real leftist political programs has resulted in the targeting of the most vulnerable segments of society: women, children, and sexual and ethnic minorities. All these concerns were aired by Japarov’s supporters in rallies during the October events.

Thus far, however, his behavior has been contradictory: on the one hand, he signed a decree that bans foreign capital from developing major national mines in the future; on the other hand, he is flirting with the idea of repaying Kyrgyzstan’s debt to China by selling off a large mineral mine, Jetim-Too.

Pressured by economic recession and the need to perform, he may trade natural resources to China and global banks and become a supine populist. Moreover, his equivocal position on oligarchy may also cause him to come in for major criticism from his support base and risk falling out with them. Further research should assess the development of his nationalist populism around natural resources, territorial integrity, and conservative and religious values.

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<sup>1</sup> For more accounts on the prehistory of mass mobilization and the uprising itself, see Asel Doolotkeldieva, “Vlast’ i prostranstvo v sotsial’nykh mobilizatsiakh: predvaritel’nye mysli o protestakh, privedshikh k smene vlasti v Kyrgyzstane osen’iu 2020 g.,” *CAP Papers* 251, February 19, 2021, <https://centralasiaprogram.org/archives/19211>, accessed February 23, 2021; Bermet Borybaeva, “Kyrgyzstan 2020: protesty rabochikh i trudovye prava”; *CAP papers* 252, March 2021, and Aleksandra Filatova, “Sotsial’nye dvizheniia kak otrazhenie poliarizatsii v kyrgyzstanskom obshchestve,” *CAP papers* 253, March 2021.

<sup>2</sup> See Nick Megoran, *Nationalism in Central Asia: A Biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Boundary* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> “Bulldozers of revolutions” is a local term that refers to heavyweight politicians who are known as drivers of uprisings against authoritarian regimes.

<sup>4</sup> See Victor Agadjanian, “Exclusion, Violence, and Optimism: Ethnic Divides in Kyrgyzstan,” *Ethnicities* 20, no. 3 (2020): 457–480.

<sup>5</sup> See Georgy Mamedov, “Illuziia sovetskogo: konservativnyi povorot v Kyrgyzstane. Zakonproekt o zaprete ‘gei-propagandy’ i sovetskii diskurs o gomoseksual’nosti,” in *Kvir-Kommunizm Eto Etika*, ed. Oksana Shatalova and Georgii Mamedov (Moscow: Free Marxist Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> See Rashid Gabdulhakov, “In the Bullseye of Vigilantes: Mediated Vulnerabilities of Kyrgyz Labour Migrants in Russia,” *Media and Communication* 7, no. 2 (2019): 230–241.

<sup>7</sup> I discuss this “grassroots conservatism” in Kyrgyzstan in greater detail in my forthcoming paper, “Grassroots Conservatism: Attitudes, Actors, and Scenes of the Conservative Revival in Russia and Central Asia,” in a special issue of *East European Politics*.

<sup>8</sup> Asel Murzakulova and John Schoeberlein, “The Invention of Legitimacy: Struggles in Kyrgyzstan to Craft an Effective Nation-State Ideology,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 7 (2009).

<sup>9</sup> Asel Doolotkeldieva, “Kyrgyz Nationalist Leader Routed: Once-Powerful Politician Miscalculates by Attempting to Take Over Parliament,” *IWPR*, October 19, 2012, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyz-nationalist-leader-routed>, accessed February 17, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Kamchybek Tashiyev served as Minister of Emergency under the Bakiyev regime. After the April Revolution, he was among the founders of the nationalist political party Ata-Jurt, which catapulted into the parliament on the ethno-nationalist post-conflict wave despite its connection to the old regime. After a failed attempt to seize power in 2012, however, the party experienced several years of decline due to the imprisonment of their leaders and activists. Seeking re-election in 2015, Tashiyev sought to unite with the oligarch Omurbek Babanov, but this union led to a partial falling-out with his nationalist support base.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews with members of the protest movement, Bishkek, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> According to the Central Election Commission, the party has officially spent \$190,000, which positions it between the highest spender, Matraimov’s “Mekenim Kyrgyzstan” party, at \$1,659,000, and the lowest spender, the “Chon Kazat” party, at \$100,000. Figures in U.S. dollars are approximate due to fluctuations in the exchange rate. See Aliza Raimberdieva, “Odnim grafikom: Skol’ko partii potratili na Vybory-2020,” *Kloop.kg*, October 4, 2020, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2020/10/04/odnim-grafikom-skolko-partii-potratili-na-vybory-2020/>, accessed February 17, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Japarov’s book *Ten Years in Politics (Documentary)* can be found online at “Sadyr Japarov: ‘Saiasatka aralashkan on zhyl’ (dokumentalduu bayan). 2-beluk,” [https://aimak.kg/janylyktar/sayasat\\_jana\\_koom/2606-sadyr-zhaparov-sayasatka-aralashkan-on-zhyl-dokumentalduu-bayan-2-blk.html](https://aimak.kg/janylyktar/sayasat_jana_koom/2606-sadyr-zhaparov-sayasatka-aralashkan-on-zhyl-dokumentalduu-bayan-2-blk.html), accessed February 24, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> These proposals met with fierce resistance from liberal civil society and were not included in the final constitutional draft. However, the draft is subject to further parliamentary readings.

<sup>15</sup> “In Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, levels of unemployment among labor migrants were 57% and 49%, respectively. In addition to unemployment, reported levels of labor uncertainty were also high in Uzbekistan

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(27%) and Kyrgyzstan (11%)—see Samuel Doveri Vesterbye, Shairbek Dzhuraev, and Andreas Marazis, “Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19 and Media Consumption among Vulnerable Communities in Central Asia,” 2020 European Neighbourhood Council, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> It is unclear whether Mekenchil and another opposition party, Butun Kyrgyzstan, passed the threshold or not since the ballot count kept changing during the night between October 4 and 5, showing that both parties were very close to passing the threshold. This status led some commentators to suggest that the authorities were deciding which of these nationalist parties to let win to fill the remaining 13 seats once 107 seats had been distributed among the three “parties of power.”

<sup>17</sup> Interviews with participants in the peaceful protest and storming of the White House on October 5, 2020, Bishkek.

<sup>18</sup> “Kak iz Kyrgyzstana vyveli sotni millionov dollarov,” *Radio Azattyk*, November 21, 2019, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/30285881.html>, accessed February 17, 2021; Radio Azattyk, Kloop, and OCCRP, “Istoriia Aierkena Saimati, otmyvshego 700 mln dollarov cherez Kyrgyzstan,” *Radio Azattyk*, November 22, 2019, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan-azattyk-occrp-kloop-joint-investigation/30286844.html>, accessed February 17, 2021; Bakyt Toregel’di uulu, “Sledy millionov dollarov: fakty i reaksii,” *Radio Azattyk*, July 2, 2020, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/30702217.html>, accessed February 17, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Ordinary citizens who took part in peaceful protests in the aftermath of the parliamentary election told the author that their mobilization was motivated by their indignation about irresponsible elite behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic, corruption, and the regime’s usurpation of power. See Doolotkeldieva, “Vlast’ i prostranstvo.”

<sup>20</sup> See a recent IRI public opinion poll (December 12-21, 2020): “Public Opinion Poll: Residents of Kyrgyzstan,” [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri\\_kyrgyzstan\\_poll\\_dec\\_2020\\_eng.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_kyrgyzstan_poll_dec_2020_eng.pdf), accessed February 22, 2021. Similar indicators were present at the time of the previous popular uprisings against the regimes in Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>21</sup> The term “liberal” is used here as a relative denomination of a rather heterogenous group of opposition leaders and parties who were compelled to cooperate in the face of their main competitor, populist leader Sadyr Japarov. This group included neo-liberal parties “Bir-Bol,” “Reforma,” and “Respublica” as well as longstanding socialist parties “Ata-Meken” and “SDPK” and pro-nationalist parties “Butun Kyrgyzstan” and “Zamandash.” In public discourse, the generic term “liberal” was applied to this group because the main “wedge” issue between them and the populist Japarov was whether the country’s future political development should be as a strong presidentialist system or a party one. The temporary and unnatural coalition of liberals was slow and ineffective. Since these leaders lost the moment due to an internal competition for power and legitimization along identity politics, they ended up mobilizing around the former Prime Minister and oligarch Omurbek Babanov and the former president Almaz Atambaev as the only politicians capable of withstanding Japarov.

<sup>22</sup> His popularity fell to a record low three percent in December 2020. See “Public Opinion Poll: Residents of Kyrgyzstan,” [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri\\_kyrgyzstan\\_poll\\_dec\\_2020\\_eng.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_kyrgyzstan_poll_dec_2020_eng.pdf), accessed February 22, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> See “Public Opinion Poll: Residents of Kyrgyzstan,” [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri\\_kyrgyzstan\\_poll\\_dec\\_2020\\_eng.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_kyrgyzstan_poll_dec_2020_eng.pdf), accessed February 22, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> See Alexander Cooley and John Heathershaw, *Dictators without Borders: Power and Money in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017); Asel Doolotkeldieva and John Heathershaw, “State as Resource, Mediator, and Performer: Understanding the Local and Global Politics of Gold Mining in Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asian Survey* 34, no. 1 (2015): 93–109.

<sup>25</sup> “Kto predostavil gostinitsu ‘Ak-Keme’ mitingyushchim? Gosorgany svalivaiut drug na druga,” *Kaktus*, October 16, 2020, [https://kaktus.media/doc/423787\\_kto\\_predostavil\\_gostinicy\\_ak\\_keme\\_mitingyushchim\\_gosorgany\\_svalivaut\\_dryg\\_na\\_dryga.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/423787_kto_predostavil_gostinicy_ak_keme_mitingyushchim_gosorgany_svalivaut_dryg_na_dryga.html), accessed February 22, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> See also Aksana Ismailbekova, “Native Son: The Rise of Kyrgyzstan’s Sadyr Japarov,” *OpenDemocracy*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/native-son-the-rise-of-sadyr-japarov-kyrgyzstan/>, accessed February 22, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> There is insufficient space to discuss these PR strategies here. In an interview to the Russian media outlet *Kommersant*, Japarov claimed that his succession to power was the fruit of tireless labor on social media over many years. For more information, see Nurgul’ Esenamanova, “Sotsial’nye gruppy podderzhki politika S. Zhaparov,” CAP Papers, forthcoming; Gulzat Baialieva and Joldon Kutmanaliev, “How Kyrgyz Social Media Backed an Imprisoned Politician’s Meteoric Rise to Power,” *OpenDemocracy*, October 15, 2020,

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<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/how-kyrgyz-social-media-backed-an-imprisoned-politicians-meteorite-rise-to-power/>, accessed February 22, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> “Zhapykeev Syimy / Kukhonny razgovor,” YouTube video, 1:55:01, posted May 18, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1WvXuI5K9M>, accessed February 17, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Interviews with members of a local “people’s committee” south of Bishkek, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> According to the existing constitution, he was not in the position to run in the presidential elections due to: 1) his criminal record; 2) the fact that an acting president, which he became after deposing president Jeenbekov, cannot participate in the presidential elections; and 3) the fact that neither an acting president nor a parliament with an expired mandate can initiate constitutional reform. His criminal sentence (11.6 years for kidnapping), which entered into force in 2017, was mysteriously terminated by the Security Council two weeks after his illegal release from prison by his followers. See “Net sostava prestupleniia. Delo Sadyra Zhaparova po zakhvatu zalozhnikov prekrashcheno,” *24.kg*, January 5, 2021, [https://24.kg/vlast/178934\\_net\\_sostava\\_prestupleniya\\_delo\\_sadyira\\_japarova\\_pozahvatu\\_zalojnikov\\_prekrashcheno/](https://24.kg/vlast/178934_net_sostava_prestupleniya_delo_sadyira_japarova_pozahvatu_zalojnikov_prekrashcheno/), accessed February 22, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Georgy Mamedov, “Japarov Is Our Trump’: Why Kyrgyzstan Is the Future of Global Politics,” *OpenDemocracy*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/japarov-is-our-trump-kyrgyzstan-is-the-future-of-global-politics/>, accessed February 23, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> At the time of writing, the Constitutional Council has passed the draft of constitution to the Parliament, where MPs should organize committee and public hearings. However, Japarov expressed the desire to speed up hearings so that the referendum on the new constitution can be held on April 11 together with local elections. Most likely, this desire is connected to fears that, if held separately, the vote on the constitution will not achieve the 30-percent voter turnout required to pass.

<sup>33</sup> Asel Doolotkeldieva and Alexander Wolters, “Uncertainty Perpetuated? The Pitfalls of a Weakly Institutionalized Party System in Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asian Affairs* 4, no. 1 (2017): 26-50.

<sup>34</sup> In line with Diana Kudaibergenova’s intellectual trajectory in *Toward Nationalizing Regimes: Conceptualizing Power and Identity in the Post-Soviet Realm* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020).