

# Kyrgyz Copy Russia in Attack on Civil Rights

By [Casey Michel](#)

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It is no secret that Russia's sway within the former Soviet republics is deteriorating. Due to a combination of economic ineptitude and dogmatic neo-imperialism, Russia has managed to push Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine toward Brussels, while shunting Central Asia toward a waiting Beijing.

Kazakhstan and Belarus have spent much of their time blocking Moscow's moves in the Eurasian Union (EEU), while Armenia, one of the few candidates for the EEU's expansion, has postponed its accession all but indefinitely.

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Politically, economically and culturally, Putin's dream of a Russian empire with Moscow

positioned once more as a first among equals is collapsing, and fast.

But there is one realm in which Russian pull has lingered. Russia has spent the past year plowing reactionary legislation through the Duma, targeting sexual minorities, limiting free speech and isolating the country from external access. And now these remarkable civil rights restrictions are gaining ground in certain Soviet ex-republics.

While media clampdowns and cultural limitations are to be expected in the neighboring autocracies — say, within Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan — it is within Kyrgyzstan that the influence of Russia's recent illiberal backslide has been most pronounced, and most unfortunate.

Kyrgyzstan had been seen as one of the best prospects for political development in Central Asia. While it had tumbled through a pair of revolutions over the past decade, it also boasted the sole female leader in the region, as well as the only peaceful democratic transfer of presidential power Central Asia has ever known.

A wealth of civil society groups are active in the country, generating progressive legislation and rights protection not seen within its neighbors. And with the help of some of the freest media in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan has managed to escape the region's penchant for autocracy.

Indeed, the body politic of Kyrgyzstan is without compare in Central Asia. A history of protest has engendered a sense of civil responsibility, spreading through the country, and being carried forward through years of both tragedy and success. As the Kazakh and Uzbek presidents celebrate 25 years in power this summer, Kyrgyzstan stands as the nearest thing to a success story Central Asia can find.

And so watching a fresh tide of illiberal legislation course through Kyrgyzstan over the past few months — modeled heavily on Russian laws already realized — is not simply a concerning development. It is a move to begin stamping out the few gains Central Asia has made since escaping the Soviet Union.

The laws are, unfortunately, familiar. One deals with non-Kyrgyz funding for local NGOs, which have presented Kyrgyz citizens with an outlet for both resource and development. The bill, nearly identical to Russia's, would force NGOs receiving outside funding to register as "foreign agents," an ominous title used to discredit NGOs.

A second proposed piece of legislation, just as disconcerting and just as similar to its Russian counterpart, attacks "gay propaganda" by making the distribution of information on nonheterosexual relations into a potential criminal offense.

Coming on the heels of a recent Human Rights Watch report detailing the rampant suffering and abuse Kyrgyz police heap on the country's gay community, the bill is another blow to those seeking tolerance for Kyrgyzstan's beleaguered sexual minorities.

Taken in conjunction with a recent bill outlawing "false accusations," which makes potential media censorship possible, the recent spate of legislation leans heavily on language that has already proven successful in Russia. This, perhaps, should not come as surprise. As one of the co-authors of the "foreign agents" bill told the Institute of War and Peace Reporting, "We are

not living on the moon or in a vacuum. We are close to Russia, and if there are good ideas there, why not take them on?"

But it's not simply that Kyrgyz legislators have found some sudden rush of inspiration from Moscow, or that they have a bastardized notion of what a "good idea" may be.

This recent rash of parochial, small-minded legislation accompanies the Americans' withdrawal from the country, and from the region as a whole. On July 11, the U.S. abandoned its military base at the Manas Transit Center, its most substantive presence in the region.

In its stead, Russian influence, which ranges from Moscow's propagandistic media outlets, to the staggering amount of remittances Kyrgyz migrant laborers accrue in Russia, has filled the vacuum.

While Chinese economic hegemony is all but guaranteed to dictate the region's direction in the near future, Russia still maintains a handful of valuable cards. And these backward pieces of legislation are the consummation of such flagging influence.

While Kyrgyzstan's neighbors are plagued with repression, including rampant forced labor in Uzbekistan, the strangling of political opposition in Kazakhstan, and the clampdown on academic research in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan always looked like a cause for hope.

But once these laws are enacted, Kyrgyzstan will take one step closer to its surrounding illiberalism, and a step away from the pluralistic potential it once provided. And it will do so by looking to Russia as its model.

A few months ago, Freedom House noted that Russia was leading Eurasia's "rupture with democracy." That paradigm has now extended to societal restrictions, with Kyrgyzstan suddenly as a prime example. Russian influence, it is clear, lives — but it is an ugly, bigoted brew, and it is bringing the best of Central Asia with it.

Casey Michel is a Bishkek-based journalist and a graduate student at Columbia University's Harriman Institute. He can be followed on Twitter at [@cjcmichel](https://twitter.com/cjcmichel).

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