



*Delegation to the EU-Kazakhstan, EU-Kyrgyzstan, EU-Uzbekistan and EU-Tajikistan
Parliamentary Cooperation Committees and for relations with Turkmenistan and Mongolia*

30.01.2024

MISSION REPORT

following the 16th European Union-Kyrgyz Republic Parliamentary
Cooperation Committee on 18-20 December 2023 in Bishkek and Osh

Delegation to the EU-Kazakhstan, EU-Kyrgyzstan, EU-Uzbekistan and EU-
Tajikistan Parliamentary Cooperation Committees and for relations with
Turkmenistan and Mongolia

Members of the mission:

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Introduction

The Delegation for the relations with Central Asia (DCAS) paid a visit to Kyrgyz Republic - Bishkek and the Southern city of Osh - from Monday, 18 December, to Wednesday, 20 December 2023 to hold the 16th EU-Kyrgyz Republic Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC) and a number of meetings with a variety of interlocutors from different sectors of the Kyrgyz institutions and society. The last DCAS visit to the country took place in 2021, while the Committee for Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament travelled to Bishkek in August 2023. The Kyrgyz Parliament attended in Brussels the 15th Parliamentary Cooperation Committee in December 2022. Moreover, in November 2023, the Deputy Speaker of the Kyrgyz Parliament was part of the Central Asia Women Leader's Caucus and paid a visit to the European Parliament in Brussels.

Context

The visit of the DCAS Delegation took place at a delicate political juncture: the strengthening of the power of President Japarov, following the constitutional referendum in 2021; the role of Russia both in its aggression against Ukraine and its attempt to confirm leadership in Central Asia, with frequent bilateral contacts and circumvention of sanctions; a deterioration of the human rights space in the country, which with Mongolia remains the most advanced democracy in the region; the improvement of the relation with Tajikistan and of the overall regional approach to water resources and environmental challenges.

In this evolving landscape, the European Union remains a cornerstone partner for Kyrgyzstan, and the European Parliament a crucial interlocutor, also in view of the GSP+ revision and on the scrutiny on the state of rule of law and fundamental of freedoms in the country.

Meetings

In this sensitive moment for Kyrgyzstan, the EP Delegation focused its intense programme on three areas: the inter-parliamentary meetings, with the participation of the Deputy Speaker to the Parliamentary Cooperation Committee and with the addition of working meals which provided opportunities for further discussions between the parties; a number of meetings with Government representatives, which included the Chairman of the Cabinet of Minister (Prime Minister), the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, of Natural Resources and Environment, of Digitalisation, as well as meetings with the Ombudsperson and the President of the key Central Electoral Commission. Finally, much attention was devoted to interaction with the Kyrgyz society, with meetings with the CSOs, visits to the Osh University and EU funded projects in the fields of research and education, and to cultural institutions included a UNESCO World Heritage. Other meetings included the EU and the EU Member States diplomats and the OHCHR Regional Representative. The complete programme and the PCC agenda are annexed to this report.

The “hearth of Asia”, between Russia, the region and Europe

Kyrgyzstan and the rest of Central Asia are living in a challenging political environment, with complicated relations with Russia, the need to strengthen and differentiate the regional ties, the growing presence of China, and the solid and reliable presence of the European Union - with our values, opportunities and benchmarks.

The case of Kyrgyzstan is particularly delicate, as clearly presented by European diplomats and local politicians. The country remains very dependent from Moscow, due to the remittances of more than one million migrants in Russia, the supply of energy and oil products at a convenient price, the personal relations between the two Presidents (Putin’s first abroad visit after the invasion of Ukraine was to Kyrgyzstan), and the institutional ties (CSTO membership and custom union). Nevertheless, the Members of Parliament and Ministers deplored the war in Ukraine, accepted the fact that “Ukraine is defending itself”, deplored the casualties and, notably, focussed on the need to respect the international law and the UN Charter. With a constant growth of the economy since the beginning of the Russian aggression, Kyrgyzstan is increasing trade both with the EU and with Russia, and Russian expatriates have opened several new companies in the country. While circumvention of sanctions is a clear issue, the topic was not particularly discussed during the meetings.

China remains the most active foreign partner and has a growing role in the country. However, one of the main infrastructure projects, the plan to construct a railway connecting China, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (and then to possibly continue to Afghanistan and Pakistan) is still on hold because of lack of clarity in its commitment by Beijing. Turkey is also both politically and economically increasingly present in Kyrgyzstan.

However, one of the main priorities, as clearly expressed during the meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the briefings with the European diplomats, is to establish balanced relations with the Central Asian neighbours. The military confrontation with Tajikistan seems to be overcome, and a Joint Commission is working on demarcation of borders and water management. Kyrgyz have also agreed on borders with Uzbeks and is undertaking efforts in reducing dependency from Kazakhstan among the Central Asian partners. In Osh, a once troubled city due to inter-ethnic tensions, the situation appeared peaceful, also because of improvement of the situation along the nearby border with Uzbekistan.

Kyrgyz interlocutors reserved a warm reception to the European Parliament Delegation, in spite of July 2023 Plenary Resolution on the deterioration of human rights in the country, and constantly stressed the importance of the crucial partnership with the EU. Kyrgyz also asked for a fast signing of the concluded EPCA, so to quickly upgrade the bilateral relations.

In this context, the European Union is perceived as key partner in coping with climate change

and for best practices on the implementation of Kyrgyz commitments to emission reductions and green conversion of energy production. Significantly, French company “Électricité de France” (EDF) will be the main contractor for the construction of a new dam and hydro power plant. However, there are still pending bilateral issues. The Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers pointed out that the EU visa policy has not changed for Kyrgyz citizens since more than ten years, while Bishkek has introduced free-visa regime for the EU passport holders. DCAS Members have openly supported the request for the introduction of EU digital visa for Kyrgyz citizens. The Prime Minister also spoke about the purchase, by the Kyrgyz national carrier, of two new aircrafts so to open direct connections to the EU and to withdraw the airline from the EU Air Safety List commonly known as the EU black list. While the EPCA is a long time waited comprehensive agreement with the EU, the improvement of the connectivity with the European Union play a strategic importance in better coping with the dynamic, and the competition, of the relations of Kyrgyzstan with Russia and China and the rest of Central Asia.

The state of play for the democratic institutions and the promotion of human rights

All Kyrgyz interlocutors showed pride in underlining the unique pluralistic system of the country, as the only genuine democracy in Central Asia with Mongolia, and seemed committed to safeguard democracy as a matter of national identity and of difference compared to the neighbours. For instance, Kyrgyz interlocutors stressed the importance of the creation of a Data Protection Agency, this being the only independent authority of this kind in Central Asia. Yet, the recent constitutional referendum has moved Kyrgyz Republic from a parliamentary system to a presidential one, with allegation of a far more populist power with some worrying authoritarian new trends.

Nevertheless, the Parliament has still a prominent role, with vibrant debates among the representatives of seven different political parties. Thanks to the work of the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), Kyrgyzstan has one of the most sophisticated systems to make transparent and online accessible to citizens issues such as registration, funding, risk of conflict of interest for parties and candidates. As in previous visit, DCAS Delegation received an extensive briefing and a very open debate with the Central Electoral Commission President, who acts with a dedicated team as a watchdog of fairness in the political life of the country, through a permanent cooperation with judges NGOs, former MPs, civil servants, media. The CEC also supervises the electronic vote of Kyrgyz residing abroad - about 20% of the voters, mainly living in Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey and in the USA.

Non- Governmental Organisations (NGOs) strongly complained about the announced new laws for civil society organisations and free media, which would imply more bureaucratic burdens, additional reporting mechanism, penalising fiscal regime. If adopted, NGOs claim, the Kyrgyz system would have no difference compared to Russian system. CSOs also pointed out that with no empowerment of media and NGOs, “there is no way to fight corruption”. Furthermore, there is no coincidence that Kyrgyzstan lost several positions in both indexes of free media and free

corruption States. The OHCHR Regional Coordinator also express the concern that the language of the draft is not consistent with international standards and can easily interpreted as a way to harass human rights defenders and might make more difficult the life of both media and NGOs. However, it should be noted, so far Kyrgyzstan is far the less regulated country in the region.

While receptive to European Parliament recommendations in preserving Kyrgyz democracy and on softening draft legislation on NGOs (notably on foreign funding and non-commercial activities) and on independent media, most of the local interlocutors, both at ministerial and parliamentary level, seemed determined to proceed to the approval of the controversial bills. The legislative process is anyway delayed and still under internal debate and, as stated during the Parliamentary Cooperation Committee, it includes regular consultations with the NGOs. Following the Human Rights Dialogue with the European Union, the drafts were changed in structure, but not really in content. On corruption, the Government believes, as stressed by the Minister of Digitalisation, that access to Internet, online data, web transparency, are key tools to fight it.

One alleged reason for passing this more restrictive legislation on NGOs is the growing influence of radical Islam in the country, supported by Arab funded “charities” and non-state or semi-state organisations from the Gulf. Notably in Osh, there are visible signs of increase of more fundamentalist religious practice. According to the Erasmus Office, most of the girls in the countryside do not enrol anymore even in primary schools, and receive only religious education – a worrying development for a Central Asian country. Also the OHCHR coordinator expressed concern about the increase funding from abroad to Islamic “charities”. A concern echoed also by the Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers, who said that the draft law on NGOs is about reporting on money and expenditures: “It is not a matter of exerting pressure, but of accountability”. Yet, the debate in the country remains lively and the Parliament will have the final say.

Economy, environment, education

The Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers informed the European Parliament Delegation that in the past two years Kyrgyzstan’s GDP and fiscal revenue increased following successful reforms to fight shadow economy. Moreover, as in other Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan is likely to benefit from the consequences of the Russian war against Ukraine, being a hub for delocalisation of Russian enterprises and for triangular operations (including to circumventing sanctions). The Chairman also stressed the need to diversification of partners - Turkey being very active, not to mention China - and of a comprehensive legal reform of the justice to create a better investment climate. More competition among Internet operators and a new digital code is expected to boost digitalisation (half of the population has access to Internet, but 98% of this half only through mobile phones).

Reforms and investments are needed also in view of the decrease of remittances from Russia due to the war against Ukraine and need to be well enhanced with sound management of natural resources and the environment. It is also planned an increase in the use of renewable energies - also to diminish the dependency from Russian supplies.

Climate change has a negative impact on the social indicators of Kyrgyzstan, which remains a lower-middle-income country affected by extended poverty notably in rural areas. The country is rich of water, and it is planning to sell it to neighbouring countries (Kazakhstan, China and possibly to Pakistan and India), also thanks to a new 4 billion USD project which requires appropriate water management. The delivery to South Asia would imply a passage through Afghanistan, with an agreement with the Taliban that they would get not cash but water.

In a country with an “horizontal society”, contrary to the vertical structure of most of the neighbours, as underlined by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the civil society needs to be the main actor also in providing more environmental sustainability. However, NGOs complained that at COP 26 the President did not recall the role of civil society of the country in addressing the reduction of emissions.

In several meetings, the DCAS Delegation could assess the degree of awareness of the interlocutors in prioritising the young generation. This government is keen in attracting more investment also to the educational field and in doubling teachers' salaries. During the visit to the Osh State University, the largest of the country with 45.000 students, the DCAS Delegation could assess the successful academic efforts in enrolling thousands of students sponsored by all South Asia countries and elsewhere. With a wide network of international cooperation, including with universities from the European Union, the Osh University is an example also of the importance of the education diplomacy to be offered by the EU and supported by an ambitious Erasmus Office with about 400 fellowships a year for outgoing students and 40 for incoming. Moreover, Hungary provides 200 fellowships per year. Those, sounded positive efforts in the competing market of educating the future leadership of Kyrgyzstan.

Follow up of the European Parliament

The actual geo-strategic location of Kyrgyzstan - between regional integration, strong relations with Russia, strong ties with China and solid partnership with the European Union - needs constant monitoring by the European Parliament, for its implications in multilateral fora, in enforcement or circumvention of sanctions on Moscow, in the overall effectiveness of the EU presence in the region.

Moreover, being the most advanced democracy besides Mongolia in this region, the democratic achievements of Kyrgyzstan need to be preserved. Threats are present, with less space for human rights defenders and activists, growing influence from China and from radical Islam, and risks of possible authoritarian and corrupted practices.

The European Parliament has established a strong friendship with Kyrgyz Republic's institutions and society, and may play an influential role in assessing the status of health and in supporting the unique democratic efforts of this country.

List of annexes

1. List of participants
2. Final programme of the visit
3. Agenda of the 16th EU-Kyrgyz Republic Parliamentary Cooperation Committee Meeting



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**16th EU-Kyrgyz Republic
Parliamentary Cooperation Committee Meeting (PCC)
Bishkek and Osh
Kyrgyzstan**

18 December - 20 December 2023

Final list of participants

DCAS Members

Mr Tomáš ZDECHOVSKÝ, DCAS Chair

EPP

Czech Republic

Mr Thierry MARIANI

ID

France

Ms Esther DE LANGE

EPP

The Netherlands

Mr Christian SAGARTZ

EEP

Austria

DCAS Secretariat

2 Staff

Political advisors

2 Staff

Interpreters (Kyrgyz/English/Russian)

2 Interpreters



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European Union - Republic of Kyrgyzstan
16th Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC)

18 - 20 December 2023

Bishkek and Osh, Kyrgyzstan

FINAL PROGRAMME

Monday 18 December 2023

13.00-13.45	Briefing meeting with EU Ambassador H.E. Ms Marilyn JOSEFSON
14.00-14.50	Meeting with Foreign Minister Mr Jeenbek KULUBAEV <i>Venue: Kyrgyz Ministry of Foreign Affairs</i>
15.00-16.15	Meeting with Chairperson of CEC, Ms Nurzhan SHAILDABEKOVA <i>Venue: Central Election Commission (CEC)</i>
16.30-17.45	Meeting with civil society and media representatives
18.55-19.25	Meeting with the Minister of Digital Development Ms Nuriya KUTNAEVA
19.25-19.45	Meeting with the EU Member States Heads of Missions
19.45-21.30	Dinner hosted by the Chair of the European Parliament Delegation, Mr Tomáš ZDECHOVSKÝ with participation of the Minister of Digital Development

Tuesday 19 December 2023

08.00-09.15	Meeting with Ms Matilda BOGNER, OHCHR Regional Representative
10.00-12.15	16th EU - Kyrgyz Republic Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC) including a meeting with Vice Speaker Ms Jamilya ISAEVA
12.15 – 12.30	Parliament tour
12.30 – 13.10	Meeting with the Director of the History Museum and the tour of the History Museum
13.15 – 14.30	Working lunch hosted by the Kyrgyz Parliament
14.40-15.30	Meeting with Mr Melis TURGUNBAEV, Minister of Natural Resources, Environment and Technical supervision
15.40-16.20	Meeting with Ombudsperson Ms Dzhamilya ZHAMANBAEVA
16.30-17.30	Meeting with the Chairman of Cabinet of Ministers Mr Akylbek JAPAROV
19.45-21.45	Dinner hosted by the Kyrgyz Parliament

Wednesday 20 December 2023

08.00-08.40	Flight from Bishkek to Osh
10.00-11.00	Visit of the Sulaiman-Too Sacred Mountain - Unesco World Heritage site/ "Cave Museum"
11.30-12.30	Lunch
12.45-13.45	Meeting with the Osh University Rector Kudaiberdi KOJOBKOV, faculty members and students
13.50-14.10	Visit to the Digital Skills Development Centre (EU funded DigiKonush Project)
14.30-15.15	Visit to the Osh University's Medical clinic supported by Erasmus+
15.30-16.20	Meeting with President's Plenipotentiary for Osh Region (Regional Governor)
18.00-18.40	Flight from Osh back to Bishkek

European Parliament

2019-2024



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FINAL AGENDA

16th European Union - Kyrgyz Republic Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC)

Tuesday, 19 December 2023

Bishkek

1. Opening of the working session, opening speeches:

- **Ms Leila Lurova, Head of the Delegation of Jogorku Kenesh of the Kyrgyz Republic, Co-Chair of the 16th European Union-Kyrgyz Republic PCC**
- **Mr Tomáš Zdechovský, Head of the Delegation of the European Parliament and Co-Chair of the 16th European Union-Kyrgyz Republic PCC**

2. Adoption of the agenda

3. Adoption of the draft minutes of the 15th meeting of the EU-Kyrgyz Republic Parliamentary Cooperation Committee, held in Brussels (European Union) on December 8, 2022

4. State of play of the EU-Kyrgyz Republic cooperation and developments in the European Union and in Kyrgyzstan, with focus on:

- **Impact of the war in Ukraine on the European Union, on Central Asia and on the international community, including sanctions and economic consequences;**

- **Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) and EU-Kyrgyz Republic, political dialogue and trade and economic relations;**
- **Economic and social reforms, their implementation and investment climate;**
- **Activities on liberation of visa regime:**
 - **Visa-free regime for holders of diplomatic and service passports for a period of up to 90 days (Proposal of the Jogorku Kenesh)**
 - **for holders of ordinary passports.**

5. EU and Kyrgyz Republic regional policy on Central Asia, with focus on:

- **Environmental policy and water-energy cooperation;**
- **Connectivity, transport and infrastructure projects;**

6. Human rights, Rule of Law and social policy, including the empowerment of civil society and fundamental freedoms

7. Date and place of the next meeting