

What Liberalism Did to Kyrgyzstan

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Kyrgyzstan is a product of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, born under the auspices of self-determination and a capitalist economy, in line with post-cold war's *end-of-history* expectations. Among neighboring Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan is the only democracy in the region. Now, 31 years later, we see in this small and mountainous region the elementary forms of what real-life democracy is in the 21st century: its limits, challenges, and potential.

Despite democracy, or perhaps because of it, Kyrgyzstan's economic growth has been one of the weakest in the region. The transition from a socialist planned economy to a capitalist one has been an unmitigated failure. Despite having civil and political liberties—a unique feature in the region—most Kyrgyz citizens find themselves apathetic to the political game while many others are charmed by nationalism, reactionary ideologies, religion, and supposedly traditional gender norms. This follows a recent and recurring pattern we can identify in other parts of the democratic world as well. What could explain this lack of enthusiasm for bourgeois democracy?

Not According to Plan...

Kyrgyzstan's political and economic history is mirrored in the urbanism of Bishkek, the country's capital. Founded as a military outpost of the [Khanate of Kokand](#) and later annexed into the Russian empire, the city began its growth in the 1920s as the capital of the (later named) *Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic*, a constituent republic of the Soviet Union. Its expansion intensified after the Second World War with new industrial areas and housing developments.

Bishkek was planned as a [garden city](#) despite being situated in a dry environment. The number of parks and the tree-lined streets are in stark contrast to the arid hills south of the city. An extensive network of drains and canals makes the greenery of Bishkek possible. Soviet planning created several neighborhoods or “micro-districts” generally not exposed to direct car traffic, developing accessible and social spaces, where kids can play safely in the courts, under the tree's shade. While trees provide cool temperatures during the hot summers, a city-level centralizing heating system provides comfortable heat during winter.

Most of the city still grows on its Soviet bones; after Kyrgyzstan gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, another geological era began for Bishkek urbanism. Despite recently reaching 1 million inhabitants, Bishkek can't be called a big city. It is more like an obese city, outweighing the infrastructure holding it in place. The city lost direction. A wildcat expansion of new buildings took place. Mostly mid-rise, these new developments sometimes mimicked a vague Haussmannian style—perhaps reflecting the aspirations of the new owners, but with uncanny results. Here we see a stark contrast with Soviet planning: car parks substitute the green and wide sidewalks, and fences and gates are used—never the case in the soviets' *micro-district*.

In an ironic twist of events, while Europe's new housing projects that mimic the *micro-district* model are now considered a staple of good urbanism, the new development in Bishkek is reminiscent of

chaotic developments across Europe in the 60s and 70s, in which cars were considered more important than humans. On the other side of the spectrum, there are so-called “new settlements”, the other face of the polarizing inequality created by the transition. Here, a precarious population finds shelter, but is disconnected from the city administration, transport, and shared utilities, such as the centralized heating system. Households are often forced to burn coal to warm themselves, making Bishkek one of the most [polluted](#) cities in the world.

The precipitous transition to capitalism in the country plummeted Kyrgyz’s economy into a state of deep crisis during the 1990s. Thirty years after the transition, Kyrgyzstan has just [recently reached](#) the level of GDP per capita that it had under the late Soviet Union—30 years of economic development on the altar of liberalism. During Soviet rule, the incidence of absolute poverty was low compared to the standards of low-income countries, while in the 1990s, it rose significantly. Kyrgyzstan experienced a long-lasting recession that nearly led to a complete disruption of its industrial base. This also increased geographical disparities between the countryside and cities and between the north and the south of the country, increased internal political and ethnic animosities, as well as tensions and conflict with neighboring countries. With the end of the Soviet economy, Kyrgyzstan started to follow neoliberal doctrines, privatizing national resources, especially in the mining industry, faster than any nearby country. The disruption of the industrial sector was then seen as a temporary slowdown, with the belief that the economy would transition to a service economy. In fact, the effects have been radical and permanent.

The Development of Underdevelopment

Instead of rapidly catching up, the transition triggered a widespread pauperization. For a country where 60% of the population is still [rural](#), the arrival of the post-materialist world was a bit too optimistic. [Deurbanization](#) occurred as a few industrial centers disappeared and the [industrial output](#) of Kyrgyzstan dropped. The country found itself relying on workforce migration, mining, and agriculture exports.

Ten percent of Kyrgyz’s GDP is reliant on a single gold mine, Kumtor, and [50% of Kyrgyz](#) exports are gold. Mines were also swiftly privatized and managed by foreign companies. Similar processes have been labeled by Egyptian Maoist economist Samir Amin (1931-2018) as the *development of underdevelopment*, where peripheral economies are only used to extract natural resources useful for central and hegemonic countries. While this relationship between center and periphery might temporarily increase income for the periphery, it also creates underdevelopment. It hinders the advancement of a more holistic economic environment, which can create jobs in different sectors of the economy and generate balanced economic growth. Peripheral countries are instead exploited by extractivism, falling into cycles of deindustrialization, and are likely to end up being dominated by the reliance on archaic social systems.

The same is happening in Kyrgyzstan. While the Soviets exploited Kyrgyzstan’s natural resources [intensively](#), they also transformed the country and implemented relatively complex industrial and institutional development. It is Bishkek that, for example, produced advanced electronic components of the [Soviet space program](#), allowing the country to reach a degree of technological sophistication and remarkable productive capabilities. All of this is gone. While the peripheric economy is used for their natural resources, the central countries coordinate and regulate the exploitation of resources and the production of high-value services and products. Kyrgyzstan has been, like many others, a victim of the shock doctrine, where the priorities were open trade, capital circulation, financial discipline, privatization, and the rapid development of a market economy. John Williamson would later informally call this phenomenon the [Washington Consensus](#).

John Williamson himself famously remarked that “Washington does not, of course, always practice

what it preaches to foreigners". Indeed, while the US and IMF preach against the fiscal deficit and for cutting public expenditure, US spending in the public sector and industries (such as defense) are astronomical--maintaining and feeding with public money and bailouts a vast military industry and a big financial sector, as the bedrock of American economy. The fact that massive public spending means little for average Americans is another problem that does not contradict the significant presence of the American state in the economy.

Indeed, cases such as Kyrgyzstan's made it clear that value is not magically produced simply by the interaction of offer and demand in a free market, but rather results out of policies aimed at the development of labor and production. This can reductively be called an *industrial policy*. If anything, the Kyrgyz experience shows by contrast the degree to which capitalism is politically built, directed, and protected in the West and China. The financialization of the US economic system is an example of industrial policy. After the 2008 crisis, the US government showed how determinedly it is willing and able to protect, stabilize and bail out the financial sector. Western countries have the capacity to redistribute money according to political considerations; even though most of the time redistribution is horizontal and not vertical, the tools and the power are there. Banks bailouts are a prime example, and in the financial sector, or when the state decides to externalize its functions to privilege a sector, such as linking pensions to financial markets. This capacity for redistribution is negligible in countries such as Kyrgyzstan. Since those countries were saluted as the failure of the socialist idea, with capitalism alone as the only possibility, capitalism doesn't need to mask in those countries: no need for capitalism with a human face here. It is pure exploitation, both by local and international actors.

If self-determination was a goal, it has also failed. Kyrgyz emigrated *en masse*, and nowadays, 30% of the country's GDP is represented by the remittances of Kyrgyz labor migrants, mainly working in Russia. They often have to suffer [institutional racism](#) by the Russian government, in addition to brutal [violence](#) from Russian nationalists. Emigration broke families and over [277,000 children](#) were left behind by their parents in Kyrgyzstan, all because of economic necessity created by the transition.

Not so ironically, the same toxic patterns also emerged within Kyrgyzstan versus other ethnicities in the country, such as the Uzbeks, the Uighur, and the Dungan, that together still represent 28% of the country. In 2010 in Osh, a conflict between [Uzbeks and Kyrgyz](#) killed 426 people and forced 80,000 others to relocate, while more recently, a militarized conflict on the southern border saw tensions with Tajikistan over common [resources](#).

The ethnic makeup of Kyrgyzstan is becoming less diverse. Capitalizing on the widespread discontent of the victims of the economic transition, nationalist groups such as [Kyrk Choro](#) saw an important rise in popularity, especially among the rural population. The first Kyrgyz president Askar Akayev quickly understood that jingoism might have been a big problem for Kyrgyzstan, and he tried to establish the new Kyrgyzstan as a form of civic nationalism under the motto "[Kyrgyzstan Is Our Common Home](#)". This program faltered quickly, and an increasingly nationalist turn has become the new normal, accepted across the political spectrum.

The logic of new nationalisms means that old friendships in the post-Soviet space are gone. Attempts were made to recreate a protected economic space of the post-socialist countries by setting up a customs union with Russia, Kazakhstan, and other countries in the region. Kyrgyz politicians enthusiastically saw the possibility to redevelop local industry. But what local industry? Meanwhile, the world was different, and the logic of the [Eurasian Economic Union](#) was mostly a Russian-led initiative to impede China's exports and protect Russian commercial hegemony in the region. This was another blow for Kyrgyzstan, as re-exporting products of Chinese origin to Russia and Central Asian countries was one of the most dynamic sectors of its economy.

Liberal internationalism was another promise of the liberal order, which didn't work for most—in Kyrgyzstan or elsewhere. Instead, it multiplied nationalisms, creating balkanized ethno-statelets, intensifying and multiplying conflicts and ethnic oppression. *De facto* liberals, lacking any other ideological hold, are not doing anything other than enabling the far right. Especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many liberal intellectuals and scholars in the region have functionally embraced nationalism, often under the fashionable guise of an intellectually weak version of decolonization (anti-communism with new clothes). The same elite that could barely speak any Kyrgyz now feels the need to weaponize language and mobilize identity to establish their political position. This nationalist identity politics, so typical in Europe and US moderate parties as well, will backfire and enable right-wingers. When it comes to nationalism, why should electors choose weak, liberal versions when they can vote for the real thing? Why should they believe in liberals and their vague promise of economic improvement that always fails to materialize?

...or Barbarism.

The lack of planning and common direction didn't just kill the green sidewalks of Bishkek, but the entire structure of society. Despite local specificities, a great feature of capitalism is to globally homogenize not only production but also political problems, and Kyrgyzstan's troubles are in line with what we saw everywhere else in the last few years. If there is a difference, is it more about intensity, than the nature of the problem.

When the last president, Sadyr Japarov, got elected, the liberal press compared him to Trump or [Orban](#), making him another figure in a global sweep of right-wing nationalists demagogues that moved the political spectrum all over the world. Japarov, though, was in general well-liked by the rural and urban poor. His rise in popularity was not even predicted by the urban intelligentsia and the media because of their poor general grip and knowledge of the rest of the country. *Mutatis mutandis*, the reason for the election of nationalists worldwide, is the same everywhere—a sense of loneliness, abandonment, and disruption brought on by capitalism. The very high abstention rate and the lack of enthusiasm for the election in Kyrgyzstan, like elsewhere in the world, happen when politics decides to be powerless in front of unbridled capitalism. But we also know that the election of a strongman does not solve the problem—quite the contrary.

The global sweep toward the nationalist illusion won't create more security, only more misery. Following Samir Amin's predictions, archaic social systems tend to get stronger in peripheral countries. The almost complete lack of social protections makes women often the prime purveyors of social care in the country, and of course, a societal pressure to be mothers and caregivers. Gender imbalances deepened all over the post-Soviet context. The shameful law about family violence in Russia is a clear example of the trend as are the attacks of Kyrk Choro members against local [Bishkek feminists](#). In the lack of social solidarity, people can rely just on their families or, in the worst case, God. And this explains the proliferation of mosques and madrassas all over the country, in a country that traditionally wasn't very religious.

Despite the nationalist illusion in full swing, Japarov does not really differ from previous presidents on policies. While Japarov nationalized the gold mine as a populist move, despite it being close to exhaustion anyway, previous Canadian owners launched an international arbitration that temporally blocked any further commerce of Kyrgyz gold, a good reminder about the real extent of national sovereignty. But the lesson won't be learned, and privatizations will return in full swing. Japarov promised to privatize power plants and banks, and continue, in line with his predecessor, to dismantle public welfare and reduce taxation. For example, in 2017, the state decided not to tax private schools. Japarov wanted to go further by introducing a system of vouchers, which hasn't successfully been implemented anywhere in the world but is attempted all the time. This approach favors private urban schools, undermining their more accountable public counterpart. Vouchers

would be another gift to urban liberal elite against the vast countryside, where there are no schools other than the public ones.

Philanthropic Industrial Complex and Internal Brain Drain

While the bones of the country have been broken, a new liberal credo has been imposed from outside, and often financed and encouraged by external donors and international organizations. This created some cushy jobs for the local middle class. The IMF, laconically, noted Kyrgyzstan's poor economic performance, saying it is "lagging productivity and dependence on gold, remittances, and foreign aid". Unlike remittances, foreign aid often comes with a degree of ideological poisoning.

One illustration of this poisoning is the internal brain drain. Graduates of the best universities in the country either emigrate physically, or remain within the country, but they are more accountable to foreign donors and their (often misleading) projects and goals than to the real needs of the local population. Often those projects look great on Instagram, but they are more or less devoid of any real significance. Most of the exalted civil society, the press, the institutions, and various NGOs remain operational because of foreign funds.

According to the liberal credo, education, the creation of "human capital" has been seen as the main way to sustain and develop the country. But, unfortunately, despite the ultra-capitalist language, analogies, and related mystifications, "human capital" is not capital at all. "Human capital" is labor, and it is nothing without work. Human capital needs financial capital to become of use. In other words, without financial capital, human capital is useless. Liberals, as usual, try to fix the poor in a moralistic way, instead of trying to fix poverty. So, "human capital" finds itself either immigrating, working remotely for foreign companies (that most of the time completely elude local taxation), or working for the big philanthropic industrial systems. This creates the illusion of a civil society that is little more than a tiny urban bubble. The destruction of any productive capacity during the transition and the lack of any industrial policy, plan, or goal makes the pursuit of human capital a whimsical and purely ideological effort.

If anything, human capital is even more irrelevant today, where most of it does not need even to physically move in order to work for more capital-intensive activities. A lot of programmers, IT experts, customer service, logistics workers, teachers, and other remote activities are flowering in Bishkek. However, those activities are barely contributing anything to public finances, as their tax evasion is almost total. This breeds absolutely no expectations toward the public: everybody is on his own under the neo-liberal sun, and it furthers internal brain drain.

This, again, is far from being a Kyrgyz specificity. After Russian aggression in Ukraine, many Russian programmers and remote workers flooded Bishkek, Almaty, Tbilisi, and Yerevan. Most of them did so not because of ideological opposition to war, but because of the sanctions, including the necessity of foreign bank accounts to keep receiving their wages. Most of them have now returned to Russia. What impact do those people have on the common good? Rent got more expensive, that's for sure.

What is democracy in this context? Devoid of any ideological flavors if not nationalism and liberalism, politics becomes a market, and Kyrgyz parliamentarism resembles more of a bazaar than a center of direction and vision of the country. Scholars of Kyrgyz parliamentarism show how the parliament is something closer to a clearinghouse of [private interests](#) and business that allows people to enable transactions and foster new business opportunities. The liberal intelligentsia mostly stays away from the dirty politics in the country, preferring the role of the watchdog (often fed with foreign money). However, the conscious decision to avoid the real politics robs them of any potency.

In sum, the transition to unregulated capitalism has managed to wreck the country and undermine its productive system, while the liberal recipe for development—focusing on individual capability rather than the production of value as a social good—is keeping Kyrgyzstan down. Democracy that gives up control of the means of production is not a democracy but exploitation. Nevertheless, democracy brings with it potential, and the hunger for an alternative is distinctly present. Perhaps, for Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere, it is a bit naïve to see voters of the radical right as embarrassed socialists, but it is also true that the most successful lefty campaigns in recent years focused on bread-and-butter economic issues and spoke clearly to the electorate. Instead of insisting on national identities are a way to foster solidarity, the left should create solidarity through redistribution and, most importantly, a socialized idea of value creation.

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