



# THE OXUS SOCIETY FOR CENTRAL ASIAN AFFAIRS



## THE TAJIKISTAN-KYRGYZSTAN BORDER CONFLICT: SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSES AND LIVED EXPERIENCES

*RASHID GABDULHAKOV,  
OLEG ANTONOV AND ERKIN KYZY*

# THE TAJIKISTAN- KYRGYZSTAN BORDER CONFLICT: SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSES AND LIVED EXPERIENCES

This report is published as part of the project “Nationalism and Violence in Central Asia” funded by the United States Institute of Peace.

About the authors:

**Rashid Gabdulhakov** is an assistant professor at the Research Centre for Media and Journalism Studies at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. He researches social media in the context of Russia and Central Asia.

**Oleg Antonov** is a Researcher at Södertörn University. His research focuses on authoritarian governance in Central Asia, in particular Russia and China’s influence in the region.

**Erkin Kyzy** is a pseudonym for a researcher from Kyrgyzstan.



**THE OXUS SOCIETY**  
FOR CENTRAL ASIAN AFFAIRS



**THE TAJIKISTAN-KYRGYZSTAN  
BORDER CONFLICT: SOCIAL MEDIA  
DISCOURSES AND LIVED EXPERIENCES**



THE OXUS SOCIETY  
FOR CENTRAL ASIAN AFFAIRS

# INTRODUCTION

Fighting erupted on the border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan from September 14 to September 19, 2022. It was the bloodiest conflict to take place between the two countries in recent history. Both sides used artillery and drones to bombard border villages and Tajik forces shelled the city of Batken in Kyrgyzstan. The conflict left 63 dead on the Kyrgyz side<sup>1</sup>. Officially 41 were killed on the Tajik side<sup>2</sup>. But Radio Ozodi reported that there were 60 casualties based on their own sources<sup>3</sup>. Further, more than 400 people were wounded on both sides and 130,000 displaced inside Kyrgyzstan<sup>4</sup>. Both sides accused each other of having started the conflict.

The Kyrgyz-Tajik border has been a site of sporadic dispute in past decades. Just 642 km of the countries' 984 km border has been delimited, with disputes over right of access to water, land and infrastructure sparking disagreements among local residents and military personnel<sup>5</sup>. But recent border conflicts in April 2021 and September 2022 have signaled an escalation in scale, with the use of heavy weapons on both sides resulting in mass casualties. Coupled with this, the conflicts coincided with an unprecedented information war fought between the media and citizens in the online sphere.

---

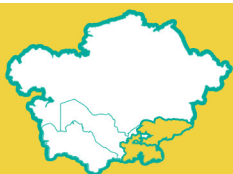
<sup>1</sup>“Events in Batken: the death toll of Kyrgyzstanis reached 63 people] События в Баткене: число погибших кыргызстанцев достигло 63 человек” RFE/RL, October 5, 2022. <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/32065968.html>

<sup>2</sup>“Tajikistan Says Kyrgyzstan Hides Military Hardware Close To Border, Despite Cease-Fire Deal,” RFE/RL, September 21, 2022. <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-kyrgyzstan-clashes-border-military-hardware/32044579.html>

<sup>3</sup>“[Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan accuse each other of “act of armed aggression”] Таджикистан и Кыргызстан обвинили друг друга в «акте вооруженной агрессии,» RFE/RL, September 18, 2022. <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32039709.html>

<sup>4</sup>Yrysbek Ulukbek uulu & Aibek Abdyldaev “Kyrgyz-Tajik border: chronology of conflicts,” RFE/RL, October 4, 2022, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/32063424.html>

<sup>5</sup>Ibid



Rather than examining who or what is responsible for the conflict, this report examines the framing of the border conflict by both sides through an analysis of official statements, perceptions of residents in border areas, and social media posts. We focus particularly on examples of chauvinism and ethno-nationalist tendencies, as well as inciting hatred between Kyrgyz and Tajiks. The report draws from an analysis of social media and official framings, but also fieldwork conducted in Batken in October 2022. The report seeks to highlight the following topics that emerged from the conversations with local stakeholders: trauma lived in armed conflict, uncertainty about the viability of Batken province as a peaceful place in the future, perceptions of state weakness and vulnerability, and the changing nature of the border conflicts. Unfortunately, due to the political situation and security reasons it was not possible to conduct fieldwork on the Tajik side of the border and present their perspective.

We compare the discourses from the previous major border conflict in April 2021<sup>6</sup> with September 2022, highlighting how tensions are escalating. For instance, in the Kyrgyz online sphere, there was an increase in the number of artistic illustrations created as a medium for narration of the events. The use of hashtags to create traceable digital archives of related social media posts also increased. If in 2021 Tajik social media users played a predominantly reactive role to posts generated in the Kyrgyz social media sphere, our analysis finds that in 2022 there was an increase in the volume of posts made by Tajik users, as well as an increase in thematic groups and channels on Facebook and Telegram. The appeal to the common Muslim identity between the two nations that was present in 2021 has been replaced with explicit nativist and racist discourses in 2022. A drastic shift towards inter-racial hostility was observed on both sides. On the Tajik side in particular, we saw numerous prominent individuals frame the conflict along religious lines as a struggle against non-believers. The Tajik side

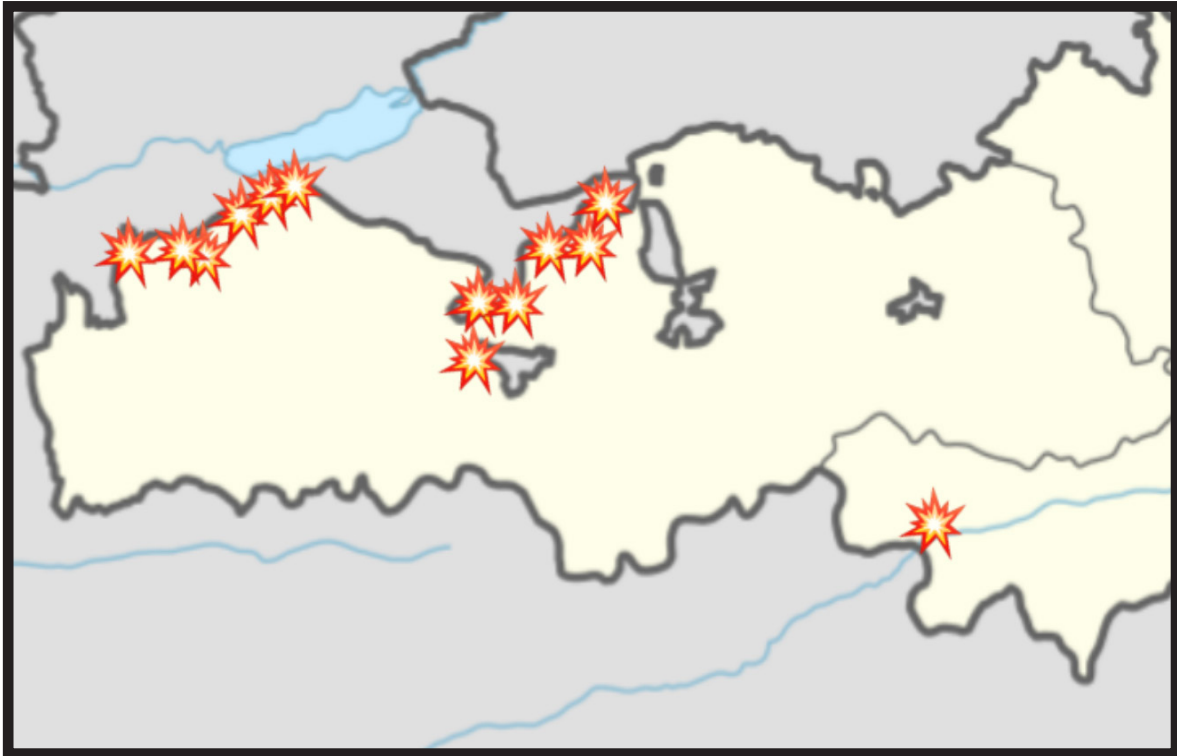
---

<sup>6</sup> Eric McGlinchey, "The April 2021 Kyrgyz-Tajik Border Dispute: Historical and Causal Context," Crossroads Policy Brief N2, July 2021. <https://www.crossroads-ca.org/the-april-2021-kyrgyz-tajik-border-dispute-historical-and-causal-context/>





also involved various former civil war era commanders, many of whom are not formally part of the Tajik armed services, who also framed the conflict along these lines.



*Figure 1. Map of the September 2022 Conflict*

## METHODOLOGY

This report draws on two methods. First, it presents the main findings from the fieldwork that was carried out in Batken province during the period of October 14 - 18, 2022. The fieldwork covered 10 sites: Batken and Razzakov towns, Samarkandek, Aksay, Kapchygay, International, Dostuk, Maksat, Arka and Kulundu villages. We collected 30 interviews with local residents, representatives of local authorities and NGOs, entrepreneurs, journalists, imams, school teachers, kindergarten employees, border guards and policemen. The fieldwork was limited in time and scope due to the constraints on the ground imposed by



state actors involved in security matters. on the ground imposed by state actors involved in security matters. For security reasons and due to the political situation, it was not possible to conduct fieldwork in Tajikistan.

Second, the study relied on netnographic observations<sup>7</sup> and discourse analysis of multimodal and multisemiotic<sup>8</sup> social media posts. In this case, the authors immersed themselves in the discourse by following individuals and institutions across social media platforms. This practice allowed for a continuous and real-time exposure to the field and participants. The researchers collected and archived respective artifacts in the form of social media posts and comments and took note of their observations in journal entries. Given that the online observations were passive and covert by default, the collected data concern only public accounts. For questions of privacy and security, where possible we have removed information or direct quotes that can be back-traced to specific individuals or institutions. But given the public profile of some of the accounts, the authors' identity cannot be concealed. All the collected and analyzed data are presented in broader terms with the intention of providing an overview of discursive nuances surrounding the events. Given that discourse in the online sphere is constructed through a combination of modes of communication, such as text and image, symbols, music, etc., the report applied a multimodal frame of analysis to ensure comprehensiveness.

---

<sup>7</sup> Kozinets, R. "Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research (Third)," SAGE Publications Ltd, 2022

<sup>8</sup> Iedema, R. "Multimodality, Resemiotization: Extending the Analysis of Discourse as Multi-Semiotic Practice," *Visual Communication*, 2(1), 29–57, 2003. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357203002001751>



## OUTLINE OF CONFLICT

A significant border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan took place on 28 April 2021. The conflict began after a dispute over a water intake station on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border near Kok-Tash. Lasting for five days, the conflict killed at least 55 and displaced over 40,000 people. It was significant in so far as both sides deployed heavy weaponry, signaling an escalation of the conflict between both countries.

After a year of continued tensions and sporadic conflict, on 14 September, 2022, during exchanges of fire between border guards at various locations, two Kyrgyz servicemen were wounded<sup>9</sup> and one Tajik border guard was killed<sup>10</sup>. Both sides accused each other of firing first<sup>11</sup>. After a day-long ceasefire, on 16 September, the Tajik armed forces shelled the city of Batken and Tajik-affiliated forces entered the village of Ak-Sai where armed men installed a Tajik flag on top of the roof of a local Kyrgyz school<sup>12</sup>. The shelling continued until 18 September, resulting in the destruction of various houses, schools and mosques. The conflict left between 104 and 144 dead, 137,000 displaced on the Kyrgyz side and over 700 various civilian structures and businesses damaged on the Kyrgyz side<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> “[The Border with Tajikistan is Restless Again. What’s happening?]”

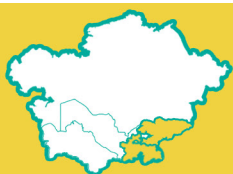
На границе с Таджикистаном вновь неспокойно. Что происходит,” Kaktus Media, September 14, 2022. [https://kaktus.media/doc/466983\\_na\\_granice\\_s\\_tadjikistanom\\_vnov\\_nesпокойно\\_что\\_proishodit.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/466983_na_granice_s_tadjikistanom_vnov_nesпокойно_что_proishodit.html)

<sup>10</sup> Farzan Mohammadi & Mullarajab Yusufi. “[One killed and several wounded. Loss of Tajik border guards in Isfara. VIDEO] Як кушта ва чандин захмӣ. Талафоти марзбонони тоҷик дар Исфара. ВИДЕО,” RFE/RL, September 14, 2022. <https://www.ozodi.org/a/32032830.html>

<sup>11</sup> “[Kyrgyz-Tajik Border: Shooting Also Started in Kak-Sai Region]”

Кыргыз-тажик чек арасы: Как-Сай аймагында да атышуу башталды,” RFE/RL, September 14, 2022. <https://www.azattyk.org/a/32033075.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://factcheck.kg/en/tadzhikistan-vedet-obstrel-okrestnostej-batkena-iz-reaktivnyh-sistem-zalpovogo-ognya-pravda/>; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/03/kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-conflict-leaves-children-without-education>



## OUTLINE OF CONFLICT

During the fieldwork in Batken region, it became immediately clear that local people are going through immense distress and trauma related to human loss, displacement, suspension of normal life, and uncertainty of the future. Among the main problems that people faced at this period was a severe lack of humanitarian aid. People suffered from the lack of warm clothes, food, shelter, and psychological assistance. Due to the generalized feeling of insecurity, people did not begin returning to their homes and we saw very few women and almost no children in areas affected by attacks. At the time of fieldwork in October 2022, the affected schools and kindergartens were still closed, and classes did not resume. In Khodjaev school in Aksay village, according to a local teacher, 500 pupils who fled with their families struggled to transfer to other schools across the country or went for online schooling. Approximately thirty teachers of the Khodjaev school found themselves temporarily without occupation. The school's office was fully burnt down. This was a brand-new school; the computer class just began functioning with equipment donated by international donors.

“People are afraid that hostilities will resume; families with children cannot risk returning home” one resident in Ak-Sai stated. The absence of owners of houses created considerable obstacles to the start of reconstruction works and the distribution of humanitarian aid. “People are not returning to their homes. The construction companies therefore cannot begin the works in time, there is for winter” according to a resident in Kapchygay village.

Batken province is multi-ethnic. Many people of non-Kyrgyz ethnic backgrounds

---

<sup>13</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/kyrgyzstan/kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-border-clashes-prove-deadly-civilians>, [https://kaktus.media/doc/467543\\_v\\_batkenskoy\\_oblasti\\_razrysheny\\_365\\_domov.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/467543_v_batkenskoy_oblasti_razrysheny_365_domov.html)

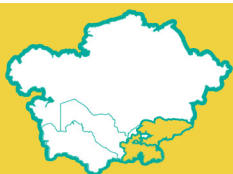




were also affected by the military incursion. In the village of International, an entrepreneur of Uzbek ethnic background saw his dentist clinic burn down. Other businesses owned by the local Uzbeks include commerce, food corners and local services, which suffered from destruction and looting. “30 people used to work here at the bazaar. Our lives were attached here. Now, we must go to Russia [to earn for life], we have no other choice” said one local ethnic Uzbek entrepreneur. In Borboduk, houses of ethnic Uzbeks were subject to the same looting as were houses of ethnic Kyrgyz and local people of Uzbek background were displaced together with their Kyrgyz neighbors.

Even in peaceful times people don't live but survive here. The development of certain areas and daily life come at a high price. Such is the case for example of the village of Maksat. In 1996, the President Akaev gave land in this area in order to strengthen border zones with Tajikistan and families with low income moved here attracted by the possibility to cultivate the land. However, the territory suffered from the absence of water and jobs, and arid climate. The community and livelihoods were built from scratch. Most families live on migrant remittances, children don't see their migrant parents for extended periods of time, and the elderly are stretched to be active in the absence of adult men and women. “We keep organizing people together, we keep the place together” the head of Maksat village stated.

In Maksat, border tensions are a constant feature of life. The local school has been destroyed already for the third time, leaving no room for hope for normalization of life among the residents. When a war occurs in such a context, the destruction of already volatile and vulnerable livelihoods is felt more acutely. “My sons work hard in Russia. They are separated from their families and don't see how their children grow up. Then the Tajiks come and destroy everything we've built over the years with hard labor and sacrifices” said a local female resident.

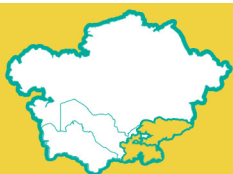


There is not much “state presence” in Batken. Many formal and informal institutions responsible for social cohesion in the Soviet era do not exist any longer. From the meager social infrastructure present in the region, schools, kindergartens and mosques are among the remaining major spaces of social interaction and integration. These institutions are often sponsored by domestic businessmen and are completed with the help of collective labor, or *ashar*<sup>14</sup>. In such cases, the entire communities participate in the completion of these important social institutions. In rural areas, these institutions are also the most modern objects of infrastructure; they are stuffed with contemporary office equipment that can be rarely found elsewhere in the village. The modernization of schools is often implemented with the help of international organizations and donors. Interviews with residents in villages where schools and kindergarten were shelled indicated how greatly their loss affected the communities.

## PERCEIVED ABSENCE OF THE STATE

In the perceived absence of the state, people feel that only humans constitute the state border. By choosing to stay and through their daily activity they ‘make up’ the state border. If people leave, nothing will uphold the border and keep the state territory intact. With the ceasefire, few men came back to their villages to oversee the renovation works. They were concerned about their emptied villages; without residents the desolated land could become occupied. Too many young men left to labor migration to Russia. Those who could afford housing elsewhere, moved to Batken’s regional center and the wealthier ones - to Osh and Chui provinces. Their anxiety about the vulnerability of the area was

<sup>14</sup> Among other things, *ashar* means a practice of mobilization of human and material resources for the realization of socially significant projects.



palpable: can the elderly and women alone “hold” the space forever? It was the ordinary men and women who organized the evacuation of people, who used their private cars to transport residents day and night to safety, who coordinated complex operations via WhatsApp chats. While the Kyrgyzstani mass media focused on shedding light on heroes among the military, it is the ordinary people who are the real heroes of everyday survival and at times of armed conflict.

Resentment towards the government remains high. “We do not need the government to build houses and roads, we will do it ourselves. Give us security! That is what people need!” – exclaim residents in Aksay. People feel abandoned and left alone with their tragedy. “Nobody cares about us” - is a recurrent expression repeated everywhere. People do not trust that the authorities will be in a position to resolve the border disputes. “The authorities keep saying that Aksai is a strategic place but soon they will forget about us, until the new conflict occurs again” – local residents.

People often repeated that the situation came to an impasse (*tunguyuk*). The perceptions of the impasse were building up for many years. “Old people try hard to maintain life, but young people recognize that there is no future here (*kelechek jok*) and are leaving.” People have been abandoning their homes, the region suffers from human resource drain and economic non-development<sup>15</sup>. The current escalation of the conflict only contributed to the perception with additional observations of the incompetent elites, failure of the country’s leadership to negotiate with the Tajik leadership, and an indifferent international

---

<sup>14</sup>Asel Murzakolva, “Challenges of Social Cohesion and Tensions in Communities on the Kyrgyz-Tajik Border,” Central Asian University, September 2018. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Asel-Murzakulova/publication/328652846\\_Challenges\\_of\\_social\\_cohesion\\_and\\_tensions\\_in\\_communities\\_on\\_the\\_Kyrgyz-Tajik\\_border/links/5bda7edfa6fdcc3a8db50622/Challenges-of-social-cohesion-and-tensions-in-communities-on-the-Kyrgyz-Tajik-border.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Asel-Murzakulova/publication/328652846_Challenges_of_social_cohesion_and_tensions_in_communities_on_the_Kyrgyz-Tajik_border/links/5bda7edfa6fdcc3a8db50622/Challenges-of-social-cohesion-and-tensions-in-communities-on-the-Kyrgyz-Tajik-border.pdf)



community. “We suffer because of our state’s weakness” – conclude many residents.

## ***PERCEPTIONS OF THE CHANGING NATURE OF BORDER CONFLICTS***

Kyrgyz citizens refer to the September events as an invasion of Kyrgyz territory and military attacks. Local stakeholders made note of the expansion of the flashpoints, the involvement of places with no territorial disputes, the increasing involvement of the military and of private mercenaries and the changing nature of possible reasons informing the incursions. In all sites that we visited, people observed the increasing usage of heavy weapons which led this time to an evacuation of 136 thousands of people. In comparison, if in the past only women and children were evacuated for safety reasons, this time everybody fled. This demonstrates that the clashes have become more dangerous for communities living in border areas.

Second, people reflected on the expansion of the fire lines. In Batken town - the provincial center of Batken – a few hours away from the actual border areas, a number of strategic facilities like the airport and a hospital were also targeted by shelling. Areas with no territorial disputes were also attacked. People do not feel safe not only in the immediate border zones, but in the wider province and wonder which new areas will be affected next time.

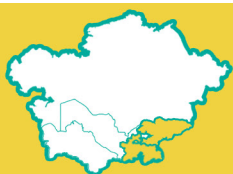
The involvement of the mercenaries on the Tajik side is another heated topic of discussions among Batken residents. “We know the level of Tajik border guards. They are similar to our boys – poorly trained and poorly equipped. These mercenaries were contractors, real fighters, fiercer” – residents repeatedly said this in areas we surveyed.



The nature of looting: local people in Dostuk (Leilek district) who stayed to protect their homes from looting say that the looters in civilian clothes were accompanied by men in police and military uniforms. Some residents were able to protect their houses by speaking to looters in Tajik; their houses were spared. Residents of Arka claim that rich houses were particularly targeted by looters, suggesting that the looting was well organized. Kindergartens and schools were also looted; often these institutions have the most modern equipment in the entire village.

A lot of discussions circulate about the reasons for the changing nature of the clashes. Some people are convinced that by creating multiple points of fire, the Tajik authorities seek to pressure the Kyrgyz authorities to make territorial concessions and allow for a corridor between Vorukh and Tajikistan. Hence the use of violence is a strategy to leverage the Kyrgyz side. Others believe that the September attack was long prepared because so much military equipment is impossible to deploy without planning. In Kapchygay, residents perceive the new escalation in connection to the road that they refused to concede to the Tajik side. In Leilek district, local people understand the expansion of the conflict as Tajikistan's attempt to transform the district into an enclave. Overall, people in Batken perceive their territory as vulnerable because it is sufficient to block a water channel or a bridge or a road in order to successfully cut off these remote areas and turn them into hostages.

A lot of discussions among residents were devoted to the state of the Kyrgyz army and the particular state of affairs of their local military units at the time of clashes. Many people mentioned the role of Russia in backing and supplying ammunition to Tajikistan. Residents compare the 2021 and 2022 clashes and observe different types of ammunition available to the Tajik side. They came to a conclusion that the Kyrgyz army was unprepared, caught by surprise and lacked guidance from their superiors.





The observations of the changing nature of hostilities towards more militarization and uncertainty about Tajik intentions lead to the rise of vigilantism and militantism among the residents. “The only solution is armament. If the state cannot protect us, we should be able to do so by our own means.” “All Tajiks possess arms; while we are having empty talks they will kill us”. “Women should learn to drive a car”. “Civilians should know how to hide in the trenches”. “Because the international community does not care, we should arm ourselves and protect ourselves.” “Rahmon is getting prepared, so we must too.” “They know that we are weak, that is why we need more and better equipped military block posts.” Local people closely follow news in both countries, watch the everyday passing of large trucks and military trucks in the direction of the Tajik enclave Vorukh as they are much more indicative of the status of peace and conflict than the Kyrgyz government’s discourses. Residents pushed for the adoption of the law that gives the residents of border areas access to weapons “in special cases.”<sup>16</sup>

## A ‘ZONE OF NO RETURN’?

The effects of the massive destruction of social infrastructure made people think that the goal of the attacks was to turn this whole area into a non-livable zone. By targeting and destroying schools and kindergartens in particular, the attacks succeeded in creating a very deep feeling of insecurity and impossibility to return to normal life. In some places, this infrastructure became a repeated target. In Maksat village, at the time of shelling in the early morning hours, the kindergarten was already open, and the staff was in the process of preparing breakfast for the children. Luckily, the staff were evacuated, and the kindergarten

<sup>16</sup> “[The Committees in Parliament Have Adopted in Three Hearing the Law on Issuance of Weapons to Residents of Border Districts ‘in Special Cases’] Комитеты ЖК сразу в трех чтениях одобрили законопроект о выдаче оружия жителям приграничных районов «в особых случаях,»” RFE/RL, October 18, 2022. <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/32089604.html>



was already open, and the staff was in the process of preparing breakfast for the children. Luckily, the staff were evacuated, and the kindergarten was closed before the arrival of children. Families are afraid to return to a place where children are targeted.

Among the destroyed property, not only houses and cars, but also family plots and livestock. People were unhappy that they and their children were so much invested into this labor, hoping to earn money from the apricot harvest in the upcoming autumn season. Others were hoping to sell livestock in the autumn in order to organize weddings and support children's higher education. Some wanted to renovate their houses, others - to buy more livestock for breeding, still others - to open a little grocery store. Now, these plans have been put on hold. It is clear that such attacks destabilize the entire ecosystems of the villages and of families within the current local political economy and lack of social protection.

The continuous deterioration of relations between the two countries and the closure of borders led also to a significant reduction of economic activities and social ties across the border. All residents in Batken noticed this as a regretful and harmful development to ordinary people. "Until 2014, the Tajiks used to buy our apricots. Now, the relations don't exist (*alar menen mamile jok*)" – residents in Arka. In Samarkandek, a large bazaar used to provide income for local villages. Both the Kyrgyz and Tajiks from neighboring areas frequented the bazaar. The Kyrgyz also used to hire the Tajik labor force contributing to each other's economic well-being. "The labor was cheap, and food was cheap. All that is gone" – resident of Samarkandek. "The Tajiks used to use the airport in Batken city to fly to Russia for seasonal work, there were much more interactions and good neighborhood culture among us before" – resident in Batken city.



## COMPARING THE DIGITAL SPHERE IN TAJIKISTAN AND KYRGYZSTAN

While internet penetration rates are not dramatically different in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with 50.4%<sup>17</sup> and 40.1%<sup>18</sup> respectively, there are considerable differences in the internet cost and accessibility of websites and platforms due to state blocking practices. Mobile internet in Kyrgyzstan is among the cheapest in the world. In 2022, the country ranked sixth globally with an average price per 1 gigabyte set at 0.17 USD<sup>19</sup>. Tajikistan, in its turn, ranks 131st with an average price per 1 gigabyte of data set at 1.94 USD. The government of Tajikistan is notorious for internet censorship, regularly blocking individual news sites<sup>20</sup> as well as entire platforms. In the last two years there were several cases where bloggers were captured in the Russian Federation and deported to Tajikistan, subsequently receiving lengthy prison sentences<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Kemp, S. "Digital in Kyrgyzstan: All the Statistics You Need in 2021," DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, February 23, 2021. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-kyrgyzstan>

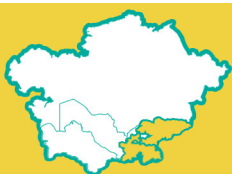
<sup>18</sup> Kemp, S. "Digital 2022: Tajikistan," DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, February 16, 2022. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-tajikistan>

<sup>19</sup> Howdle, D. "Worldwide mobile data pricing 2021," Cable.co.uk, November 2, 2022, <https://www.cable.co.uk/mobiles/worldwide-data-pricing/>

<sup>20</sup> "Blocking Websites Benefits No One in Tajikistan," RSF, April 29, 2019. <https://rsf.org/en/blocking-websites-benefits-no-one-tajikistan>

<sup>21</sup> "Tajikistan: Authorities Somehow Find More Room for Internet Censorship: This Latest Wave of Blocks Appears Linked to a Change in the Tax Code," Eurasianet, January 21, 2021 <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-authorities-somehow-find-more-room-for-internet-censorship>

<sup>22</sup> "Tajik Blogger Detained In Moscow; Relatives Fear His Extradition To Dushanbe," RFE/RL, August 18, 2022. <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-blogger-arrested-russia-gorno-badakhshan/31994249.html>; "Family Says Tajik Blogger Abducted, Sent To Dushanbe After Being 'Released' From Custody In Moscow," RFE/RL, September 12, 2022b. <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-blogger-gbao-abducted-russia-custody/32029629.html>; "Tajikistan: another blogger sent to jail for 6 years," ACCA, July 29, 2022. <https://acca.media/en/15905/tajikistan-another-blogger-sent-to-jail-for-6-years/>; ACCA. (2022b, October 13). "Tajikistan: The detention regime for the convicted blogger has been strengthened," ACCA. October 13, 22b. <https://acca.media/en/16702/tajikistan-the-detention-regime-for-the-convicted-blogger-has-been-strengthened/>



In Kyrgyzstan repressive practices of silencing critical voices has also intensified since Sadyr Japarov became president after a coup d'état in October 2020. Some interest groups have organized protests against independent media outlets and those affiliated with “the West”, demanding their closure as well as the adoption of a “foreign agent” law akin to that currently used in the Russian Federation to silence dissent. Furthermore, new draft legislation for governing and restricting the freedom of speech during emergency situations is under discussion<sup>24</sup>, all while the civil society leaders and politicians who opposed state decisions on border delimitation between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have been detained<sup>25</sup>. A prominent case of repressive measures against critical voices is the injustice surrounding the investigative journalist Bolot Temirov whose Kyrgyz passport was annulled as he was forcefully deported to the Russian Federation<sup>26</sup>.

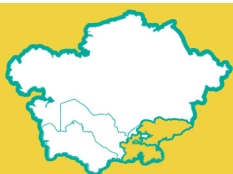
Worrying trends of repression of critical voices are thus observed in both states. The leadership in the two countries is faced with divergent dilemmas. With a long history of internet censorship, Tajikistan finds itself inferior in the online information battles surrounding border clashes. In situations where citizens' digital literacy is low and generating political content is linked to the fear of repression, it is challenging to create and disseminate online counter narratives. In Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, due to the relatively low censorship, and a rich history of civil society mobilization and political participation of- and online, the state feels threatened and vulnerable. While the vibrant civil society and active

<sup>23</sup> Makanbai Kyzy, G. “Rally With Demand to Shut Down Kloop, Azattyk, and Kaktus Held in Bishkek,” 24.kg, October 13, 2022, [https://24.kg/english/247975\\_Rally\\_with\\_demand\\_to\\_shut\\_down\\_Kloop\\_Azattyk\\_and\\_Kaktus\\_held\\_in\\_Bishkek/](https://24.kg/english/247975_Rally_with_demand_to_shut_down_Kloop_Azattyk_and_Kaktus_held_in_Bishkek/)

<sup>24</sup> “Kyrgyzstan: Towards Total Media Control?” Institute for War and Peace Reporting, November 1, 2022. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyzstan-towards-total-media-control>

<sup>25</sup> “Kyrgyzstan: Arrests of Activists, Politicians Occurred Amid Growing Pressure on Media,” Eurasianet, October 24, 2022. <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-arrests-of-activists-politicians-occurred-amid-growing-pressure-on-media>

<sup>26</sup> “Kyrgyz Journalist Bolot Temirov Deported to Russia,” The Diplomat, November 29, 2022b. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/11/kyrgyz-journalist-bolot-temirov-deported-to-russia/>



social media users in Kyrgyzstan were instrumental in generating anti-Rahmon discourses amid the border clashes, they were also rather critical of their own state leaders. This is a fundamental difference in the discursive approaches in the two countries. The two leaders are similar in their attempts to instrumentalize public discourses, but they are dealing with a different set of realities. For Rahmon, the main task in this domain is to operate in the realities of low digital literacies and generate voices critical of Kyrgyzstan but loyal to Dushanbe. Japarov, in his turn, is operating in realities of active citizenry with high digital literacy, who he aims to silence for the sake of regime stability and at the expense of the ability to generate counter-Dushanbe narratives in future clashes.

## ATTRIBUTING BLAME

Both sides accused each other of starting the conflict. Of the 65 published by state media outlet *Khovar* articles, 44 articles mainly begin with the words “Armed Aggression of Kyrgyzstan, Attack, Provocation and Terrorist Act.” The remaining 21 are official statements and press releases from government and law enforcement agencies that are published without these words. From September 14 to September 26, over 20 articles were published on the online web page of the newspaper *Jumhuriyat* including official state reports on the border armed conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

One article by Negmatullo Mirsaidov dated September 18 was titled “Kyrgyzstan’s Strike on the Mosque is a Monstrous Terrorist Act.” His article focuses on the shelling of a mosque in Ovchi Kal’acha, Bobojon, Gafurov district. Quoting the Quran he writes that “If someone kills a believer intentionally, then Hell will be his retribution, in which he will remain forever. Allah will be angry with him, curse him and prepare for him great torment.” Therefore, a true believer will





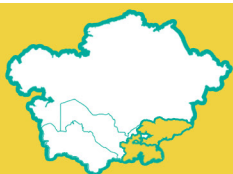
always think about what awaits him in the other world if he has committed such a grave sin as the murder of an innocent person.” According to Mufti of Tajikistan Saidmukarram Abdukodirzoda, “the tyrant [Japarov] will fail, and every proud person will be defeated. The tyrant will fail because he opens fire on civilians without weapons, especially those praying in the mosque, and this is considered violence. Because peaceful citizens prayed in the mosque, and not armed people going to war. These people came to the mosque to bow to the Almighty and offer prayers for the peace and stability of Tajikistan. I saw a video where several Kyrgyz soldiers were sitting near a computer and, when they saw the explosion of the mosque, they laughed out loud and applauded, as if they had conquered the world [...] Those who shed innocent blood will receive what they deserve for every drop of it, both in this world and in the other world. God does not forgive the killing of innocent people.”

The articles portray the Tajik people as inherently peaceful, echoing a frequent nodal point in Rahmon’s speeches. “The Tajik nation is recognized in the history of mankind as a thoughtful, cultured, civilized, patient and tolerant nation or people. Until now, the Tajik people have defended their land and Motherland with their wisdom and ingenuity.”<sup>27</sup> According to one author “Tajikistan wants to find a suitable solution for peace and mutual understanding, taking into account the protection of national and mutual interests and observing the tradition of good neighborliness. However, the Kyrgyz side is not sufficiently prepared to deal with this problem, taking into account the interests of both sides.”<sup>28</sup> Yet, due to the Kyrgyz provocation, violence is now justified. “Their sharpness must be answered with sharpness, and their slap must be beaten with fists. We don’t have to be merciful anymore, our compassion is too much to cost us today.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/payk.tj/posts/pfbid034pwHyGNtvq6dYMto38nEQThdRcSe5iXnuGUpVuT2f32aXsHKqTKU7xrQmnFk1HeYl>

<sup>28</sup> [http://jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art\\_id=47426](http://jumhuriyat.tj/index.php?art_id=47426)

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/payk.tj/posts/pfbid034pwHyGNtvq6dYMto38nEQThdRcSe5iXnuGUpVuT2f32aXsHKqTKU7xrQmnFk1HeYl>

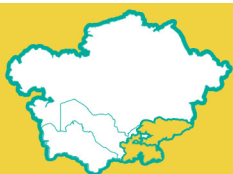


Kyrgyzstan, where more than 447 people died and 75,000 Uzbeks became refugees. [...] Therefore, the violation of the treaty, the murders and arrests of the Kyrgyz in the region are typical.” Another article by Political Scientist Abdurakhmon Muhammad dated September 19 states that “the treacherous attack of the Kyrgyz Border Guards is a sign of their bloodthirstiness and dishonor.” Another describes Kyrgyzstan as “a “weak” link in Central Asia,” likening “the armed aggression of Kyrgyzstan with the invasion of international terrorist groups such as (Al-Qaeda) and (ISIS).” Victor Kim writes that “over the past 30 years of the recent history of independence of the Central Asian countries, all states have confirmed their commitment to peace, stability and good neighborly relations. Except for one state - Kyrgyzstan, where individual leaders continue the policy of self-affirmation in the country, region, while not taking into account the interests of the Kyrgyz people.”

According to President of the National Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan, Farhod Rahimi, “the political leadership of Kyrgyzstan, with its treachery and irresponsibility, using the high platform of the UN, distorts this reality throughout the world, incorrectly and one-sidedly assesses what is happening and tries to convince the world community to accept their lies and slander.”

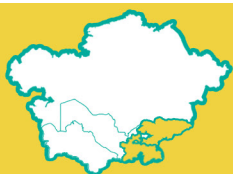
## ***THE USE OF HASHTAGS: INTERTEXTUALITY AND CALLS FOR GLOBAL MEDIA ATTENTION***

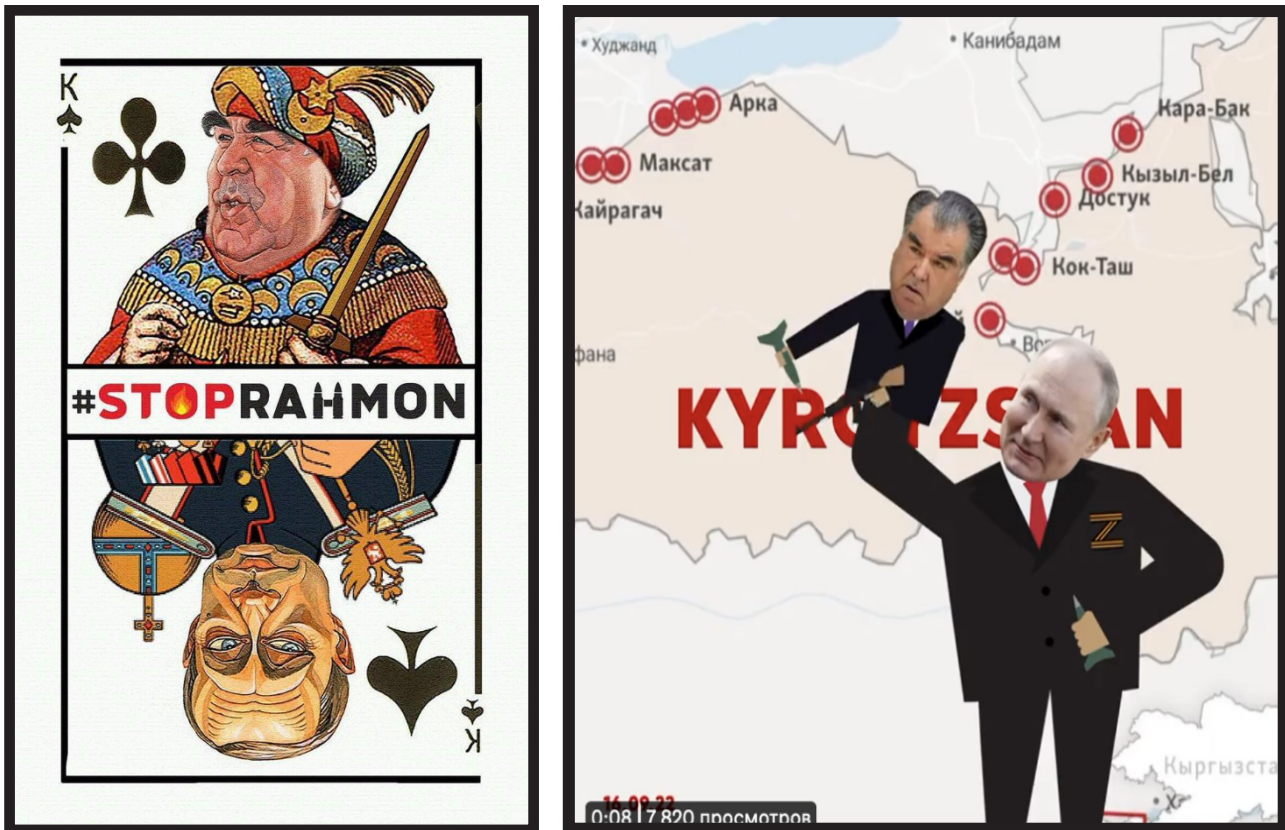
The use of hashtags to draw media and public attention to a crisis situation has been a common practice among social media users in Kyrgyzstan for quite some time. In April 2021, such use of hashtags had a predominantly domestic focus with the use of such words and phrases as *#freeBatken*, *#prayforBatken*,



*#prayforKyrgyzstan*. The discourse communicated through these appeals was narrated as a call for compassion and solidarity. President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon was portrayed as the main perpetrator who attacked Kyrgyzstan. In 2022 the narrative has taken on a more alarmist tone with such hashtags as *#kyrgyzstanunderattack*. At the same time, the focus has shifted from Rahmon alone being the sole perpetrator to Tajikistan and the Tajik people as being responsible more broadly. Moreover, links were made between Tajik-Kyrgyz border clashes and other conflicts such as Russia's war against Ukraine and Azerbaijan's attack on Armenia. Some of the popular hashtags such as *#AzerbaijanIsATerroristState #StopBeingSilent #HelpArmenia* were borrowed and copy-pasted into posts surrounding the Tajik-Kyrgyz border clash. This practice of intertextuality, where other conflicts are used as a reference point for framing the domestic border clash, appears to have been an attention-grabbing strategy. Since Central Asia remains terra incognita for the outside world, connecting the region via hashtags to conflicts that receive global media attention is a form of a call for help and justice.

In these media strategies, the global media giants are perceived as mediators while the global audiences are relied upon as the jury capable of exercising some form of justice. As such, in 2022, social media users in Kyrgyzstan have started actively tagging foreign media outlets in their posts, appealing to them for attention. The same set of hashtags has been copy-pasted and used by thousands of users in their posts covering the conflict. The most widely used set of hashtags is *#CGTN #CNN #BCC #ABC #TheNewYorkTimes #WashingtonPost #NBCNews #RussiaToday #DW #Euronews #AgenceFrancePresse #AssociatedPress #Reuters #UnitedPressInternational #Fox #MSNBC #USAToday #TheWallStreetJournal #POLITICO #Bloomberg #HBO #HuffPost #NewsWeek #Time*. The tagged press includes predominantly US and European outlets, as well as Russia's RT.





**Figure 2 and 3. Pictures Posted to Social Media Discussing the Conflict**

The difference in digital literacy levels in the two states is also evident in the use of hashtags. For instance, social media users in Tajikistan appear to have directly copy-pasted some of the news and posts from the Kyrgyz social media sphere. While the phrase “Kyrgyzstan under attack” has been replaced with “Tajikistan under attack”, some of the hashtags such as *#FreeBatken* traveled along with the posts. Moreover, replacing one state with another in the social media posts has led to confusion as according to such posts, Kyrgyzstan attacked its own villages.

The appeal to the outside world for attention is also represented linguistically. Most of the comments underneath the posts are made in the Russian language. There are several reasons for this. The most obvious being the lingua franca status of the language in the region, especially given the differences between

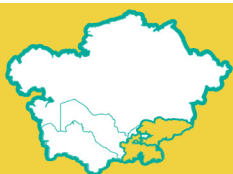


the Tajik and Kyrgyz languages. Moreover, communication in Russian allows for reaching wider audiences across and beyond the region of Central Asia. Some of the social media posts on both sides were duplicated in English, Arabic, Japanese and other languages.

The role of traditional media as a connective element between the region and the outside world appears to be central. Comments under social media posts made by such outlets as Kloop, for instance, generate the most user reactions in the form of emojis and comments. One of the *Kloop* reports received over 1,800 comments (at the time of data collection in November 2022). In the comment section people on both sides of the conflict were appealing to each other for understanding, blaming each other, trying to persuade one another. While the dominant language of the discussion is Russian, people also make posts in English, Kyrgyz and Tajik. In this regard, social media posts made by professional media outlets not only serve as sources of information but also as spaces where people congregate for discussions, debates and, sometimes, rivalries.

## INCREASING INTER-ETHNIC TENSIONS

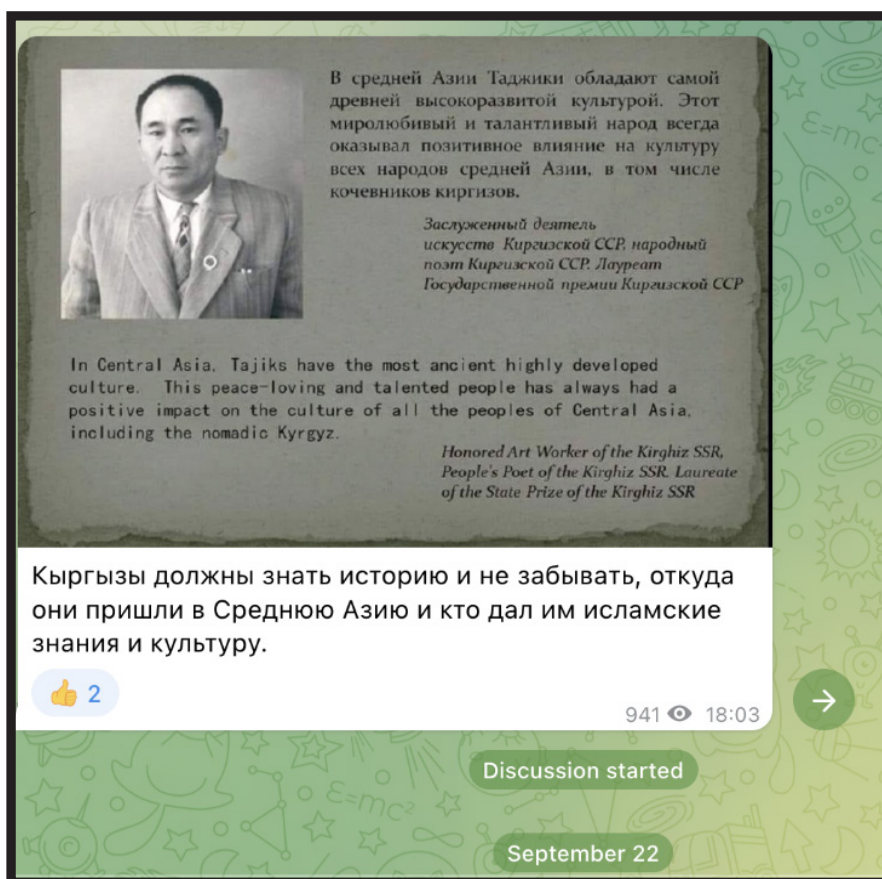
A worrying discursive trend is the increase in ethnic biases and racism in posts and comments across social media platforms. On the Tajik side, there are two prominent nativist narratives. The first one stresses the unique Aryan origin of the Tajik nation and the second one stresses the nomadic history of the Kyrgyz people by framing it as inferior to the settlers. Related social media posts and comments stress that the Tajik culture is ancient, that Tajik people are peace-loving and that they have made a positive impact on their nomadic neighbors. As 'evidence' of these discourses, social media users quote not only Stalin but also a Soviet-era Kyrgyz poet Kubanychbek Malikov. Comments call for the people





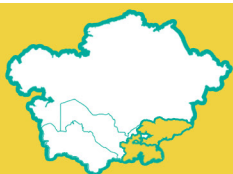
of Kyrgyzstan not to forget where they came from and who “gave them Islam”.

Images of Kyrgyz people in the yurts are shared in posts and comments to further strengthen the nomadic versus sedentary division. At the same time, the narrative that in the Soviet times all nations lived in peace with each other were present in posts and comments in 2021, and were nearly entirely absent in 2022, indicating a sign of intensified inter-ethnic tensions.



**Figure 4:**  
**A Kyrgyz**  
**Telegram**  
**Channel**

A sharp increase in racism and intolerance is observed in the Kyrgyz social media sphere. Users refer to Tajiks as “Taziki” which can be translated into Russian as ‘wash basins’. Other intertextual references include such name calling as “Jamshuts” referring to a character from an infamous Russian TV show “Nasha Rasha” [Our Russia]. The comic TV series is an epitome of racial and other



**Figure 5:**  
**Screenshot**  
**from Nasha**  
**Russia**



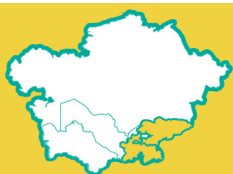
stereotypes of Central Asian labor migrants in Russia.

While both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are heavily dependent on remittances sent by labor migrants from Russia<sup>30</sup>, social media users in Kyrgyzstan opted for an intertextual reference to a racist show to downplay intellectual capacities on the Tajiks.

Netnographic observations on the Twitter segment of Kyrgyzstan - a space predominantly occupied by highly educated Russophones (referred to as Balkonskie) - revealed domestic clashes in the stance on anti-Tajik discourses. Some prominent users with a vast following were demanding pressure to be put on Tajiks residing in Kyrgyzstan. There were cases of public shaming and online exposure of individual Tajik citizens who have studied in Kyrgyzstan or came on a business visit. These individuals were accused of double standards as

<sup>30</sup> Osmonalieva, B "Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan take 1st place in amount of remittances from Russia," 24.kg, November 25, 2021, [https://24.kg/english/214361\\_Kyrgyzstan\\_and\\_Tajikistan\\_take\\_1st\\_place\\_in\\_amount\\_of\\_remittances\\_from\\_Russia/](https://24.kg/english/214361_Kyrgyzstan_and_Tajikistan_take_1st_place_in_amount_of_remittances_from_Russia/)

<sup>31</sup> Gabdulhakov, R. "The Avengers vs the Orcs: Social Media Nuances in Kyrgyzstan's (Almost) Third Revolution," The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, October 28, 2020. <https://oxussociety.org/the-avengers-vs-the-orcs-social-media-nuances-in-kyrgyzstans-almost-third-revolution/>

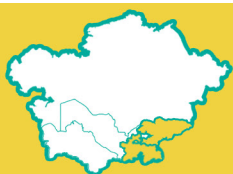


while benefiting from education and professional contacts in Kyrgyzstan they continued expressing support for Rahmon and condemned Kyrgyzstan amid border clashes. This public exposure and shaming involved calling out the affiliated institutions and accusing them of aiding Rahmon. Another group of users called for a differentiation between the government of Tajikistan and regular citizens who themselves suffer from the regime's atrocities.

Tajik social media users have actively accused the Kyrgyz people of racism and called out the events of 2010 when clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks took place in the southern provinces of the country. Posts of this nature are accompanied with images as well as video materials. The late president of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov as well as the Uzbek pop star Yulduz Usmonova who was vocal in reaction to the 2010 events, were actively featured in the comments to support the narrative that the Kyrgyz side is ethically flawed.

Abdukodir Talbakov, director of the Abulkosim Lokhuti Central Library in Dushanbe and former director of Poytakht TV Channel, who is known on social networks for his sharp discussions and critical attacks on the Tajik opposition, dissidents and independent journalists. At the same time, Talbakov, each time taking advantage of the tense situation and the escalation of the border conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, makes caustic condemning statements towards the Kyrgyz authorities. His harsh remarks about the President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Japarov and the head of the State Committee for National Security of the Kyrgyz Republic Kamchybek Tashiev consist of the following accusatory, insulting and impartial words that affect the honor and dignity of a person, for example, “bloody ruler”, “thugs”, “criminals” and “aggressors”, more detailed screenshots below

The screenshot from Talbakov's Facebook that Sadyr Japarov is the President of Kyrgyzstan and Kamchybek Tashiev is the head of the State Committee



for National Security of the Kyrgyz Republic are both “bloody ruler”, “thugs”, “murderers”, “thieves”, “bandits”, “former prisoners”, “criminals” and “aggressors.”



*Figure 6: Commentary from Tajik Social Media*

The major discursive difference between the Tajik and the Kyrgyz social media spheres in the attitude towards state leadership. The vast majority of Tajik social media users who participated in discourse creation and dissemination surrounding the border clash endorsed the leadership of president Rahmon. On the Kyrgyz side, the situation is much more complex as active social media users who criticized Rahmon for aggression against Kyrgyzstan also expressed disenchantment and distrust in their own government.

There is a long history of distrust in politicians in Kyrgyzstan. Even without going far back in the country’s history, there were several crisis situations where





people felt left alone with their own problems. Some vivid examples include the so-called “dark July” of 2020 when amid the COVID-19 pandemic the state did not manage to offer the required assistance and citizens relied on each other in support<sup>32</sup>. Citizens were also instrumental in protecting Bishkek from looting amid the 2020 coup<sup>33</sup>. Moreover, the ongoing border delimitation work between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan is also raising suspicion in the Kyrgyz society<sup>34</sup>. As such, incidents at the border with Tajikistan also give way for the critical voices who expressed concerns over state leadership’s passive reactions. In these discourses there is a divide in perceptions of national-level politicians taking decisions in the capital and local leaders who experience conflict first hand and know the needs of border region dwellers.

Posts critical of state leadership focus on their alienation from the regular people. President Japarov is criticized for wearing expensive clothes while socioeconomic insecurities in the country are on the rise. In the similar manner, the head of GKNB (state security service) Tashiev is criticized for favoring security service officers with state benefits such as subsidized housing, all while the internally displaced people rely on other citizens in finding shelter and food.

In contrast to the elites in the capital, the head of Batken province received some social media praise in 2021 amid the meeting of two state delegations. As members of the Kyrgyz delegation were greeting president Rahmon they put a left hand on their heart as a symbol of respect. The head of Batken province, however, was spotted the only one refuting the symbolic gesture, which was praised in the social media discourses.

---

<sup>32</sup> “Photo exhibition dedicated to victims of COVID-19 opened in Bishkek,” Cabar, November 1, 2022. <http://en.kabar.kg/news/photo-exhibition-dedicated-to-victims-of-covid-19-and-heroes-of-black-july-opened-in-bishkek/>

<sup>33</sup> “In Pictures: Volunteers protect Bishkek from looters,” AKIpress News Agency, October 8, 2022. [https://akipress.com/news:649277:In\\_Pictures\\_\\_Volunteers\\_protect\\_Bishkek\\_from\\_looters/](https://akipress.com/news:649277:In_Pictures__Volunteers_protect_Bishkek_from_looters/)

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.





## RELATION WITH ISLAM

In Tajikistan, a number of prominent religious leaders and bloggers framed the conflict along religious lines, combining these narratives with notions of ethnonationalism. Pro-government Tajik blogger Usmon Mirzomurodov, the owner of the Tojikonshow page on Instagram with 727,000 followers. In his post “In sha Allah be javob namemonan - In sha Allah, you will not go unanswered,” which is accompanied by a video (12,000 likes and about 700 comments) calling for reprisals against Kyrgyzstan for starting the war. In this video, Usmon says: “I wish you a speedy recovery and express my deep condolences to the families and friends of those killed during the border conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. [...] The sudden attack of non-Muslims, not people and not men but qunguzo (an Uzbek word which is translated into Russian beetle) on the mosque of the village of Ovchi-Qalacha, Bobojon Gafurov district, after the signing of a peace agreement and the announcement ceasefire will not be forgotten and will not be forgiven. Their sentence is the death penalty. They thus proved themselves that they are not people. They (the Kyrgyz) are insects. So, if you kill them (the Kyrgyz), it WILL NOT BE CONSIDERED A SIN.” The video message of the blogger Usmon has elements of militant and religious ethno-nationalism



**Figure 7: DiloVar Safarov's Address to the Kyrgyz People**



expressed in a special extreme form (chauvinism, xenophobia and racism with the inculcation and incitement of hatred).

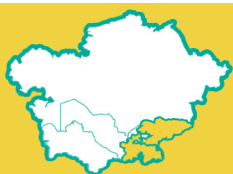
Dilovar Safarov, a prominent pro-government blogger, touches upon the topic of religion and notes the following: “Let me speak frankly with you. In history, in order for the Tajiks to attack someone, you read and study whatever you want” and “in Islam there is no nation, in Islam there is only religion, those who in Islam are considered brothers. Therefore, we call you (meaning the Kyrgyz) I don’t want to divide, but neither those who say that the Tajiks are murderers, they say some kind of slander against us.”



**Figure 8:**  
***Hoji Mirzo, one of the most famous theologians of Tajikistan, answers the questions of believers.***

To the question of believers: Is Hoji Mirzo ready if he is sent to defend the border and defend the Motherland from aggressors? He replied that he was ready and not afraid. I call on people to defend the Motherland and, if I myself do not follow my call. This means that I am a two-faced person. I swear to God that I am ready to defend the Motherland, despite my age and illness. I am also a member of this society. I’m ready for anything, even to be in the front ranks of the defenders!<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Din.va.jomea/videos/512923106869312/>



## ROLE OF THE FORMER COMMANDERS

A number of former commanders, most of whom fought with the United Tajik Opposition, were present on the front lines. General Shoh Iskandar a former field commander from Gcharm and head of the Isfara-1 Department of Internal Affairs in the Sughd region, was seen at the front along with Mirzokhuja Ahmadov (Belgi).



*Figure 9, 10 and 11:  
Frontline Commanders*





In one video featuring Mirzokhuja Ahmadov, which was later deleted, the commander is seen using a grenade launcher to strike a Kyrgyz tank.



**Figure 12:**  
**Video of Mirzokhuja**  
**Ahmadov Firing a Grenade**

The poster shouts: *“Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar”*. Mirzohuja (Sheri nar - Lion). Mirzohuja knocked out a tank. *“He is a Tiger, he is a real Leo. Long live Mirzohuja from Gharm!!! Takbir, Allahu Akbar!!! Long live Tajikistan!!! Takbir, Allahu Akbar!”*

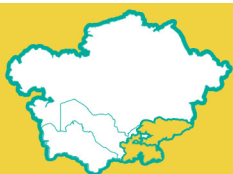


## COMMUNICATING CONFLICT THROUGH ART, IMAGES AND VIDEO FOOTAGE

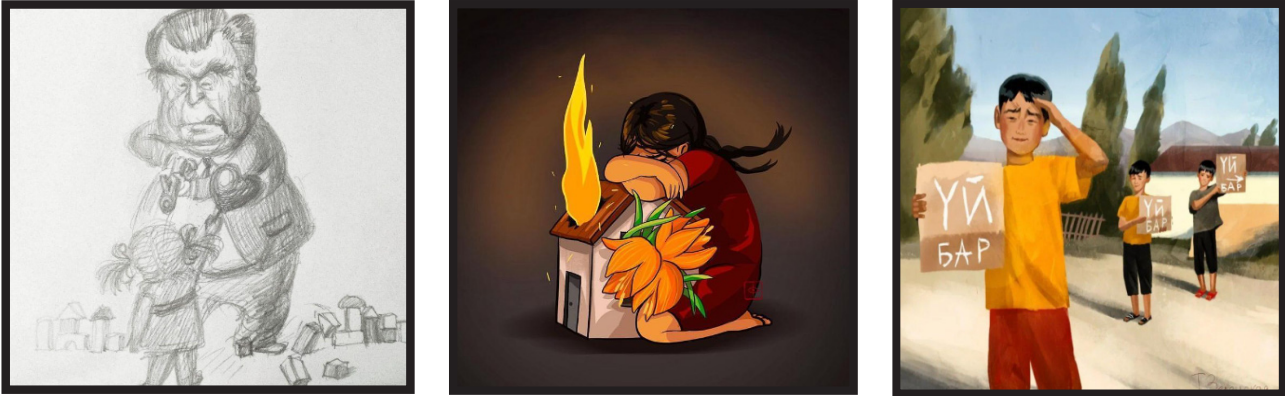
There are multiple levels of reporting on the conflict. Hand in hand with the footage shared by soldiers and citizens experiencing conflict on the ground, there are artistic interpretations of the situation that narrate the events and trigger emotions among the audience. Of course, there are also memes and intertextual cultural references designed for the narration of events in a particular key.

It appears that the Tajik military personnel actively captured and shared footage from the battlefield. A prominent example is the erection of a Tajik flag over a school building in Kyrgyzstan's Batken province. This footage led to outrage among Kyrgyz social media users. Video footage of the destruction of residential areas and key infrastructure such as bridges were also freely circulating across social media platforms.

Artistic illustrations of conflict are a unique feature of the Kyrgyz social media sphere. Prominent illustrators reacted to the events with their own interpretation and shared pieces that went viral in the domestic online sphere. Thematically, the illustrations on the Kyrgyz side focus on portraying Rahmon as an aggressor while actively featuring children as both innocent victims of aggression and as active citizens. Some examples below: a pencil drawing of Rahmon pointing his weapon at an innocent girl, while destroying everything long his path, a girl crying by her burnt house and young boys holding up the signs that there is logging in their village for the displaced people running for their lives.







**Figure 13: Illustrations about the Events**

The Tajik social media segment also victimized children who used respective images as emotional trigger points. Some of the memes compared Kyrgyzstan to a person bothering a beehive, which represents Tajikistan in the particular meme. Having absent the bees, the character representing Kyrgyzstan is shown in front of foreign TV crews of FOX, CNN and BBC asking for help.



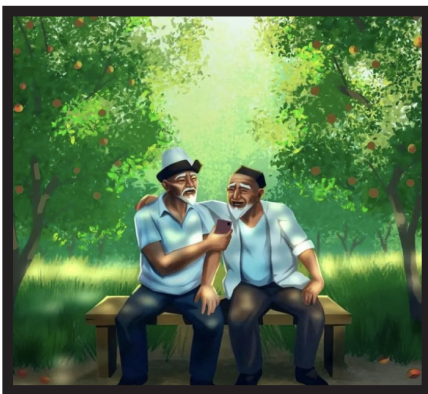
**Figure 14:  
A Meme from Tajik  
Social Media**





**Figure 15: Post from Kyrgyz Social Media**

Yet even amid the intensification of inter-ethnic biases and mutual accusation in aggression, there were still a few images circulating across the online spheres calling for peace between the two nations. As can be seen in the image below, a Kyrgyz and a Tajik old men are portrayed in good spirits, sharing a moment of joy by looking at a photo of their grandchildren on a smartphone. The kids are running through a field surrounded by mountains with kites of Tajik and Kyrgyz flags making an infinity sign in the air, representing eternal friendship.



**Figure 16 and 17: Social Media Posts**



## CONCLUSION

The analysis revealed growing anxieties among the border communities in Batken about the viability of this place for future peaceful life. It shows how ordinary residents struggle to make life in harsh conditions, amplified manifold by repeated armed conflicts and instability. The report also demonstrates similarities and differences in the online discourses surrounding border clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in April 2021 and September 2022. While the reactions to two events are similar in the use of multimodal and multi semiotic discourses in the forms of images and illustrations combined with text and intertextual references, some of these discursive practices experienced amplification in 2022. On the Kyrgyz side, this translated into an increase in the overall volume of reactions to conflict and the increase in specific media practices such as the creation and dissemination of artistic illustrations interpreting the events, the reliance on informal voices, and the appeal to international media for attention.

Traditional media voices are perceived as highly relevant by social media users in Kyrgyzstan. Appeals for attention signify a perception of the existence of justful outside actors who can get involved in the conflict and help mediate it. Foreign media is, therefore, called upon not only for coverage of the events but also for reporting in a particular manner, clearly pointing to the aggressor and the victim. At the same time, social media users in Kyrgyzstan are not passive actors. Users generate and disseminate large volumes of content that accuses Tajikistan of aggression and calls on the people of Tajikistan to resent their state leadership. Moreover, cases of hacktivism also take place when citizens sharing anti-Rahmon sentiments allegedly conduct DDoS attacks on the Tajik social media users and media outlets.

Social media users in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan experience divergent levels of



internet accessibility and digital literacy. As a result, state leaders in the two countries face a different set of challenges that need to balance between regime stability and creation of counter narratives all while taming the domestic critical voices. In the case of Tajikistan, significant digital divides, low digital literacy rates and the long history of internet censorship created a situation where regular citizens find it challenging to engage in the online media battles in a meaningful and impactful manner. In Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, vibrant and digitally savvy civil society presents a challenge for the regime as citizens expose state leaders over issues of corruption.

A major discursive difference between the two events is a shift towards explicit nationalism and inter-ethnic hatred. If discourse shared in 2021 contained references to the common history, Muslim identity and the shared brotherhood, in 2022 the dominant focus fell on differences between the two nations. Discourses emphasized the superiority of one nation over the other and relied on intertextual media materials to humiliate and defame the other side. The shift towards explicit intolerance and hatred is alarming as it penetrates even the traditionally moderate and liberal social media bubbles.





# NOTES

## Cover Photo Source

S. Grits (2010), Kyrgyz special forces on a search operation in the Dustuk neighbourhood in the southern Kyrgyzstan city of Osh, Wednesday, June 16, 2010., AP, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/kyrgyz-army-tries-to-get-control-in-riot-hit-south-1.523325>

---

## ***The Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan Border Conflict: Social Media Discourses and Lived Experiences***

Written by

*Rashid Gabdulhakov, Oleg Antanov and Erkin Kyzy*

Edited by

*Edward Lemon, Bradley Jardine and Michael Hilliard*

Copyright, 2023

For more information please visit

[www.oxussociety.org](http://www.oxussociety.org)

