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Kyrgyzstan

Russian opposition activists are threatened with expulsion from supposedly neutral Kyrgyzstan

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Yulia and Ilya Kuleshov were among the first Russian citizens to move to Kyrgyzstan last spring, just after the invasion of Ukraine. The couple had been publicly active back in St Petersburg – Yulia ran a foundation that helped victims of sexual violence, while Ilya was involved in urban improvement projects – but they no longer wanted to live and work in Russia.

“We didn’t know anything about Central Asia, but we really wanted to visit the region. We were told that Kyrgyzstan is an ‘island of democracy’, so we decided: we need to go there,” Yulia recalled. They also knew that the influx of Russians to other countries such as Georgia had become a source of tension.

Officially, Kyrgyzstan has taken a neutral stance on Russia’s war in Ukraine – as the president, Sadyr Japarov, said two weeks after the invasion. Following the Kremlin’s announcement last autumn of a partial mobilisation, Japarov [also said](#) that Russians in Kyrgyzstan should not fear extradition to their homeland.

“We do not see any harm [from newly arrived Russian citizens]. On the contrary, we see a lot of benefits,” he said. Kyrgyzstan appeals partly because Russian is widely spoken, housing is relatively inexpensive and the registration system for foreign citizens is simple.

For some Russians, the country is a temporary base before they move on elsewhere; for others, it’s become their second home.

After arriving in Bishkek, the Kyrgyz capital, the Kuleshoffs – who had long dreamed of having their own space for political and cultural events – rented a large two-storey house in the southern part of the city. They created a meeting area called [“Red Roof”](#) (after the colour of the building’s roof tiles) on the ground floor, and a communal living space on the floor above.

Red Roof quickly became an important hub. New arrivals from Russia found help integrating into life in Kyrgyzstan, while locals made friends with the newcomers. People came to learn about Kyrgyz culture, hold musical evenings and masterclasses, write letters to Russian political prisoners and discuss the fallout of the invasion.

“I enjoyed interacting with people who were in the same position as me, as well as with locals who were eager to connect and talk,” said Anton Vakhramev, who moved to Bishkek from Moscow with the help of a relocation programme for Russian activists. He had found his first months in Bishkek difficult – he didn’t know anyone in the city – but Red Roof soon became a place “where he felt comfortable”.

But on 23 March, Red Roof suddenly announced it was closing due to pressure from law enforcement officials. As the Kuleshoffs have discovered, Kyrgyzstan is in the midst of its own democratic decline.

Detention and warnings

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On the evening of 24 February 2023 (the first anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine), Russian and Kyrgyz residents, including Yulia and Ilya, hung yellow and blue ribbons on a street in Bishkek. The next morning they planned to lay flowers in a park in memory of the victims of the invasion.

As soon as they arrived, Yulia said, they were surrounded by men who claimed to be park employees, but then showed identification cards from Kyrgyzstan's State Committee for National Security (GKNB). According to Yulia, they detained the group without explanation, confiscated their phones and threatened them with criminal charges of "inciting ethnic hatred".

The attitude of the police changed only when the activists' lawyer arrived. The detainees received a fine for "violating the conditions of their stay" in the country, with the police describing the incident as "a conversation about preventing provocations aimed at drawing Kyrgyzstan into the conflict between Russia and Ukraine."

A few days later, the police detained several Russians living at the Red Roof centre. Yulia said they were given a warning: "One more violation and everyone will be expelled from Kyrgyzstan."

The officers also admitted they had a "dossier" on each member of the community, and produced folders containing personal data and photographs.

"It turned out that they had been collecting this [information] for a long time. There was even a folder with photos of me and my daughter," said Yulia. She believes Red Roof had been under surveillance – she repeatedly noticed men standing outside the house, photographing those who entered and left.

The police also forbade them from dealing with "hot topics" including political prisoners, feminism and LGBT issues, and warned that Yulia would be expelled from Kyrgyzstan if she took part in the city's International Women's Day protest, only grudgingly allowed to go ahead in the first place, on 8 March.

Yulia said that she and her husband are "in limbo" and do not know what to do next. Ilya is involved with some local urban improvement projects, while Yulia is writing a Master's thesis at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek. "We can be deported at any moment if we continue to do what we consider important and interesting," she said.

"Everything can be considered a violation. If I feel bad because of the war in Ukraine, I should keep quiet, otherwise I am 'inciting ethnic hatred'," Kuleshova explained. "But I have no reason to stay here under these conditions. We have already lived under such a regime in Russia, and we know what it can lead to."

openDemocracy contacted Kyrgyzstan's parliamentary ombudsman for human rights, but did not receive a response.

Clampdown on anti-war protests

Kyrgyzstan's reputation as a "island of democracy" in a generally authoritarian region has been bolstered by the regular mass protests against corrupt, autocratic rulers over the past 20 years. This strong vein of public criticism of state officials has often been seen as a check on the accumulation of power.

Indeed, current president Japarov [came to power](#) after protests broke out over election results in the country in 2020 – the opposition politician was freed from prison during the chaos.

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Yet for the past three years, [reports](#) by the US non-profit think tank Freedom House have ranked Kyrgyzstan as “not free”, replacing its previous status as a “partly free country”.

Last October, for example, more than two dozen activists and politicians were arrested after they opposed the [Kyrgyz government's decision to transfer a much-disputed reservoir to neighbouring Uzbekistan](#). Many are still in prison, facing charges of “attempting to organise mass riots”.

Shortly afterwards, Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Culture blocked the website of Radio Azattyk (the Kyrgyz service of US-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), a leading source of news and comment in the country. A Bishkek court later [upheld the decision](#), refusing to recognise the block as illegal.

In November, prominent investigative journalist Bolot Temirov was [expelled](#) from the country, after he published an investigation into alleged corruption by relatives of the head of the GKNB, Kamchybek Tashiev. The latter denied the allegations against his family.

Russian activist Raushan Valiullin, who arrived in Bishkek after Russia's September mobilisation, has personally experienced this crackdown on peaceful protests – something he's familiar with from home, where he combined opposition activities with his job as a history teacher in Tatarstan.

He volunteered for Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny's campaign to become Moscow's mayor in 2013, opposed Russia's deeply unpopular 2018 pension reforms and has been detained more than once for participating in protests. When he finally decided to leave Russia, following the invasion of Ukraine, he chose Kyrgyzstan because of its anti-authoritarian reputation.

“When we were choosing a country, I put a big exclamation mark in front of Kyrgyzstan,” says Valiullin. “To me, it seemed the most democratic country in the region. The people know how to put insolent rulers in their place. I was attracted to it.”

On 21 January this year, rallies were held in dozens of cities around the world in support of Navalny and other Russian political prisoners. More than 30 people, including Valiullin and his family, gathered in the centre of Bishkek, near the landmark Kyrgyz National Philharmonic building.

While demonstrators in other cities carried placards and banners, this was not possible for Russia's new emigres in Kyrgyzstan – only Kyrgyz citizens were allowed to participate by police in the rally.

Valiullin said that police officers approached his group, even though they were not chanting anything, and asked them to move to another location. When they did so – to Bishkek's Gorky Square – police told them to disperse after asking if they were Kyrgyz. “They said: ‘Since you are Russians, there's no reason for you to protest here,’” Valiullin explained.

For more than a year, city authorities have banned protests and rallies in a number of locations in the centre of Bishkek, including near the Russian Embassy – a move that is in breach of Kyrgyzstan's Constitution, according to human rights defenders.

“After the start of the war, Kyrgyzstan declared its neutral position. Then the authorities began to limit the activity of citizens – of Kyrgyzstan and other countries – who wanted to protest what was happening in Ukraine. There have been administrative proceedings, and fines against them,” Kyrgyz human rights defender Dinara Oshurahunova told

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openDemocracy.

Oshurahunova believes there are risks for any activist who speaks openly against Russia's war – regardless of their citizenship.

She added: "Rallies in support of Russia have been ignored [by the authorities]. No measures were taken against those who participated in them."

The facts seem to uphold Oshurahunova's claims. Soon after the invasion last spring, several rallies against Russian aggression were held in Bishkek. All ended the same way – with the detention of activists. But this did not happen at rallies held in solidarity with Russia, including a concert that went ahead without official permission.

"If law enforcement wasn't previously looking into Russians [in Kyrgyzstan], they are now," said Oshurahunova.

Bishkek police chief Azamat Nogoibayev has said that demonstrations have not been banned in Bishkek – and that the fact there are fewer protests means there is a "stabilisation" in the country.

"The protests haven't stopped, we just limited the places where you can hold them. It's inconvenient for city residents – they complained, especially those who live and work in the centre," Nogoibayev told local media on 31 March.

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