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## **ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF KYRGYZ-UKRAINIAN DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS**

*All views and assessments are those of the author  
and do not reflect the position of the editorial team*

The Kyrgyz Republic and Ukraine — separated by thousands of kilometres and the borders of third countries — are states that, however, for a long time were part of the USSR as two union republics, within which they had friendly relations.

In the early 1990s, the Soviet Union collapsed, and each republic, having gained independence, went its own way. However, Kyrgyzstan's interest in Ukraine did not wane and gained new potential.

In August 2022, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy, at the ceremony of receiving credentials from the Ambassador of the Kyrgyz Republic Idris Kadyrkulov, emphasised 'Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan need to build relations from a clean slate, rather than trying to restore relations of former post-Soviet republics'.

On 20 December 1991, the Kyrgyz Republic was one of the first to recognise the independence of Ukraine shortly after its proclamation. Furthermore, it became the first post-Soviet state to send its representative in the rank of minister to Ukraine in the same year, demonstrating an interest in developing bilateral relations. On 19 September 1992, both countries formalised their diplomatic relations by signing the Agreement on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations in the form of notes exchange. Thus, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan confirmed their readiness to develop bilateral relations as independent states and in new geopolitical realities.

Under the leadership of Ulukbek Chinaliev, the first Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Ukraine, the Kyrgyz Republic established its Plenipotentiary Representation in Ukraine in 1991, later reorganised into the Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic in Ukraine in 1993. The Embassy commenced its operations within the walls of the Institute of National Relations and Political Science of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (now Kuras Institute of Political and Ethnic Studies). Ulukbek Chinaliev warmly recalls his time working in the host country in his academic works, expressing gratitude to the leadership of Ukraine and the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine for facilitating diplomatic missions and academic activities.

In response to significant events in Kyrgyzstan's recent history, its foreign policy underwent reassessment, prompting a reevaluation of its approach towards Ukraine. Years of cooperation within international organisations, including on a bilateral level, laid a solid foundation for working relations between the Kyrgyz Republic and Ukraine. Today, the contractual-legal framework of Kyrgyz–Ukrainian relations consists of 69 bilateral documents, the principal being the Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation between Ukraine and the Kyrgyz Republic of 1996. A crucial provision of this document affirms that Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan are building their relations as friendly states, consistently guided by principles of mutual respect for state sovereignty, and recognise and respect the integrity and inviolability of the existing borders of Ukraine and the Kyrgyz Republic.

Over the years of independence, both countries have engaged in active political dialogue at the level of presidents, governments, as well as parliaments, and ministries. At the government level, both nations signed agreements to foster economic and industrial cooperation and certify highly qualified scientific and scientific-pedagogical personnel. Furthermore, they forged interdepartmental and intersectoral agreements to facilitate cooperation across various fields.

In 1996, Askar Akayev, President of the Kyrgyz Republic, visited Ukraine for the first time and signed the aforementioned Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation during that visit. During his speech after signing the document, he expressed the state's interest in cooperation with Ukraine across various spheres. The President of Kyrgyzstan expressed satisfaction with the results of the visit, emphasising that the visit laid the foundations of economic cooperation between the countries. Askar Akayev noted that he hoped for a significant increase in trade turnover between the states, which at that time amounted to \$15 million per year. In his opinion, there is potential to increase it at least tenfold.

The Kyrgyz Republic mainly imported equipment and machinery, metal products, sugar, confectionery, cocoa, grain-based products, paper and cardboard, meat from various animals and birds, edible by-products, and pharmaceutical products from Ukraine. Kyrgyzstan exported tobacco and its industrial substitutes, radiators and electric machines, raw hides, skin raw materials, pharmaceutical components, and agricultural products to Ukraine.

By the end of 2013, the trade turnover between Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan reached \$168 million. However, since Kyrgyzstan joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) Customs Union in 2015 and the Association Agreement came into effect in 2017, particularly its part concerning the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) between Ukraine and the EU, Ukrainian and Kyrgyz markets started to exist in different economic planes, which ultimately had a negative impact on the trade and economic relations between the countries.

The relative geographical distance between the two states did not prevent them from advancing bilateral political, trade-economic, and cultural-humanitarian relations to a very high level, grounded in mutual respect and friendliness. Democratic transformations in both countries provided a significant impetus for deepening cooperation while considering national interests.

At the same time, the Kyrgyz Republic, like Ukraine, has a strategically advantageous geostrategic position. Situated at the intersection of transportation and energy flows, it is vital in transporting goods and services from Europe to Asia. Moreover, Kyrgyzstan's picturesque nature provides favourable conditions for developing the service sector and tourism.

The main logistic routes of the Kyrgyz Republic to Europe pass through the territory of Russia and Belarus. Furthermore, under current conditions, trade with Ukraine has faced particular difficulties due to this situation. Given this, the Central Asian countries are considering options to simplify logistics through alternative routes. This surge in interest in the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, also known as the Middle Corridor, reflects the growing attention to this alternative route. It passes through Azerbaijan, China, Georgia, Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, and further through the Black Sea to European countries, including Ukraine. Part of it is the recently launched Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway. Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye have correspondingly shown interest in the route. It will also be promising for Ukraine.

Since 2016, Kyrgyzstan has been the first Central Asian participant in the European Union's Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+), a special mechanism to stimulate sustainable development and effective governance. GSP+ provides additional tariff preferences to vulnerable developing countries due to insufficient diversification and integration into the international trading system for exports to the European Union. In particular, this entails eliminating tariffs on more than 66% of items, covering a wide range of goods. For instance, GSP+ grants Kyrgyz producers the right to export approximately 6,200 tariff lines to Europe at zero tariff rates, which undoubtedly may also interest Ukrainian businesspeople.

The Russian–Ukrainian confrontation and its consequences have significantly impacted bilateral relations between Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine.

Since the beginning of the Russian–Ukrainian military conflict, the Kyrgyz Republic has declared neutrality towards both sides. Kyrgyzstan firmly believes that diplomatic means and negotiations are the sole path to resolving conflict, emphasising its support for adhering to the norms and principles of international law as outlined in the UN Charter and other universally recognised documents, especially concerning territorial integrity and peaceful conflict resolution.



Вручення Вірчих грамот Президентіві України Володимирові Зеленському. 17 серпня 2022 року (© Офіс Президента України)

Presentation of Credentials to President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy on 17 August 2022 (© Office of the President of Ukraine)

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic supported the negotiations initiated in March 2022 between representatives of Moscow and Kyiv, along with other mediating efforts and initiatives by third-party countries to achieve peace. Additionally, Kyrgyzstan expressed readiness to provide a platform for negotiations and assist in resolving the conflict.

The Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic, along with other diplomatic missions accredited in Ukraine, continues its operations in Kyiv and has not left Ukrainian territory since the start of the full-scale war. During the August 2022 meeting to present credentials, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy thanked Ambassador Idris Kadyrkulov for his commitment.

The Embassy has organised a series of sports, cultural, and other events in Kyiv to foster Kyrgyz-Ukrainian cultural and humanitarian cooperation amidst the war. Some recent examples include the publication of books in Ukrainian, such as a new collection of works by Chingiz Aitmatov and the book *Er-Toshtyuk* (Kyrgyz folk epic); a diplomatic reception for Knowledge Day with readings of Taras Shevchenko's works, and the issuance, with the support of Ukrposhta, of a postage stamp commemorating the 210<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the Great Kobzar under the title Taras Shevchenko Unites Nations, among others.

At the same time, the relations between the Kyrgyz Republic and Ukraine are complex and ambiguous. However, the potential for fruitful and mutually

beneficial cooperation between the two countries is quite rich. It only needs to be directed constructively. Therefore, the most essential task under current conditions is to find common and mutually advantageous positions that benefit both countries. Currently, Ukraine is directing all attention and energy toward the military conflict with Russia, but we all hope for a peaceful resolution as soon as possible.

For Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine holds a special place in the region, and Bishkek has always been a predictable partner never committing manipulations or blackmail.

The development of cooperation between the Kyrgyz Republic and the countries of the European Union, of which Ukraine (also having deep historical roots with Kyrgyzstan) may soon become a member is an integral part of its foreign policy. The interest of both countries in expanding economic cooperation — primarily in the energy, aviation, and transportation sectors — based on traditional friendly ties, pragmatism, and mutual economic benefit should be the necessary impetus to ensure the long-term prosperity of both nations.