

Societal Transformations

**NEW**

**VOICES**

**FROM**  
**CENTRAL**

**ASIA**

Societal Transformations

**VOLUME 3**

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**Marlene  
Laruelle**  
editor

Central Asia Program  
Institute for European, Russian  
and Eurasian Studies  
Elliott School of International Affairs  
The George Washington University

# **NEW VOICES FROM CENTRAL ASIA**

## **Societal Transformations**

### **VOLUME 3**

**Marlene Laruelle, editor**

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The third volume “New Voices from Central Asia: Societal Transformations” gives the floor to a young generation of experts and scholars from Central Asia and Azerbaijan. They were fellows at GW’s Central Asia-Azerbaijan Fellowship Program, which aims to foster the next generation of thought leaders and policy experts in the region. The Program provides young professionals (policy experts, scholars, journalists, bloggers, and activists) with opportunities to develop their research, analytical, and communication skills in order to become effective leaders within their communities. The Program serves as a platform for the exchange of ideas and builds lasting intellectual networks of exchange between and amongst Central Asians and the U.S. policy, scholarly, and activist communities. It increases and helps disseminate knowledge about Central Asian viewpoints in both the United States and Central Asia.

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# PART I.

## THE RISE OF SOCIAL ACTIVISM

### Chapter 1. Rethinking Urban Activism and Civil Society: Insights from Analysis of Bishkek Civic Networks

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Raushanna Sarkeyeva<sup>1</sup> (2018)

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#### Introduction

In spring 2017, residents of Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, experienced a sudden shock: the municipality commenced a major street reconstruction project that involved more than 7,000 trees being cut down. Residents and civic activists who demonstrated against the project found themselves running into a brick wall: the municipality's argument that the project had already been approved. Residents of the Dushanbinka neighborhood, who were the most active protesters, brought the case before the city court, claiming that the authorities' actions were illegal, but lost the case despite evidence that the municipality had violated the acting Master Plan of Bishkek City. Though the protests themselves soon lost public attention, they triggered the mobilization of different groups across the city. Not only did residents turn out for protests, but they also cooperated with eco- and urban activists, human rights organizations, and journalists. However, city officials refused to acknowledge the grassroots nature of these activities, instead contending that the protests had been "artificially created by some non-government organizations"<sup>2</sup> and questioning activists' credibility by denouncing them as "foreign agents."

In 2018, the story of contentious urban activism continued. In March and April, many groups of residents and civic activists expressed their

concerns about the new Comprehensive Plan for the city center. Activists took a number of steps, ranging from calling for additional public consultations to protesting in front of City Hall.

These two cases illustrate that an increasing number of Bishkek residents are engaging in discussion of the urban agenda through their participation in various political and non-political actions. Citizens do not trust local authorities and are afraid of changes that will irrevocably damage the city and their lifestyle. At the same time, activist groups' attempts to influence the urban agenda or the municipality's decisions are rarely successful. The current challenge facing Bishkek's civic groups is to unite their efforts and develop a consolidated position in defense of their interests and values. How can such a consolidation be achieved? How might different interest groups and NGOs be connected?

To answer these questions, I examine relations between communities and civil society organizations (CSOs) in Bishkek, which together form civic networks. Using Social Network Analysis, I mapped survey data and analyzed the structure of networks. Qualitative data was collected from case studies and interviews, which explored cooperation between civic groups and communities, their values and strategic choices. The ultimate goal of my research is to produce policy suggestions for strengthening Bishkek's civic networks.

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<sup>1</sup> Raushanna Sarkeyeva is a founder and director of Urban Initiatives Public Foundation (Kyrgyzstan). She studied Change Management at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands. Since 2013, she has been involved in urban development processes, organizing the first open discussion platforms on urban issues surrounding the Bishkek City project (Urban Talks, Bishkek Urban Forum). She developed an agenda of the Forum of Cities (2017) and a methodology for the multi-disciplinary study of four regional cities.

<sup>2</sup> "Mer Bishkeka: nado ne protestovat', a ob'iasniat' chto doroga nuzhna," *Kaktus.media*, June 8, 2017, [https://kaktus.media/doc/358513\\_mer\\_bishkeka:\\_nado\\_ne\\_protestovat\\_a\\_obiasniat\\_chno\\_doroga\\_nyjna.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/358513_mer_bishkeka:_nado_ne_protestovat_a_obiasniat_chno_doroga_nyjna.html).

The paper proceeds as follows. First of all, I provide background information about urban changes and urban activism in Bishkek. Next, I explain the choice of networks as a metaphor and a method for studying urban communities and grassroots activism. After that, I describe my data and explain Social Network Analysis (SNA) in detail. I go on to discuss the structure of Bishkek's civic networks and different modes of cooperation between activists and other organizations. Finally, I provide recommendations to policymakers and stakeholders for how to strengthen partnerships with urban actors and thereby improve urban governance.

## Background

Bishkek has changed dramatically since independence. The city's population has doubled since 1989: official census data from 2012 reports that it now stands at 950,000, but experts suggest that the actual number is closer to 1.2 million and that the daytime population exceeds 1.3 million. Bishkek has become a center of economic growth in the country: in the 2006–2012 period, it produced one-third of national GDP, a figure that rose to 38.2 percent in 2016.<sup>3</sup> The city's economy relies mainly on services: trade, transportation, communication, finance, etc.<sup>4</sup> Although it has benefited from internal migration, the population increase has put pressure on the city's physical and social infrastructure and resulted in urban sprawl. Today, there are 48 low-rise peripheral neighborhoods. Of these, 19 are considered *novostroiki*—new settlements under construction. Between 167,000 and 260,000 people are believed to live there.<sup>5</sup>

A recent survey of Bishkek residents<sup>6</sup> showed that only one-third of respondents were born in the city, while two-thirds came from other regions of the country. Many internal migrants have been living here for a long time, but the number of

those who arrived less than five years ago is likewise high. Bishkek is constantly taking in newcomers, a tendency that affects socialization and communal life, causing the city to be simultaneously diverse and fragmented. There is a divide between long-time residents and newcomers, between Kyrgyz-speaking and Russian-speaking groups, between rich and poor, secular and religious. For newcomers, Bishkek is a “city of opportunities” when they first decide to move there. However, it often comes to be seen as a “city of oppression” due to the everyday struggle for scarce resources (infrastructure and social services), decent living conditions, and safety.

Sociologists' noted contention that “the city is not a place for the community” seems to hold true for Bishkek. The most obvious evidence of this is the tension between newcomers and long-time inhabitants. Long-time residents stereotype newcomers as uncultured rural “others” who occupy land illegally and burden the municipal budget. It should be emphasized, however, that this is no more than a stereotype: Nasritdinov et al. deconstructed this and other myths about *novostroiki*, demonstrating that newcomers are not a homogeneous group and that the majority of the land on which *novostroiki* are built is already legally recognized as part of the city of Bishkek. The survey of residents I conducted with a group of fellow researchers provides further support for this claim, finding that local communities (self-organized in neighborhoods or courtyards) are the least popular type of communities in the city. This can, in part, be explained by the decay of communities in neighborhoods built during the Soviet era. Due to emigration from the country in the 1990s, followed by waves of internal migration to the city, these communities failed to maintain close ties between neighbors. Half the apartment buildings in Bishkek have condominium organizations,<sup>7</sup> but these are not communities per se, because relations between

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<sup>3</sup> “Otchet po itogam sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo razvitiia goroda Bishkek za 6 mesiatsev 2016 goda,” Bishkek City Administration, accessed June 4, 2018, [http://meria.kg/images/files/2016/11/\\_\\_\\_9\\_\\_2016\\_ggg.docx](http://meria.kg/images/files/2016/11/___9__2016_ggg.docx).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Emil Nasritdinov et al., “Integratsiia novostroeek v gorodskuiu sredu” (presentation at Bishkek Urban Forum, 2014), <https://www.slideshare.net/bufkg/ss-37118480>; Craig Hatcher, “Illegal Geographies of the State: The Legalisation of a “Squatter” Settlement in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan,” *International Journal of Law in the Built Environment* 7, no. 1 (2015): 39-54.

<sup>6</sup> For more detail, see the “Data, Methods, and Measures” section of this paper.

<sup>7</sup> Azamat Usabaliev and Liliya Kuchkacheva, “Programma razvitiia goroda za schet stimuliruiushchego dolevogo granta” (presentation at Bishkek Urban Forum, Bishkek, June 4, 2014), <https://www.slideshare.net/bufkg/ss-37116585>.

members often remain formal. Meanwhile, residents of the new settlements have organized themselves in order to solve infrastructure problems and have strong relations within communities.<sup>8</sup>

Does this mean that Bishkek has an active and robust civil society? Nasritdinov and Schröder estimated that between 2010 and 2013, public spaces in Bishkek “hosted” more than 2,000 protests. Forty percent of those protests had a local agenda, including picketing by residents of *novostroiki*.<sup>9</sup> However, it was less than three years ago that long-time urbanites really began to engage in contentious politics. Until then, the activities of neighborhood groups that opposed infill development near their houses and in green zones (so-called “Not In My Back Yard,” or NIMBY, activism) had been sporadic and not visible. In 2016, demonstrations against amendments to the Land Code brought together diverse residents’ groups and activists. In 2017, the protest movement against road reconstruction and the chopping-down of trees similarly united people across the city. 2018 began with a discussion of the new Master Plan for the city center and renewed demonstrations. The issues of clean air and urban ecology provided an overarching agenda for these events. Media and urban activists also augmented interest in the urban agenda by publishing stories about corruption in the municipality and the questionable “benefits” of new urban developments.

How these contentious movements influence urban communities and civic participation remains to be determined. Are we seeing the rise of new civic coalitions and partnerships in the city, or are the current protests simply mobilizing a thin layer of politically active residents? Answering this question is the aim of this paper.

## Communities, Activism, and Civic Networks in Cities

This research explores the structure of relations between communities and civil society organizations in Bishkek and explore these different groups’ values. In this section, I unpack the theoretical concepts that underpin this research: communities, networks, grassroots activism, and urban social movements.

### Urban Communities: From “Urban Villages” to Networks

The “community” has traditionally been understood as a group of people with close relations between members, strong solidarity, and a feeling of belonging to the group. Another common feature of traditional definitions is a view that communities are local: members of a community share a territory of residence. In 1959, Durant defined community as “a territorial group of people with a common mode of living striving for common objectives.”<sup>10</sup>

The discussion of communities in cities evolved along two lines of argument: “community lost” and “community saved.” Proponents of the former view see the anomie of city life as a threat and cities as not conducive to maintaining close relations between people and forming a community.<sup>11</sup> Proponents of the latter, meanwhile, have demonstrated that cohesive social networks and rural-type communities can be found in working-class areas of cities. These “urban villages” are heavily dependent on the consistency of residents’ lives in terms of occupation, residence, and personal relations.

As cities and their residents become more mobile, locality becomes less salient as a feature of urban communities.<sup>12</sup> As Knox and Pinch observe, “Instead of urban communities breaking up, they can be thought of as breaking down into an ever-increasing number of independent subgroups, only

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<sup>8</sup> Moya Flynn, Natalya Kosmarskaya, and Guzel Sabirova, “The Place of Memory in Understanding Urban Change in Central Asia: The Cities of Bishkek and Ferghana,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 9 (2014): 1501-1524.

<sup>9</sup> Emil Nasritdinov and Philipp Schröder, “Re/Claiming Bishkek: Contestation and Activism in the City of Two Revolutions,” *Central Asian Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2017): 97-128.

<sup>10</sup> Graham Day, *Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 11.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Knox and Steven Pinch, *Urban Social Geography: An Introduction*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Pearson, 2010), 187-188.

<sup>12</sup> Anastasiya Mokrousova and Konstantin Glazkov, “Prostranstvenno-setevoi podkhod k izucheniiu potentsialnykh gorodskikh soobchshestv,” in *Konkursy dlia studentov i molodykh uchenykh. Raboty Pobeditelei 2013 goda: luchshie esse i proekty issledovaniia* (Moscow: MISKP, 2014).

some of which are locality based.” The penetration of digital technologies and computer-mediated communication (CMC) has intensified debates about the future of communities. Some believe that new types of communication serve as a source of solidarity in new types of communities,<sup>13</sup> contending that the internet will engage members of a community without replacing in-person relationships entirely. Critics, for their part, tie the rise of CMC to a decline in civic participation—in communities, clubs, and associations—over the past 20 years.<sup>14</sup> To move beyond this dichotomy, we must develop new methods for studying communities in cities.

### Grassroots Activism and Social Movements

Since the term “community” is overused and can provoke endless discussions, let us revisit it from the perspective of civic activism in cities, particularly grassroots and social movements.

Studies of the urban grassroots often subscribe to “crisis communality,” a perspective that explains the emergence of community movements as a response to various threats and urgent needs.<sup>15</sup> Examples of such grassroots groups are numerous: from local NIMBY protests to international “Vision Zero” campaigns, from self-help groups struggling to improve public infrastructure in their neighborhood to historical building preservation movements. The urban grassroots are concerned with local problems and needs, and therefore have certain boundaries. What sets urban social movements apart from grassroots efforts is that they aim to bring about “a structural change” in social institutions and policy direction.<sup>16</sup> Manuel Castells introduced this view in his seminal work *The City and the Grassroots*, in which he also revisited the idea of “community.” He

argued that the shared identity and common understanding inherent in communities serve as a social base for urban movements. He also emphasized the significance of local communities as focal points of urban movement activity.<sup>17</sup> After Castells’ book was published, academic discussions of urban social changes and the role of communities in them came to revolve around the issues of communities in local politics and the agency of community members.

There is some agreement that movements and grassroots mobilizations are *communities in action*;<sup>18</sup> they challenge the current state of affairs and typically employ bottom-up mobilization.<sup>19</sup> Studies of the urban grassroots conclude that the success of such groups depends on their ability to mobilize existing support networks and to associate with local social systems. Below, I explore the most important contributions of network studies to the topic at hand.

### Networks as a Method and a Metaphor

This attempt to understand relations between communities and CSOs employs “network” as both a method and a metaphor. The network metaphor uses the relational perspective and explores the structure of formal and informal relations between members of a community (inter-personal level) or between civil society groups and organizations (inter-organizational level). In the case at hand, Bishkek’s civil society is depicted as a web of organizations and communities engaged in various types of supportive and contentious relations. A recent definition by Diani considers civil society “as a distinct system of interdependence.”<sup>20</sup> Taking the network metaphor one step further, Diani proposes that various relations formed between citizen

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<sup>13</sup> Viktor Vakhshstain, “Proizvodstvo soobchshestv: sobytie, iazyk, kommunikatsiia,” *60 Parallel* no. 2, 41 (2011), [http://intelros.ru/pdf/60\\_paralel/41/13.pdf](http://intelros.ru/pdf/60_paralel/41/13.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Katherine Giuffre, *Communities and Networks: Using Social Network Analysis to Rethink Urban and Community Studies* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 200-201.

<sup>15</sup> Knox and Pinch, *Urban Social Geography*, 191-193.

<sup>16</sup> Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley, CA and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 322-328.

<sup>17</sup> Day, *Community and Everyday Life*, 140-141.

<sup>18</sup> Kerstin Jacobsson, “Grassroots in the City: Urban Grassroots Movements in Central and Eastern Europe and Post-Soviet Space,” (paper presented at the CBEEES annual conference, Södertörn University, Stockholm, December 4-5, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Day, *Community and Everyday Life*, 142.

<sup>20</sup> Mario Diani, *The Cement of Civil Society: Studying Networks in Localities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

organizations, local authorities, and public agencies—*civic networks*—serve as “the cement of civil society.”

Network studies has contributed new insights and concepts to our understanding of social movements and collective actions. For one thing, network studies draw attention to a difference between *dense* and *sparse* structures of relations and their role in mobilization for collective action. Thus, the LGBTQIA community in New York was able to create an “urban action network” to fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s using weak ties to different groups and institutions. Their response and solutions to the problem were timely and practical, in contrast with medical institutions and city authorities, which failed to acknowledge the scope of the epidemic and react accordingly.<sup>21</sup> Another important takeaway from this literature is the role of well-positioned members of social networks, known as brokers—individuals and organizations that connect parts of the network that would otherwise be distant. Brokers benefit from receiving unique information and are more likely to have innovative ideas about issues that are “buzzing” around in groups they connect.

Diani studied civic networks in two British cities, Glasgow and Bristol,<sup>22</sup> finding that despite their different political and local contexts, the civic networks of the two cities had similar structural patterns. He proposed a typology of modes of cooperation that he found to be related to the structural positions of CSOs. His typology takes two processes as its dimensions: resource allocation (choice of forms of action and partners, exchange of organizational resources, etc.) and boundary definition (influence of collective actions on those who participate, their agenda and positions). From this emerges four quadrants, each of which corresponds to one mode of cooperation: organizational, sub-cultural, social movement, or coalitional. Diani found that CSOs working in the “organizational” mode focused on specific issues and did not engage in alliance-building. Though they

were seen as important partners by many actors, they were isolated from the rest of the network. Organizations that actively exchanged resources but had limited influence on each other’s values formed coalitions. Coalitions in Bristol and Glasgow were driven by instrumental concerns (need to unite resources) and by specific time-constrained goals. Actors who engaged in “social movement” cooperation, by contrast, were engaged in multiple dense networks, both formal and informal.

The networks method depicts and analyzes relations and connections between people, organizations, and communities by producing analytical diagrams, known as sociograms (see Box 1 for definitions and measures). Social Network Analysis (SNA) is an analytical tool based on graph theory and other mathematical methods; it is widely used as a quantitative analytical tool in social sciences. SNA is useful for capturing structural patterns and analyzing multiple types of actors and relations, but it should be combined with qualitative methods in order to explain the nature of these patterns. As Marshall and Staeheli summarize, visualizing networks can provide a starting-point for ethnographic research analyzing how these relations are negotiated, how resources are used, and how members understand support and networking.<sup>23</sup> The following section provides details about data collection and the social network analysis measures used in this study.

## Data, Methods, and Measures

This paper builds on data collected by a group of researchers led by Emil Nasritdinov (American University in Central Asia), Gulnara Ibraeva (Public Opinion Laboratory), and Mehrigul Ablezova (Public Opinion Laboratory).<sup>24</sup> We set out to understand the structure and texture of urban communities in Bishkek. We intentionally applied the term “communities” to all kinds of civil society groups, from interest-based clubs to activist organizations, from self-help groups to experienced NGOs, because

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<sup>21</sup> Giuffre, *Communities and Networks*, 156-159.

<sup>22</sup> Diani, *The Cement of Civil Society*, 12-25.

<sup>23</sup> David J. Marshall and Lynn Staeheli, “Mapping Civil Society with Social Network Analysis: Methodological Possibilities and Limitations,” *Geoforum* 61 (2015): 56-66.

<sup>24</sup> See Appendix 1 for the complete list of researchers.

we wanted to study diverse forms of social life in the city.

We surveyed 500 residents and 178 civil society organizations and communities during summer 2017 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The latter survey covered both formal and informal communities and 15 types of CSOs. In addition, we produced seven case studies based on semi-structured interviews and observation of different organizations and communities.

My primary mode of analysis was Social Network Analysis (SNA). For the SNA, I used the part of the survey data in which respondents named their partners and specified the type of support they received from (and gave to) them. In SNA terms, the partners of each respondent constitute its ego-network. Mapping our survey data produced 178 ego-networks, which I analyzed using the open-source SNA software GEPHI. The resulting dataset consists of 495 actors, who share 525 connections (see Figure 1 for a sociogram of all actors).

#### Box 1. Key Definitions and Measures in Social Network Analysis

**Social network** is a collection of actors and the connections between them.<sup>25</sup> Technically, a social network is a set of nodes and ties.

**Sociogram** is a visual depiction of the social network, where edges represent relations/ties and points or figures stand for actors.<sup>26</sup> A variety of techniques are used in SNA to answer research questions of different types: changing the color of nodes to define subgroups, changing the weight of ties, filtering nodes and ties by different attributes and by statistical measures (e.g., filtering by number of partners), etc.

Statistical analysis in SNA relies on graph theory. SNA also uses balance theory to explain patterns of relations. The key statistical measures I used are density and centrality.

**Density** is the ratio of ties realized in a network to the ties that could possibly have been realized.

**Centrality** is a feature possessed by individual nodes to a greater or lesser extent; they can be very central or very marginal. There are three types of centrality measures:

- **degree centrality** represents the number of direct ties that a node has with others
- **closeness centrality** defines how close, on average, each network member is to every other member of the network
- **betweenness centrality** looks at each node's position in the network regarding ways in which that node is the link to others

After the initial phase of social network analysis, we interviewed eight more organizations with a unique position in this network and conducted a second round of semi-structured interviews. The interviews had three parts: 1) questions about the history of the organizations; 2) questions about their relations with partners and participation in “umbrella” movements; and 3) questions about their attitude toward the city and opinion of recent changes in the city. We wanted to understand their experience of partnerships, their motivations for building relationships with others, and the likelihood that they would form a network community or a coalition based on shared values.<sup>27</sup>

It is important to note here that our network data is not a complete map of Bishkek activists and communities. This study's data and analysis focused on one layer of civic networks, with the result that there are various relations between numerous actors that do not show up. I would therefore encourage the reader to be cautious about generalizing.

In the following section, I describe the results of my data analysis and discuss the general structure of Bishkek's civic networks. I then explore modes of cooperation, taking cooperation between city-oriented communities and NGOs working to stop violence against women as my case studies.

<sup>25</sup> Giuffre, *Communities and Networks*.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

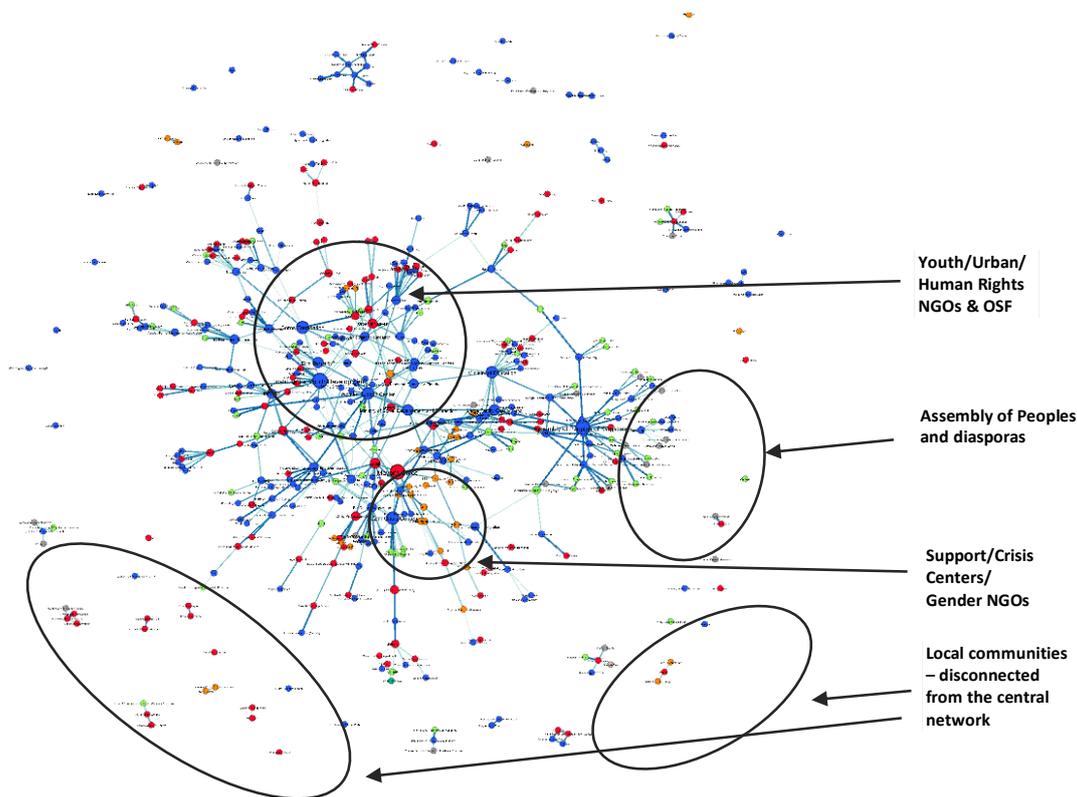
<sup>27</sup> See Appendix 3 for the questionnaire used in the second-round interviews.

## Structure of Bishkek's Civic Networks

The communities and organizations surveyed do not form a single interconnected network. There is a dense core composed of highly connected central actors and a "periphery" with isolated actors who do not have a lot of partners (see Figure 1). Experienced non-governmental, state, and international organizations form the dense core of the network, while isolated actors are often small, community-based organizations that have only one partner or do not have partners at all. The overall density of the resulting network is very low, with an average of two connections per actor.<sup>28</sup>

If we look at this general structure in terms of the issues on which actors work, we can see that the dense central subnet includes communities and NGOs working on gender, women's rights, education, and social inclusion. Communities working on narrow topics or in a specific target area (like condominiums), as well as self-support groups, appear at the edge of the sociogram and may be entirely isolated from other actors. Such isolation makes it difficult for these communities to reach a wider audience or attract additional resources.

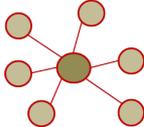
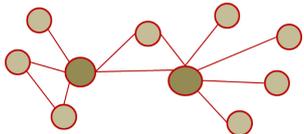
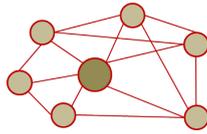
**Figure 1. Sociogram of Bishkek urban communities and organizations: dense vs. sparse groups**



Source: Author's visualization of SNA data

<sup>28</sup> The SNA measure of this network density is 2.113.

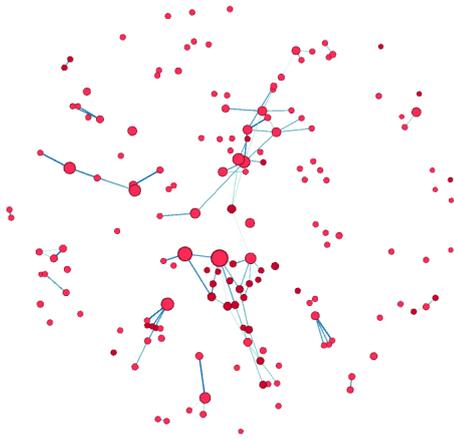
**Table 1. Structural patterns found in Bishkek’s civic networks**

Name	“Stars”	Two-group subnet	Balanced net
Form (structure)	Star-like ego-network made by vertical connections—dyads—to one central actor 	Subnets formed by dyads and a few triads; one sector or cross-sectoral 	Formed of triads; high density within the subnet 
Most frequent type of ties	Financial support (funding of projects) and project implementation; donor-beneficiary or state supervisor–community dyads	Vertical connections between two groups: information-sharing, participation in events, and (occasionally) joint projects	May vary from weak information-sharing to strong project-based collaborations
Examples from Bishkek’s civic networks	Ministry of Education, Assembly of Peoples, Institute for Youth Development	LGBTQIA communities with shared out-group ties to STAB (activist organization); debate and youth development as a linkage between the business community and local grassroots	Gender and human rights NGOs and informal communities, represented by Women Support Center, Sezim Crisis Center, Bir Dujno, UNiTE

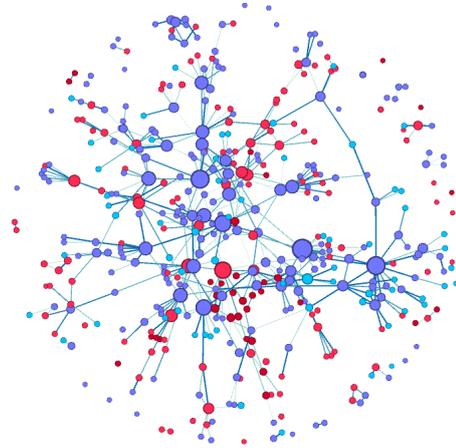
When a subnet has more in-group ties (between members) than out-group ties (connections with organizations from other groups or parts of the network), they tend to form a so-called *small world*. A “small world” is a community within a larger network that has high density and cohesion within itself but only a few out-group connections. In the case of Bishkek, potential small worlds include: 1) subnets of NGOs working with youth and partnering with universities and large business sponsors; 2) condominiums that partner exclusively with municipalities; and 3) self-support groups and parental groups that work on their own or with the support of a few business sponsors. Table 1 provides an overview of the most common structural patterns.

Only 35 percent of respondents work on local issues and target city residents. I call these respondents—who represent local communities through their engagement with condominiums, the mayor’s office, the municipality, and NGOs working on the urban agenda—“city-oriented.” Other actors in civic networks are the state, non-governmental and business organizations working at *oblast* or national (47.2 percent) level, non-governmental and business organizations working at international level (13.4 percent), and foreign organizations (4.4 percent). Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate that without the latter group of civil society organizations and state bodies, the network would be incomplete: many city-oriented actors would not be connected were it not for a donor organization, established NGO, or state agency.

**Figure 2. Sociogram of city-oriented communities and organizations in Bishkek**



**Figure 3. Sociogram of all actors, including various non-governmental, state, and international organizations**



Source: Author’s visualization of SNA data

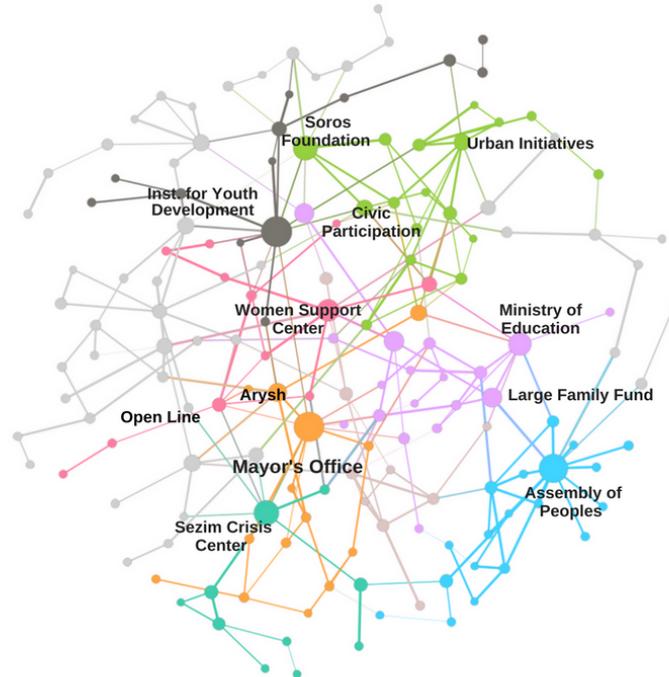
Thus, some actors are well placed to connect different subgroups of the network and have the potential to connect groups that are isolated from the central subnet. The three actors with the best positions in our network are the Institute for Youth Development, the mayor’s office, and the Assembly of Peoples of Kyrgyzstan. These are followed by the Soros Foundation Kyrgyzstan, Sezim Crisis Center, the Ministry of Education, Women’s Support Center, the Ministry of Social Development and Protection, the Large Family charity fund, the *Elim, barsynby?* charity fund, and the NGO Arysh. Eight city-oriented actors are well-positioned and have more than 6 connections:

- Mayor’s office—the executive branch of the local self-government—has territorial departments at the level of administrative districts (*akimiats*) and neighborhoods (MTUs);
- Arysh—a community-based organization that emerged as an initiative of *novostroiki* dwellers in 1997, it later became institutionalized and has implemented donor-supported infrastructure and social projects in these areas. It continues to work with local self-support groups from *novostroiki*;
- “Our Right” Public Fund (PF)—helps residents of apartment buildings to manage their

common areas and fight illegal construction. Known for its legal advice and advocacy campaigns;

- “Urban Initiatives” Public Fund—among the organizers of the first Bishkek Urban Forum. Works on public space redevelopment and conducts research on urban development topics;
- Labrys—a grassroots platform for advancement and protection of the human rights of LGBTQIA people in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia more broadly;
- Sezim Crisis Center—provides legal and psychosocial assistance for girls, women, and their family members affected by gender-based domestic violence and human trafficking;
- Resource Center for Elderly People—a community organization working to improve senior citizens’ access to social services and economic opportunities, as well as protecting their rights; and
- Mutakalim—an association of progressive Muslim women, it works on various issues including reproductive health, women in leadership, and domestic violence.

**Figure 4. Actors with high centrality in a network of actors with a minimum of two connections**



Source: Author's visualization of SNA data

These actors are central to the network and connect remote communities with the central subnet. Moreover, they have the potential to extend their network and bridge structural holes—and, in so doing, to strengthen the overall civic network.

### Alliances and Social Movements in Bishkek's Civic Networks

In this section, I take a closer look at different contexts in which civic networks have formed and varying modes of cooperation between actors. In the first part of this section, I look at city-oriented activists and organizations from two subnets. In the second part, I discuss the informal network of organizations and individuals that has emerged around the UN Women campaign “Stop Violence Against Women.”

#### Small Worlds of City-Oriented Communities

City-oriented organizations and grassroots initiatives are scattered across the network. Two subnets or cliques of the network are helpful in

understanding the relation between a network's structure and the modes of collective action used by members of the network.

The first is a subnet of organizations and communities that work at the city level on urban issues. These include groups of urban activists (“Our Right” PF and “Urban Initiatives” PF); ecologists (Archa Initiative); local condominium and tenants' associations; and organizations from the creative and business sectors.

“Our Right” (*Nashe pravo*) is an NGO that initially helped residents of Bishkek's apartment buildings to resolve issues surrounding their common property and public spaces. More recently, the Fund has begun to represent citizens' interests in courts and government bodies. Two years ago, it began to investigate illegal privatization and construction in public parks and green zones, such as riverbanks. Among grassroots city-oriented communities, “Our Right” is the most grounded; it is connected to real people and acts on concrete issues. It works with many residents of former Soviet dormitories and condominiums, and

has helped more than 60 condominiums defend their public spaces over the past five years.<sup>29</sup>

“Our Right” worked with “Urban Initiatives,” Archa Initiative, Cycling Community, and MoveGreen to express a consolidated position about the master plan for the city center. This cooperation began after protests on Dushanbinka street in spring 2017, when “Our Right” supported residents’ protests against the removal of trees and attempted to negotiate with the City Department of Architecture to find a solution that would save the trees. “Our Right” has also played a key role as a broker, connecting the older generation of urban activists, in their 50s and 60s, with organizations that have emerged in the past 4-5 years and are comprised of individuals in their late 20s and early 30s.

Another broker in this subnet is Archa Initiative. It does not have many partners among city-oriented initiatives but connects them with experienced and influential environmental organizations. “Archa” is well-positioned to manage information exchange and resource allocation between the two networks, a distribution that is facilitated by the fact that environmental NGOs are accustomed to forming ad hoc alliances and supporting each other during targeted advocacy campaigns. A member of the BIOM organization, one of the most experienced environmental NGOs, described short-lived mobilization as follows:

...[w]hy do we need to be like the government and have rigid, hierarchical structures? We act like partisans: when we have a specific task, we come together and solve it, and afterwards we split up.<sup>30</sup>

Let us now turn to the second subnet of city-oriented initiatives, looking at Arysh, an NGO that has been working with residents of new settlements since 1997. Arysh was established by the leaders of five self-support groups of internal migrants who wanted to address infrastructure issues in new settlements. Today, Arysh also works

to empower residents of *novostroiki* economically. The organization has ties with communities in 19 new settlements across Bishkek, as well as with local NGOs working on gender and registration issues. In addition, Arysh is a member of the transnational network “Central Asia in the Move,” which brings together 31 migration-focused NGOs from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. Arysh has both a long history of relations with self-support groups from *novostroiki* and a good reputation as an NGO that has successfully implemented large donor-funded projects.

Unsurprisingly, this study found that the majority of Arysh’s ties with other NGOs are strong ties formed during joint implementation of projects. Arysh considers “partnership” a formal relationship and is wary about the motives of future partners, an attitude that may be explained by competition in the NGO sector. Other organizations may have their own reasons for not working together, as an Arysh manager explained:

Sometimes we invite others to work together, ... organizations that work with youth, committees on healthcare... When we invite them to come to *zhilmassivy* [*novostroiki*]... if there is a [formal] project, they come, but they do not come otherwise. Maybe they do not like it here, or maybe they are afraid of [*novostroiki*].<sup>31</sup>

Arysh leaders are therefore cautious about organizations that have little interest in—or stereotype—the problems of *novostroiki*. This may be why Arysh has limited connections within the first subnet of city-oriented initiatives (discussed above), despite being among the most influential organizations in this network. It is, however, connected with other influential NGOs: Women’s Support Center, the human rights platform Bir Duino, and the Resource Center for the Elderly. In addition, Arysh has a good partnership with the municipality, which is itself an influential actor in Bishkek’s networks (see Figure 4). In sum, it is most important for Arysh to maintain good relations with *novostroiki* self-support groups; connections to

<sup>29</sup> Kalicha Umuralieva, director of “Our Right” PF, personal interview with the author, August 2017.

<sup>30</sup> BIOM staff member, personal interview with D. Ukhina, December 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Arysh manager, personal interview with Z. Urmanbetova, January 2018.

“peer” NGOs are limited to national and international knowledge-sharing networks.

### UNITE—Effective Mobilization through Loose Ties

The campaign “Let’s End Violence Against Women and Girls Together<sup>32</sup>” (UNiTE) was initiated by UN Women in Kyrgyzstan in 2001 as part of the global UN campaign. Gender activists, LGBTQIA organizations, and NGOs worked together to launch the campaign and increase its visibility. Gradually, by attracting new members from among their partners and peers, this partnership transformed into a coalition-like network well known beyond the gender-related civic sector. Today, UNiTE has more than 200 members, among them experienced local NGOs working on gender (Women’s Support Center) and LGBTQIA issues (Bishkek Feminists’ Initiative) as well as small organizations and individual activists from different regions of Kyrgyzstan. The network is informal; there is no legal entity associated with it and no regular membership. All members communicate via an email newsgroup. The newsgroup serves as a forum for sharing news, discussing campaigns, and finding support. This electronic communication is instrumental to urgent mobilization: members inform each other about victims of domestic violence from their area or their social network, and other members offer their assistance, be it a shelter, legal counsel, or financial support. According to the coordinator of the mailing list, it also helps members from rural areas to stay on the same page and to reach out for support.

UNiTE is known not only for helping women and girls directly, but also for lobbying for legislative changes regarding gender-based violence. Three successful advocacy campaigns brought about three milestones: the adoption of

the law “against domestic violence,” the adoption of the law “on early marriages,”<sup>33</sup> and the failure of the law on chemical castration of rapists.<sup>34</sup> With each campaign, UNiTe became more visible and respected, gradually becoming known as a “movement.” According to members of the network, advocacy campaigns mobilized all of members’ resources, including personal connections:

[S]o we drafted the law against bride kidnapping [...] and we had to bring it to the parliament. If we went alone, there would not be enough of us, so we needed partners. Then we sent a message to those who are here in Bishkek, saying, “Here is what we want to do,” and [asking] who was interested. They responded and we worked together...When we use multiple doors and contacts at several organizations, we become more visible.<sup>35</sup>

The “multiple doors” refers to using network members’ varied personal connections to members of Parliament to increase the odds of getting support from deputies. As this statement shows, broader reach and greater visibility are key benefits of collaborating.

Though UNiTE emerged with help and guidance from UN Women, the network is a rare example of a single-theme partnership that does not depend entirely on a single donor. The network receives funding from the Open Society Foundations, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, and others, including the business community. Whatever money donors have left at the end of the financial year, they give to support “16 Days of Gender Activism,” an annual gender campaign held in December, and members divide the funds between the leading organizations.

Interestingly, there is no formal procedure for joining the movement. In the beginning, new members came by recommendation of their colleagues and peers; this, coupled with a

<sup>32</sup> The last word of this motto became the nickname of the campaign and the movement—*Soobsha* in Russian, or “Unite(d).”

<sup>33</sup> See activists’ open letter to President Atambaev on the law that would ban a mullah from performing *nikah* (the Islamic marriage ceremony) if the bride is under the age of 16: Larisa Ilibezova, “Grazhdanskie aktivisty obratilis’ s otkrytym pis’mom k Prezidentu strany,” Centre of Democratic Research Processes, October 12, 2016, <http://crdp.asia/civil-society-activists-sent-an-open-letter-to-the-president-of-the-country/>.

<sup>34</sup> Ryspek Toktonaliev, “Kyrgyzstan: Aktivisty uvereniy, chto khimicheskaya kastratsiya ne effektivna,” *Golos.kg*, July 26, 2013, <http://golos.kg/?p=11041>.

<sup>35</sup> UNiTE member, personal interview with D. Ukhina, December 2017.

commitment to participating in campaigns and meetings, was enough. Today, some people just join the mailing list, which—according to the UNiTE coordinator—amounts to joining the network. The coordinator believes that this approach creates a non-spoken voluntary commitment understood by all members:

... [when people ask us how they can join, what papers should they sign, we say:] no, you sign nothing. We only need your personal commitment, and that is it, nothing more. I think that when you formalize relations, it may turn some [cautious] people off joining.<sup>36</sup>

As discussed in the quotation above, equal responsibility and voluntary participation are core values of the UNiTE network. The leaders of the network want to preserve these values, even if it means loose ties and sometimes a lack of support.

The main events involving resource allocation and negotiations of agenda and boundaries between members are the annual anti-violence campaigns and intermittent collective actions. The network's activity is cyclical, with dormant periods—or “waiting” times—interspersed between active and visible campaigns:

[W]e have tried several times [to lobby for a law] on [gender] quotas, but we have not succeeded... Though this [law] is not yet solved, it does not mean that ... there have been no efforts. There were quite intense activities, but right now we are in a “waiting” regime. As soon as it starts... someone would post [write to the network] and then we would reactivate it, we would conduct meetings, etc.<sup>37</sup>

UNiTE is a network of loose, informal ties that connect members who are geographically and socially disparate. Despite this informality, the network has achieved a certain level of success as a social movement. To conclude, UNiTE is an excellent example of cooperation based on the “strength of weak ties” phenomenon. Connections between UNiTE members support the common pursuit of the collective goal—“to stop violence

against women”—and facilitate collective action when needed.

### Discussion: Modes of Cooperation and Ways to Strengthen Networks

The network analyses presented in this paper illustrate the relative fragmentation of Bishkek's civil society groups and communities and the different structural patterns of cooperation between them. From this, we can draw several conclusions. Firstly, there is a disparity between the density of the networks of city-oriented initiatives and communities and those of organizations working on broad themes and issues. The former has a higher degree of isolation, while the latter are well-connected to each other and also to business, state, and donor organizations. Experienced NGOs, state organizations, and donor entities serve as cement for the whole network.

Secondly, looking at the structure of different subnets, we have identified three patterns: star-like networks with supervisors and their “fans,” dense subnets of sectoral partnerships, and central actors that hold together different subnets and groups of the network (see Table 1). Networks of “supervisors” and formal relations between NGOs and state bodies (see Table 1) correspond to Diani's *organizational* mode of cooperation. Vertical ties and project-driven partnerships are distinct features of such subnets in Bishkek. The second mode of cooperation—*coalitional*—corresponds to the sectoral and cross-sectoral partnerships I observed. These subnets include a variety of actors: formal and informal, grassroots and state, city-oriented and nationwide. In Bishkek, we can see such coalitions among NGOs and activists working on broad issues such as youth, gender, and environment. Those coalitions reach out to other sectors—groups working on gender to organizations for internal migrants, urban activists to ecology groups, for example—as well as having ties with the local authorities.

<sup>36</sup> UNiTE coordinator, personal interview with D. Ukhina, December 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

In Bishkek, the UNiTE network is the closest to the social movement form of collective action. Differences between members of UNiTE can be significant; groups vary in terms of size, level of institutional development, and location. Although the network does not have formal membership, members of UNiTE have a strong collective identity. Another feature that keeps it from “NGO-ization” is that it has both periods of active mobilization and inactive “waiting” time, in which the network is held together by newsgroup alone. UNiTE could provide an example of forging connections through “weak ties” for currently fragmented city-oriented initiatives.

Another significant finding is that there are structural gaps in Bishkek’s civic networks that collude with the extant social divides in the city: spatial, economic, and linguistic. This prompts the following questions: 1) Which civil society organizations could bridge the structural gaps? and 2) how should they do it?

The community studies literature indicates that brokers are more likely to find innovative solutions to common problems, effectively mobilize various groups for collective action, and succeed in formal dialogue with authorities. There are more than 10 actors who hold central and influential positions in Bishkek’s civic networks and could therefore serve as brokers between different groups. Among them, the mayor’s office, the Women’s Support Center, Arysh, the Institute for Youth Development, Sezim Crisis Center, and “Our Right” PF have the potential to bridge the divide between single-issue local communities and influential NGOs, as well as the divide between newcomers and longtime urbanites. The municipality is also an important actor: if it were to develop networks that would fill the identified gaps, more meaningful partnerships and projects could be created between civil society and local authorities.

Studies of the urban grassroots in post-Soviet countries also explored the role of brokers and other strategies for improving horizontal

connectivity within networks. Polanska’s research on the tenants’ movement in Poland found that brokers were critical in alliance-building processes.<sup>38</sup> Brokers helping tenants’ associations were well-educated young individuals with widespread social ties. They worked as mediators in negotiations with other movements and as spokespersons to the media, along with developing strategic external connections for the movement. The experience of the Polish tenants’ movement is very relevant to Bishkek’s city-oriented CSOs. At present, with the exception of environmental activists, they rely primarily on theme-specific connections, and they should seek alliances with other social movements (for instance UNiTE).

However, it is not only experienced CSOs that can support small and isolated communities. Ivanou’s case study of “Taganka 3,” a NIMBY activist group from Moscow, demonstrates how an experienced grassroots community used its central position to help others and scale up its agenda.<sup>39</sup> Initially, the group’s members opposed infill development in their neighborhood, taking on developers in three consecutive court cases. Later, they began to help other anti-infill groups from different parts of the city. This was possible because stories about Taganka 3 appeared in the media and the group clearly communicated its capacity and willingness to help others. Similarly, “Our Right” has connections to many NIMBY groups and condominiums and has recently begun to partner with those who work on the broader issue of participatory urban development (“Urban Initiatives,” City Development Agency). The stories of small urban grassroots movements should be covered in the media and through knowledge networks to facilitate the establishment of peer connections. Academia can also contribute to developing a knowledge base about ongoing projects and success stories.

Another strategy could be cross-sectoral partnerships. Small local communities could approach strong actors in the network and cooperate in areas where their issues and

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<sup>38</sup> Dominika V. Polanska, “Alliance Building and Brokerage in Contentious Politics: The Case of the Polish Tenants’ Movement,” in *Urban Grassroots Movement in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Kerstin Jacobsson (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015), 202-213.

<sup>39</sup> Aleh Ivanou, “‘Taganka 3’ Group: An Instance of Local Urban Activism in Moscow,” in *Beyond NGO-ization: The Development of Social Movements in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Kerstin Jacobsson and Steven Saxonberg (London: Routledge, 2013).

geographical areas intersect. For instance, UNITE members could partner with Arysh, local communities, and urban planners to advocate for, design, and pilot the implementation of safe public spaces for women and girls in new settlements.

A five-city study of Ukrainian urban grassroots initiatives found that influential actors had one trait in common: they provided a gathering space for other initiatives, bringing them together for educational and cultural events, festivals, and conferences.<sup>40</sup> Participation in events facilitates knowledge-sharing and the creation of “weak ties” that can be activated when needed. Having these weak ties is more valuable than having strong project-based relations. In the case of Bishkek’s civic networks, it might be not possible to connect all actors through information platforms, since they have very different interests. However, knowledge-sharing events and discussion platforms can help to bridge the existing structural holes between city-oriented communities. The next section offers feasible recommendations for the municipality and central actors in Bishkek’s civic networks.

### Policy Recommendations

My analysis demonstrates the need to invest in developing peer-to-peer connections and supporting various modes of cooperation, from loose information ties to strong and grounded collaborations. It is essential for NGOs and initiatives that already have central positions to be able to connect distant parts of the network—in other words, to bridge structural gaps. By facilitating information exchange and access to resources, they strengthen civic networks and help grassroots initiatives achieve better results. In this section, I propose a series of recommendations that would help both city-oriented initiatives and the municipal authorities to facilitate cooperation and improve urban governance at the neighborhood level. The bottom line is that all

actors should invest in cross-sectoral partnerships and reach out to isolated communities and residents’ groups within the city. The municipality should be highly embedded in these cross-sectoral partnerships at different levels.

### Developing Cross-Sectoral Partnerships on Urban Issues

Key areas where multimodal and cross-sectoral partnerships would be beneficial are: 1) inclusive development of neighborhoods, especially on the outskirts of the city; 2) gender issues in an urban context, e.g., women’s safety in public spaces; and 3) citizen engagement and local government accountability. “Brokers” in these areas should:

- Establish a consortium for specific geographical locations (neighborhoods, settlements) that would include representatives of local communities, city authorities, the business community, academia, and activists. These consortiums should negotiate their agenda and serve as umbrella organizations that streamline and facilitate both bottom-up grassroots initiatives and top-down state and municipal programs.
- Reach out to voluntary organizations, student clubs, and local communities and establish communication channels (e.g., WhatsApp groups, local email newsgroups, and social media groups/pages) to inform these communities about relevant programs and initiatives at the city and/or national level.

### Improving Urban Governance at the Neighborhood Level

The work of two municipal structures is crucial for developing relations between communities, CSOs, and the municipality. These are the territorial

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<sup>40</sup> Varvara Podnos and Maria Gryshchenko, “The Development of Urban Grass-Roots Initiatives’ Network in Kyiv, Kharkiv, L’viv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Odesa,” *Mistosite.ua*, September 26, 2017, <https://mistosite.org.ua/en/articles/the-development-of-urban-grass-roots-initiatives-network-in-5-ukrainian-cities-kyiv-kharkiv-lviv-ivano-frankivsk-and-odesa>.

departments of the municipality (MTUs) and the City Development Agency (CDA). The key role of the MTU is to build relations with different communities within its neighborhood. These connections can contribute to CDA's work on community development and support for grassroots initiatives.

MTUs should begin by taking the following steps:

- Each neighborhood's MTU should partner with local NGOs or academics to collect data about different communities in their district, surveying residents and creating a list of communities and their leaders.
- Armed with this knowledge, MTUs should arrange meetings with representatives of these communities to discuss their needs, their suggestions for improving their neighborhood, and their readiness to contribute to local development.
- Next, the MTU should identify priority projects and conduct charrette workshops with the help of community leaders, who can facilitate workshops and lead projects.

For its part, the City Development Agency could improve the matching grant program and support MTUs' efforts in the sphere of community development. I recommend the following three short-term actions to the CDA:

- Develop a grant program for local initiatives in which self-support groups can participate; consult with Arysh and other community-based NGOs or even hire them as facilitators of the process.
- Remove unnecessary bureaucratic procedures and revise requirements of the matching grant program to encourage joint applications by two and more condominiums that share a common space. This would allow for initiatives constructing a community garden on vacant municipal land between apartment buildings, etc.
- Develop an internal promotion program for municipal workers who demonstrate good

outcomes in community development and accountability of their MTU. CDA can invest in their skills and competencies, offer them bonuses, and encourage peer-to-peer learning between MTUs. To ensure that evaluation of municipal workers is not biased, CDA could partner with monitoring and evaluation NGOs and with networks of local communities and activists, receiving feedback from the latter directly.

### **Community Development as a Strategy for Inclusive Urban Development**

The existence of public spaces where communities and grassroots organizations can gather—parks, municipal libraries, schools, and community centers—is beneficial for the city in the long run. The municipality should develop a comprehensive plan for the development of such public spaces. The more communities are formed based on commitment, joint initiatives, and shared interests and values, the more favorable the conditions will be for civic engagement and participatory urban governance.

To improve the institutional context for communities and grassroots activists, the mayor's office and the City Council should consider the following steps:

- Conduct a survey of socialization practices and measure social capital in neighborhoods; outsource this task to a cross-sectoral consortium of NGOs and academics.
- Gather, analyze, and publish data about public spaces and ways local communities and grassroots initiatives could support their redevelopment and maintenance.
- Develop a pilot community centers project using the resources and premises of existing municipal libraries (of which there are 28 spread across the city), beginning in the three neighborhoods with the lowest social capital and the least public spaces.

## Appendix 1. Research team

<b>Team leaders</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emil Nasritdinov, American University of Central Asia (AUCA)</li> <li>• Gulnara Ibraeva, Laboratory of Opinion Studies</li> <li>• Raushanna Sarkeyeva, Urban Initiatives PF</li> </ul>
<b>Data Collection part 1: Surveys, interviews and case studies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nargiz Abdyrakhman kyzy, AUCA</li> <li>• Nurgiza Rustambek kyzy, AUCA</li> <li>• Elnura Kazakbaeva, AUCA</li> <li>• Zarina Urmanbetova, independent researcher</li> <li>• Asel Umarova, independent researcher</li> <li>• Ane Genvarek, independent researcher</li> <li>• Aikanysh Derbisheva, Urban Initiatives PF</li> </ul>
<b>Data Collection part 2: Semi-structured interviews, second round</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Zarina Urmanbetova, independent researcher</li> <li>• Diana Ukhina, independent researcher</li> </ul>

## Appendix 2. List of interviewees and case studies

*1<sup>st</sup> round—data collected through interviews for case studies*

#	Name	Issues	Year founded	Scale of activities (target area)	Position of person interviewed
1	<b>Mutakalim—association of progressive Muslim women</b>	Domestic violence, family planning, HIV/AIDS, peacebuilding, social exclusion, economic empowerment	2000	Kyrgyzstan, including Bishkek	Founder
2	<b>Our Right PF</b>	Managing urban commons, preservation of parks, illegal construction, civic engagement in urban planning	2008	Bishkek exclusively	Founder/ Director
3	<b>Woman Support Center</b>	Gender equality, political and economic rights of women, violence against women and girls	1996	Nation-wide; worked with informal settlements of Bishkek	
4	<b>Door Eli</b>	HIV/AIDS, residence permits for internal migrants, access to social services for internal migrants, prevention of drug addiction	2004	New settlements of Bishkek	
5	<b>Pro KG professional club</b>	Education and professional opportunities for young people, scholarships for rural youth	2009	Kyrgyzstan	Founder
6	<b>Ittipak—Public Union of Uighurs in Kyrgyzstan</b>	Preservation of culture and traditions, involving Uighurs in the socio-political life of Kyrgyzstan, protection of the interests of the Uighur community	1990	Kyrgyzstan (branches in oblasts)	

2<sup>nd</sup> round—for explanation of structural patterns, etc.

#	Name	Issues		Scale of activities (target area)	Position of person interviewed
1	UNITE KG—network “Let’s end violence against women and girls”	Gender-based violence, women’s rights	2011	Kyrgyzstan	Coordinator
2	Open Line PF	Women’s rights	2009	Kyrgyzstan	Director
3	EKOIS	Environment, climate change, and ecology	2001	Kyrgyzstan	Coordinator
4	Institute for Youth Development	Youth empowerment, social entrepreneurship	2011	Bishkek, Chuy, and Issyk-Kul regions	Project manager
5	IDEA Central Asia	Branch of international debate education association, development of critical thinking and civic engagement among young generation	2001 (IDEA US)	Kyrgyzstan	Project managers
6	Arysh	Local infrastructure and economic problems in underserved neighborhoods of Bishkek, migration, economic empowerment of internal migrants	1999	Bishkek mainly	Coordinator
7	BIOM	Ecological movement, environment protection education, monitoring and evaluation	1993	Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia	
8	Insandyk Onuguu	Discussion club, organized by students, various topics	2014	Bishkek and few other cities	Advisor (founder)
9	Center for Research of Democratic Processes	Democratic processes, human rights, gender	2002	Kyrgyzstan	

**Appendix 3. Questions in second-round interviews**  
(extract from the *Guide for Researchers* developed by the author)

**Questions**

1. History of the community/organization (if these questions were not asked earlier in a case-study interview)
  - i) When and by whom it was established? Who are the founders of your community?
  - ii) What was the purpose behind starting your community/founding your organization? What was the founders’ motivation?
  - iii) How has your community/organization developed? What have been the main stages and milestones in the history of your organization?
  - iv) Have there been any significant changes in the structure, activities, or staff of the organization? If so, what caused these changes?
  - v) To what extent has your community/organization changed since it was founded?
2. Current activities of the community

- i) What is the community doing? What goals and objectives does it have?
  - ii) How do you work with members of the community, or the beneficiaries of your work?
  - iii) What problems and challenges do you face?
  - iv) What have been the most difficult times or situations? Did you receive support from anyone, any organization; did anyone help you to cope with and overcome this situation?
3. About support and partners
- i) Who are your supporters? How have you come to know and cooperate with them?
  - ii) Who are your primary partners? What is the value of your partnerships with them?
  - iii) How do you understand your role in developing partnerships with other communities/ organizations?
4. About the city
- i) What associations does Bishkek bring to you? How can you describe the city?
  - ii) In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing Bishkek today?
  - iii) How do the civic sector (and NGOs) attempt to solve these problems? How would you assess their contribution?
  - iv) What changes would you like to see in the city? Do you want to be part of these changes personally?

## Chapter 2.

# Agents of Change? Civic Engagement of Western-Educated Youth in Kazakhstan

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Sergey Marinin<sup>1</sup> (2019)

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### Introduction

Kazakhstan has a significant youth population. Over 51 percent of citizens are under the age of 29, the vast majority of whom were born under the rule of the first president of independent Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Over 25 percent of the nation's population are millennials.<sup>2</sup> The younger generation is faced with numerous socio-economic challenges, including lack of employment opportunities and job growth, limited social mobility, underrepresentation in the state structures, and limited space for social and political expression. As a step toward tackling this vast array of problems, 2019 was declared the "Year of Youth" in Kazakhstan. The program for this year seeks to develop policies that would bring considerable social benefits for young people. Activities include, inter alia, social engagement with the state through volunteerism and social responsibility initiatives.

Although this initiative is well-intentioned, it may, ironically, have been jeopardized by the young people themselves—who dared, for the first time in a long time, to make their voices heard after Nazarbayev decided to resign from the presidency in March. On April 21, 2019, two young activists held up a banner at the Almaty marathon that read, "You cannot run from the truth," for which they both received 15-day prison terms. Even earlier, in March, after interim president Tokayev's decision to rename the capital city to Nur-Sultan yet again without consulting the public, young people expressed their disagreement online. As more

young Kazakhstanis have joined this wave of discontent, the country has seen a spree of creative youth protests, from a series of online sketches ridiculing the regime's reaction to peaceful actions like writing famous slogans on their bodies or holding up blank signs on public squares (for which the young people involved are still detained). As these examples show, the youth of Kazakhstan are coming up with new ways of speaking their minds. However, the dichotomy between a state that wants a positively engaged youth, on the one hand, but does not allow it to peacefully express itself, on the other, has created a problem with serious repercussions.

My interest in this paper is in how youth engage in civic and social initiatives. I am especially concerned with the contribution of Western-educated young people to social change. This social group represents a compelling case—with some of them already in power, they will have a tremendous opportunity to shape the post-Nazarbayev era, including by fostering democratic values. Hence, my research question is: How do young Western-educated Kazakhstani young people promote social change through civic engagement initiatives?

To answer this question, I surveyed 113 individuals from Kazakhstan aged 18-35 who either received their education or worked abroad (primarily in Western countries). The survey included questions on the spheres in which they are civically engaged, their motivation for participating in such initiatives, factors inhibiting their civic engagement, and how

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<sup>2</sup> Marlene Laruelle, "Nazarbayev Generation. Kazakhstan's Youth, National Identity Transformations and their Political Consequences," *Voices on Central Asia*, March 21, 2019, <http://voicesoncentralasia.org/nazarbayev-generation-kazakhstans-youth-national-identity-transformations-and-their-political-consequences/>.

their international experience changed their perception of the notion of social engagement.

The limitations I encountered during the project centered on the lack of extended studies on the topic of Kazakhstani youth engagement and Western-educated graduates in particular, as well as the sample size of the survey. A larger sample would have been needed to ensure that the study was representative. Still, this paper offers significant insights into the issue of youth civic engagement and the role of Western-educated youth in it. It proceeds as follows. First, it discusses the theoretical concepts of civic and social engagement, with a specific focus on the political landscape of Kazakhstan's authoritarian regime and how this affects forms of civic activism. It also touches upon the interplay between the quality of education and the level of engagement. Second, the paper explores the general environment of youth engagement in Kazakhstan, mapping key youth policy actors and what they do on the ground. Third, it analyzes the engagement of Western-educated youth by presenting and interpreting the survey data.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Theorizing Civic/Social Engagement*

In this paper, "civic engagement" and "social engagement" (hereafter CSE) will be used interchangeably. Coming to terms with what constitutes CSE is an arduous process; the scholarly community contends that this concept is hard to define and to measure. Owing to "conceptual stretching,"<sup>3</sup> the term might include a wide range of activities depending on how the notion of "civic" is construed. Robert Putnam advocates for a comparatively all-encompassing definition, stating that civic engagement includes a wide variety of actions, from social networks and political

participation to newspaper-reading.<sup>4</sup> Other groups of authors give the term a more nuanced definition. Instead of "civic engagement," they propose "active citizenship," putting the focus on collective rather than individual action and seeing civic involvement as being based on engaging with community issues through work in all sectors, not only the government.<sup>5</sup> This could also be described as "collective action [that] influences the larger *civil society*."<sup>6</sup> Finally, civic involvement as a precursor to *political participation* involves moving individual actions toward collective action solely through the instrumentality of the political process.

It is a challenge to narrow down the scope of what comprises civic engagement due to the multifaceted nature of the concept and, in our case, the lack of data on youth's perception of what it means to be socially engaged. However, the main idea is that "[the] active citizen participates in the life of a community to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future."<sup>7</sup>

In this research, I employ the notion of a "latent"—also called "pre-political"—form of civic engagement, a notion developed by Ekman and Amna.<sup>8</sup> Their concept illuminates the hidden tendencies of civic participation in authoritarian states. The citizenry in non-democratic regimes do many things that should not necessarily be categorized as direct civic engagement leading to political involvement or results. However, they might have strong potential to become political involvement or have a particular influence on policies. Many young people are engaged in formally non-political or semi-political domains. This type of activity does not directly target the authorities, but it nevertheless results in involvement in current social processes. These activities may include volunteering, charity, helping to support vulnerable social groups, education initiatives, or online means of engagement (social

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<sup>3</sup> Joakim Ekman and Erik Amnå, "Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology," *Human Affairs* 22, no. 3 (2012). doi:10.2478/s13374-012-0024-1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Richard P. Adler and Judy Goggin, "What Do We Mean By 'Civic Engagement'?" *Journal of Transformative Education* 3, no. 3 (2005): 236-53, 238. doi:10.1177/1541344605276792.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 238.

<sup>7</sup> Aelita Skarzauskiene, Agne Tvaronavičienė, and Gintare Parazinskaite, "Cyber Security and Civil Engagement: Case of Lithuanian Virtual Community Projects," European Conference on Cyber Warfare and Security, July 2014, 181.

<sup>8</sup> Ekman and Amna, "Political Participation and Civic Engagement."

media activities). However, unlike Ekman and Amna, I do not draw a line between “civic” and “social,” as the two processes produce essentially the same result: involving young citizens in civic activities.

Ekman and Amna find the closest equivalent to “latent engagement” in Schudson’s notion of “monitorial citizens” who are informed about and interested in politics yet who generally choose to avoid formal channels of political participation. Although they remain active in the civic realm, they act politically only when “they feel it is really imperative.”<sup>9</sup> I believe these related concepts apply well to the current state of youth involvement in civic processes in Kazakhstan.

#### *How Does Education Influence Social Engagement?*

Better-educated youth contribute to society in various ways, including civic activities. An individual’s relative level of education has a causal effect on his or her level of democratic engagement.<sup>10</sup> Someone who has a comparatively higher level of formal education than others in a given social setting enjoys higher social status. This means that the more educated individual is better equipped to convey a political message, thus making it more likely that he or she will become politically involved.

The interplay between the level and quality of education and younger generations’ involvement in civic activities might seem obvious—education universally brings improvements to all forms of engagement.<sup>11</sup> Though it is difficult to identify specific variables that cause more educated individuals to participate at a higher level, some of the main factors are *development of bureaucratic competence, civic skills, cognitive capacity, curriculum* (also known as “classroom climate”), *student government, habits of associational involvement, and volunteering in the community*

(service learning).<sup>12</sup> A comprehensive study of civic education in 28 nations has shown that among the aforementioned factors, classroom climate (discussing social and political issues in the classroom freely and openly) is the most significant.

Kazakhstan is making progress toward such academic and administrative freedom. In 2018, Nazarbayev signed a bill that enshrined these freedoms into law. This law goes hand in hand with step 78 of the “100 Concrete Steps,” a landmark development strategy designed to allow Kazakhstan to achieve its ultimate goal of becoming one of the 30 most developed nations in the world by 2050. It gives universities almost full control of curricula formation, as well as the ability to select which majors to offer on the basis of market demand rather than the state’s priorities (as they were historically selected). This is undoubtedly a positive step toward greater transparency and healthy competition among universities that will improve the quality of higher education and enhance academic freedom.

Higher education enrollment and literacy rates are also trending upward. All in all, 496,209 people were enrolled in Kazakhstan’s higher education institutions in 2017/2018, of whom females comprised 54.3 percent (n=269,649).<sup>13</sup> The number of students increased by 4 percent in 2018. The adult literacy rate (15+ years) of Kazakhstan is 99.8 percent, an improvement over the 1989 figure of 97.5 percent.<sup>14</sup> However, the education system is hobbled by its failure to develop students’ soft skills. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) assessment, Kazakhstan’s university-level education lags behind on a multitude of such indicators, including “cognitive and practical skills,” “decision-making,” and “autonomy,” as well as more complex indicators such as “advanced knowledge of a field,” “critical understanding of theories and principles,”

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 288.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Desjardins and Tom Schuller, eds., “Measuring the Effects of Education on Health and Civic Engagement: Proceedings of the Copenhagen Symposium,” OECD, 2006, [www.oecd.org/education/innovation-education/37437718.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/education/innovation-education/37437718.pdf), 39.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>13</sup> “Vysshie uchebnye zavedeniia Respubliki Kazakhstan na nachalo 2017/2018 uchebnogo goda,” accessed May 2, 2019, <https://www.zakon.kz/4900658-vysshie-uchebnye-zavedeniya-respubliki.html>.

<sup>14</sup> “World Data Atlas, Kazakhstan - Adult (15+) Literacy Rate,” accessed May 1, 2019, <https://knoema.com/atlas/Kazakhstan/topics/Education/Literacy/Adult-literacy-rate>.

“advanced skills demonstrating innovative approaches to solving unpredictable problems,” “reflection,” and “self-regulation.” None are directly pursued in the higher education system of Kazakhstan.<sup>15</sup> This reality is directly relevant to understanding the progress (or lack thereof) of youth’s social involvement. The absence of these soft skills from both local university curricula and extracurricular activities reflects the absence of a “classroom climate” or general critical engagement with material within the local system of higher education. Hence, my hypothesis is that Western-educated Kazakhstani youth should be more socially engaged.

#### *Alternative Forms of Youth Engagement*

Informal modes of youth activism typically originate in an authoritarian and repressive milieu. Regimes that inhibit civil freedoms encourage new types of action, especially in the online realm. Social media and online platforms alike create more space for youth activism and involvement than do major political institutions. The former serves not only as a modern Habermasian “public sphere,” but also as a primary setting for youth involvement in consuming, discussing, circulating, distributing, and producing content.<sup>16</sup> Social media offer new modes of engagement and remain a safe venue for dialogue between youths. Social media have significant potential to become a powerful tool for further increasing civic and political participation.

Another driving force behind the emergence of unconventional youth activism is disillusionment with the country’s current political trajectory and lack of trust in politicians. Today’s youth tends to withdraw from institutional activities because the authorities are not receptive to younger generations’ demands and because young people consider politics “remote and

irrelevant.”<sup>17</sup> If conventional means do not work, they resort to new modes of expression that are “less professionalized and controlled.”<sup>18</sup> These activities, ranging from community service to charitable contributions, rely on various forms of internet and new media technologies. Other forms of civic engagement, namely issue-based activism (a form of activism motivated by specific issues such as environment or gender issues, etc.), lifestyle politics, and identity politics have been on the rise among Western youth as well.<sup>19</sup> However, it is not clear if the Kazakhstani younger generation necessarily participates in all of these.

#### **Mapping the Youth Engagement Environment in Kazakhstan**

The spectrum of actors in the field of Kazakhstan’s youth policy is quite diverse, and the state is the dominant one. The government devises youth engagement strategies, directs state policies to meet youth’s “gut issues” (such as employment and housing), etc. It also welcomes investment in Kazakhstan’s human capital on the part of international organizations (IOs). As a result, the country’s youth policy landscape includes many joint “State-IO” projects or more independent youth projects backed solely by IOs. Non-institutionalized structures are also present and function on the Internet, targeting a younger audience. The state likewise realizes the necessity of utilizing younger generations, so the Salem Social Media agency, led by the former press secretary of the Nur Otan presidential party, Aleksandr Aksyutits, has recently become a significant player on the Internet scene, attracting some famous bloggers to boost the apolitical agenda among the young, marginalizing creators of political content online.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Higher Education in Kazakhstan 2017: Reviews of National Policies for Education* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2017), 90.

<sup>16</sup> Annika Bergström and Maria Jervelycke Belfrage, “News in Social Media,” *Digital Journalism* 6, no. 5 (2018): 583-98. doi:10.1080/21670811.2018.1423625.

<sup>17</sup> Hilary Pilkington and Gary Pollock, “‘Politics Are Bollocks’: Youth, Politics and Activism in Contemporary Europe,” *The Sociological Review* 63, no. 2 Supplement (2015): 1-35. doi:10.1111/1467-954x.12260, 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Weiyu Zhang, “Redefining Youth Activism through Digital Technology in Singapore,” *International Communication Gazette* 75, no. 3 (2013): 253-70. doi:10.1177/1748048512472858, 254.

<sup>20</sup> Colleen Wood, “In Central Asia, Politics by Way of Social Media,” *The Diplomat*, February 22, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/in-central-asia-politics-by-way-of-social-media/>.

**Table 1. Forms of youth activism in Kazakhstan**

Pro-government	Sponsored by international organizations/donor foundations	Informal structures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mainly aimed at troubleshooting young people’s socio-economic problems</li> <li>• Patriotic and accountable to state initiatives</li> <li>• Social volunteerism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Looser in regulation</li> <li>• Higher-quality</li> <li>• More effective in terms of civic engagement</li> <li>• Initiatives include Zhas Camp, Youth Corps, Y-Peer, AIESEC, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mostly in online spaces, social media, and video platforms</li> <li>• Least regulated; may be completely unregulated</li> </ul>

The Kazakhstani regime conceptualizes its youth policies through the State Youth Policy Act of 2015 as well as presidential messages and state strategies. The latest strategy—“Kazakhstan 2020: Path to the Future,” adopted in 2013—was a predecessor of the Youth Act and laid down the main mechanisms for implementing youth policies. For the first time, the law increased the involvement of young people in the work of consultative and advisory bodies. The law also defined volunteerism as “community service” not affiliated with any political or religious organizations.<sup>21</sup> One of the law’s key aims is to engage youth in the socio-economic and socio-political life of the country.<sup>22</sup> The law generally focuses on the social realm—chiefly education, health, employment, and business activities, countering corruption, nurturing “green thinking,” and fostering patriotic sentiments.<sup>23</sup>

These multiple strategies for engaging youth with state entities and addressing youth social problems evolved into the 2019 Year of Youth. For the time being, it is the overarching framework within which for the government to work with the younger population. Its key priorities—education, employment, affordable housing, support for young families—mainly target the basic social problems. The state has for instance initiated multiple programs for supporting youth entrepreneurial activities and business start-ups.

The project’s roadmap also prioritizes social activism, namely tree-planting campaign—based on the “Zhasyl Yel” (“Green Nation”) national green movement—and the re-creation of construction brigades and military-patriotic education.<sup>24</sup>

State efforts to engage the younger generation on the ground run up against countless problems. Youth’s responsiveness to the myriad government projects is very low due to the state paternalistic—rather than “equal partner”—approach. The authorities engage in propagandistic and ideological mobilization instead of welcoming self-starters and proactive youth leaders, with the result that they do a poor job of raising awareness of their initiatives and increasing their visibility. Moreover, state initiatives in practice neglect the rural youth population. Administrative organs coerce students to attend various pro-state events or listen to yearly presidential messages that do not inspire youth to engage. Funding for social engagement activities is allocated through the main pro-state youth organizations, Zhas Otan and Zhas Ulan, creating corruption risks and limiting decentralization. The sporadic character of youth policies also makes them a comparatively ineffective strategy for tackling youth engagement. As Irina Mednikova, Director of the Youth Information Service of Kazakhstan, notes:

<sup>21</sup> Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On State Youth Policy” (as amended on June 13, 2018), accessed April 4, 2019, [https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc\\_id=31661446#pos=3;-156](https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=31661446#pos=3;-156).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, [https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc\\_id=31661446#pos=62;-45](https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc_id=31661446#pos=62;-45).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Dorozhnaia karta po provedeniiu goda molodezhi,” March 26, 2019, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://primeminister.kz/ru/news/infographics/dorozhnaya-karta-po-provedeniiu-goda-molodezhi-18098>.

[...] it is quite possible that this year will only be a sedative to systemic wounds of youth policy to prevent the growth of discontent and radicalization of this large and active social group. But I always say that young people need freedom and participation in decision-making. Only then do they become a resource for the state, not a problem.<sup>25</sup>

Independent and international donor-funded activism has been less voluminous but more effective than that of the state, according to “Youth Mapping” research conducted in five post-Soviet states in 2018.<sup>26</sup> Prominent projects include ZhasCamp, Youth Corps, Y-Peer, and AIESEC. These types of initiatives are supported by international organizations and NGOs, international foundations, and embassies. The mentioned organizations deal with a broad range of youth activities, such as informal peer education, leadership and soft skills development, volunteerism, and professional and entrepreneurial exchanges between youth and experts in the business community.

Non-institutionalized social engagement, on the other hand, has been driven primarily by issue-based activism and informal modes of social influence. Traditional forms of youth engagement (voting, participation in political parties) are falling, especially in the industrialized world.<sup>27</sup> A recent large-scale study of Kazakh youth showed that the majority of young people are indifferent to politics and barely vote.<sup>28</sup> Mutual distrust between the state and the younger generation is leading youth to evade formal modes of interaction with classic institutions. Many young people therefore prefer the less-regulated online space, where they can be freer to express themselves in various forms. While the majority of young Kazakhs do not follow political content, they are not indifferent to what is

happening in their country. In fact, according to a recent public opinion study conducted among the capital city youth, 54.7 percent of surveyed young people said they “feel active about” their community. When asked about the possibility of participating in a socially-driven protest, 44.2 percent responded positively.<sup>29</sup> These figures indicate that semi-civic attitudes may have the potential to transform into political action in the future.

### The Case of Western-Educated Youth Engagement in Kazakhstan

Having observed a tendency toward pre-political behavior among Kazakhstan’s youth, let us now turn to look at how Western-educated Kazakhstani perceive civic engagement and understand their place in it. It should be noted at the outset that it is difficult to locate Western-educated young people in the heterogeneous pool of civic activities because they are dispersed across all listed categories.

The creation of the “Bolashak” study-abroad program in 1993 was—and to a certain extent still is—a vision of Kazakhstan’s future, a Western-values-driven approach to nurturing people with “less blinkered vision.” The program was established to support the entry of independent Kazakhstan’s new generation into the globalized world and overcome “Soviet-style” anachronisms in education.<sup>30</sup> In 2010, Kazakhstan became part of the Bologna process, with a view to drawing even closer to the developed world. This move recognized the excellence of Western science and education. Then-president Nazarbayev even concluded in a 2006 speech that “[the] Soviet

<sup>25</sup> Youth Information Service of Kazakhstan (YISK), “God molodyozhi: na chto potratiat milliardy iz gosbiudzheta?” February 15, 2019, accessed March 28, 2019, <https://misk.org.kz/events/1e04c257-5b1b-4792-b681-4c4fad922e84/>.

<sup>26</sup> Ksenia Bondal, “Kto sozdaet kachestvennye programmy razvitiia molodezhi?” *Kapital.kz*, October 10, 2018, <https://kapital.kz/gosudarstvo/73050/kto-sozdaet-kachestvennye-programmy-razvitiya-molodezhi.html>.

<sup>27</sup> David E. Campbell, “What Is Education’s Impact on Civic and Social Engagement?” In “Measuring the Effects of Education on Health and Civic Engagement. Proceedings of the Copenhagen Symposium, Copenhagen, 2006, accessed March 4, 2019, <http://www.oecd.org/education/innovation-education/37437718.pdf>, 39.

<sup>28</sup> T. Umbetaliyeva et al., *Youth in Central Asia: Kazakhstan. Based on a Sociological Survey* (Almaty: Friedrich Ebert Foundation Kazakhstan, 2016), 144.

<sup>29</sup> Talgat Kaliyev et al., “Life Satisfaction and Sentiment of Modern Youth in Astana (According to the Results of Sociological Research),” *Kazakhstan-Spektr 2* (84) (2018): 87.

<sup>30</sup> Dossym Satpayev et al., *Molotov Cocktail: The Anatomy of Kazakh Youth* (Almaty: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2014), 33.

education system is archaic and poses a danger to the security of the [Kazakh] nation and the state.”<sup>31</sup>

However, to assert that Kazakhstan’s Western-educated youth wholeheartedly support liberal values would be too presumptuous. The Kazakhstani elite’s political disposition toward liberal ideas is quite moderate; modernization without “excessive” Westernization is perceived as the most desirable outcome.<sup>32</sup> The so-called “Bolashak generation” imports more technocratic approaches than democratic values and is tightly controlled both at home and abroad.<sup>33</sup>

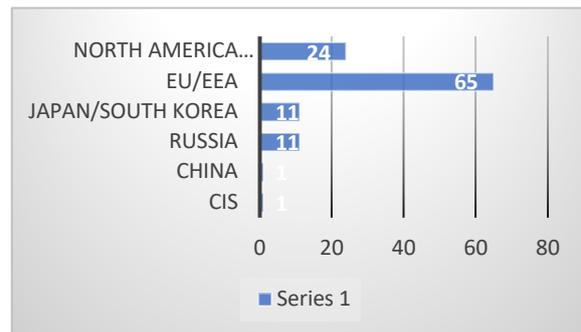
In this study, I attempt to look at some aspects of civic engagement—social/civic initiatives, volunteerism, and charity work—and how Western-educated youth are involved in them. For this purpose, I designed a survey comprised of 16 open and multiple-choice questions. The survey does not specify the scope and definitions of the categories mentioned, as I wanted to explore how respondents understand what it means to be socially/civically engaged. I also looked into specific factors that hamper the civic engagement of Western-educated youth. Finally, I analyzed how Western-style education influences respondents’ civic and social engagement (CSE).

For the purposes of this study, I define Western-educated youth as young people aged 18 to 35 who have received a higher education degree, work experience, or practical training in Western-style academic settings and/or Western countries, predominantly those in the European Union/European Economic Area (EU/EEA) or North America. A total of 113 participants were involved in the survey: 65 females, 47 males, and one non-binary individual. On average, respondents had spent 33.6 months abroad. In terms of ethnic composition, 85.9 percent (n=97) of the sample were Kazakhs, 9.7 percent belonged to other ethnic groups (n=11), and 4.4 percent of respondents did not indicate their ethnic background (n=5). The overwhelming majority of respondents had studied abroad (67.2 percent/n=76), another 25.7 percent

(n=29) had both studied and interned abroad, 6.2 percent (n=7) had solely had internships/training abroad, and 0.9 percent (n=1) had both studied and worked abroad.

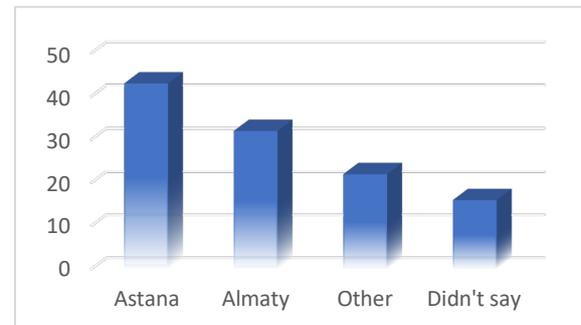
As Figure 1 shows, the vast majority of respondents obtained their training and education in the EU/EEA.

**Figure 1. Location of education and/or training**



In terms of respondents’ current residence in Kazakhstan, two main locations were named: Astana (n=43) and Almaty (n=32). Twenty-two respondents were in other cities (n=22), while 16 declined to indicate their current place of residence (n=16)—see Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Current geographic distribution in Kazakhstan**



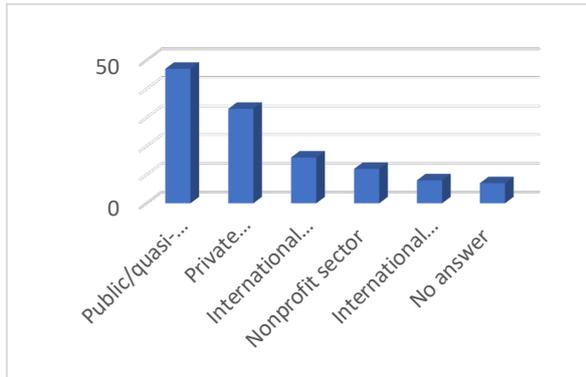
The plurality of respondents works in the public and quasi-public sector (n=47), followed by the private sector (n=33). The main sectors in which respondents are employed are shown in Figure 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>32</sup> Douglas W. Blum, *The Social Process of Globalization: Return Migration and Cultural Change in Kazakhstan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

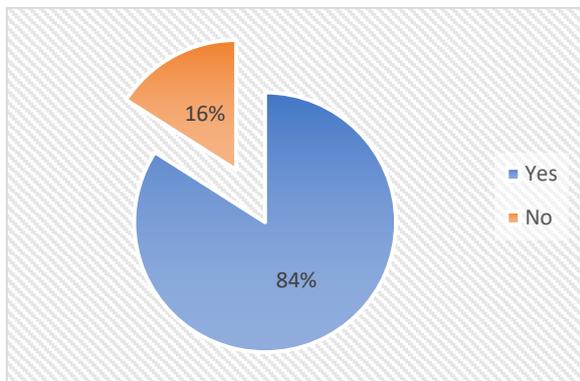
<sup>33</sup> Adele Del Sordi, “Sponsoring Student Mobility for Development and Authoritarian Stability: Kazakhstan’s Bolashak Programme,” *Globalizations* 15, no. 2 (2017): 215-31. doi:10.1080/14747731.2017.1403780.

**Figure 3. Employment by sector**



When asked how they obtained their education and/or training experience, the Bolashak program dominated (n=56), followed by other scholarships (n=56) and self-financing (n=17).

In response to the question of whether they took part in any social, civic, charity, or volunteer activity in addition to their main job, 50 respondents answered in the affirmative against 63 who responded in the negative. Comparing these

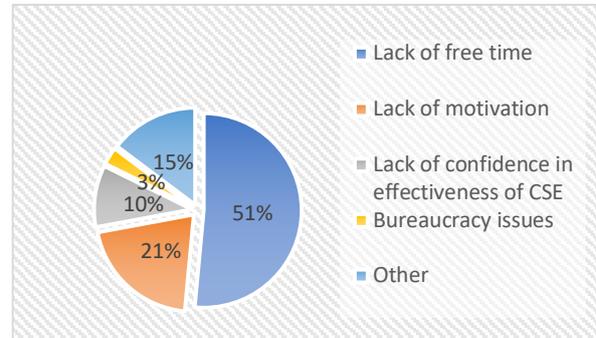


numbers to how respondents received their education revealed that Bolashak graduates are slightly more involved in CSE organizations than those who received other scholarships or self-financed, with Bolashak graduates representing 28 of the 50 respondents who participated in CSE activities.

To the question “Do you consider it important to participate in the civic life of the country?” a significant majority—96 of 113 participants—responded positively; seven responded negatively and nine did not answer. This number is rather indicative, as it shows respondents’ predisposition

toward future civic action. Among the main factors inhibiting respondents’ CSE were four key reasons, displayed in Figure 4.

**Figure 4. Factors inhibiting CSE**



Among “other” responses, people expressed fear of engagement and concerns about a lack of freedom of speech or freedom of expression.

Returning to the theoretical premise that education level has a causal effect on CSE, the survey revealed that the overwhelming majority of respondents (n=95) think that their experience and education abroad had a significant impact on their understanding of what it means to be socially engaged.

**Figure 5. Has your international education/work experience improved your understanding of civic engagement?**

Positive responses to this question clustered around several experiences. These included:

- The “classroom climate” in the West—an educational environment where students and instructors could informally and freely discuss social and political issues pertaining to their countries;
- Comparison of their experiences at home and abroad, which motivated them to change things up;
- Conceptual and critical understanding of how civic initiatives influence public institutions; and
- Participation in CSE organizations abroad and willingness to transfer best practices to Kazakhstan.

Some of the respondents gave rather encompassing descriptions of what prompted them to engage in CSE upon returning to Kazakhstan:

It seems to me that the issue is about people, international environment, cultural differences. In my particular case, my professors, classmates, their arguments, and our joint discussions influenced me profoundly [...] We talked a lot about the values that the EU promotes within itself and in the world. I think that encouraged me to reflect on the values in Kazakhstan's society and my contribution to it.<sup>34</sup>

Others noted their participation in initiatives abroad and explained that this transformed their psyche:

Active participation in a volunteer student organization in the US gave me a sense of [satisfaction] and skill development. I grasped the idea of what a community is.<sup>35</sup>

I understand that I can make positive changes at the local level, at my own level. Maybe these changes are not grand, but they benefit specific people, and I receive feedback from [them]. It brings deep human satisfaction.<sup>36</sup>

Some respondents highlighted the issue of values—the value of human capital abroad, respect for individual freedoms, and how the lack thereof in Kazakhstan influenced their perception of civic involvement:

In the West, a person is valued primarily as an individual. Human dignity is praised there. And I liked this attitude; I wanted to make life brighter in Kazakhstan too.<sup>37</sup>

To the question of “How do you understand the notion of social or civic engagement?,” responses took two main directions. The first group—those in favor of social change—underscored the societal needs, primarily mentioning volunteer initiatives

and the sense of belonging to a community rather than being indifferent to social problems:

Participation in the development of urban or state public policy through the expression of ideas, opinions, and suggestions. For example, taking part in the construction of your residential neighborhood common area, housing estate, etc.<sup>38</sup>

Many of this group's civically engaged youth suggested that CSE should involve creating a safe and inclusive platform, or feedback channel, for discussing and proposing solutions to the leading societal challenges.

The second group focused more heavily on the civic/political nexus, mainly the issues of protecting human rights, exerting more pressure on state bodies through the democratic mechanism of self-organization, standing up for social rights, and exercising the right to vote. Importantly, some respondents did not associate civic initiatives with the political opposition, stating that “civi[c] activity in Kazakhstan is often confused with the opposition while it is not.”

The majority of responses centered on the importance of being an active and responsible citizen who is not indifferent to the problems of his or her local community and society in general, and who is not only active online but also contributes to positive change offline.

## Conclusion

The multifaceted nature of civic engagement expressed in theory is reflected in the Kazakhstani realities on the ground. Western-educated youth are engaged in a variety of activities, not all of which can be categorized as direct civic engagement. Many of them are in a latent form. However, this hidden, unsystematic, and pre-political participation can lead to relatively explicit and political demands, as demonstrated by the unprecedented mass youth protests that preceded

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<sup>34</sup> Author's survey.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

and followed the presidential elections of June 2019.

The results of this study revealed that although Western-educated youth engage in social and civic initiatives only on a limited basis, they *do* engage. Young people readily contribute to educational, charitable, and volunteer activities, as well as to some human rights initiatives. They do not perceive themselves as an opposition force, but rather seek opportunities within the established political order to increase social justice, promote respect for human rights, strive for the betterment of society, and get their voices heard by decision-making bodies. This vision of cooperation rather than confrontation is challenging the established Western view that active youth civic engagement equates to opposition to the state.

The survey also showcased the receptiveness of this cohort to change, and these young people are fairly likely to participate in efforts to bring such change about. The regime, preoccupied as it is with the transfer of power and maintaining its stability, is not particularly interested in giving free rein to youth civic activism, let alone developing strong civic institutions. That is why the space for youth social expression remains minimal, and the state will probably continue to react quite harshly to uncontrolled displays of youth civic activism.

## Recommendations

Given this challenging political context—including the dominance of the state over virtually all socio-political domains—and based on the research findings at hand, I propose that the **Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan**:

- Develop a campus-based university peer-learning pilot program that would employ recent Kazakhstani graduates of Western universities as instructors to promote civic engagement through training in communication skills, critical thinking, and leadership. A curriculum development and oversight committee created together with a Ministry representative and comprised of faculty members, a Bolashak administrator, and more senior alumni of Western universities would select these graduates based on their proven track record of leadership and engagement with civic initiatives.

I further recommend that **university management**:

- Increase partnerships with Western universities and their recent graduates to support the teaching of civic and social responsibility in higher education;
- Create university-based research centers that would provide evidence-based models of civic engagement;
- Collaborate with international donor organizations that specialize in higher education to support such research centers; and
- Facilitate networking among Western-educated alumni.

## Chapter 3.

# Do-It-Yourself Activism: Youth, Social Media and Politics in Kazakhstan

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Daniyar Kosnazarov<sup>1</sup> (2018)

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Compared to their parents, who were born and socialized during the Soviet Union, Kazakh millennials and post-millennials<sup>2</sup> have had greater opportunities to study, travel, and express themselves on social media through art, fiction, or music. Although the state and elites continue to exert strong power over many economic sectors, both cohorts have wider options than their predecessors in terms of employment, social mobility, private business, and cultural activities. Likewise, while the government's restrictions on media,<sup>3</sup> religion,<sup>4</sup> and public expression<sup>5</sup> are growing, the younger generations are being raised in a comparatively free country. The high level of Internet penetration,<sup>6</sup> availability of inexpensive smartphones and PCs,<sup>7</sup> and wide variety of social media platforms present vast opportunities to consume global content and interact with locals and foreigners alike.

Even if young citizens of Kazakhstan have lived their entire lives under a single leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the presidential succession<sup>8</sup> to come could become a critical moment for consolidating generational consciousness, significantly affecting millennials' and particularly post-millennials' survival strategies. While many things will depend on power dynamics within the establishment, post-Nazarbayev-era state managers may seek public support to legitimize their new rule. Since the youth comprise one-fifth<sup>9</sup> of the country's population, government policies in such crucial areas as education, housing, and employment will need to address the challenges millennials and post-millennials face. Strategies for communicating these policies will also require significant modification, as the vast majority of young citizens are currently unaware of government initiatives and projects.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Daniyar Kosnazarov's research interests include youth, social media, and popular culture. He is Editor-in-Chief of Steppe, an independent digital media outlet in Kazakhstan that covers technology, entrepreneurship, education, leisure, and art. He has experience working in both the government and private think tanks in Kazakhstan, and previously served as Chair of the Department of Strategic Analysis at Narxoz University, evaluating strategy implementation. He holds an MA in International Relations and Regional Studies from Tsukuba University, Japan (2012), and a BA in International Relations from Selcuk University, Turkey (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Here I employ Pew Research Center's generation scheme. Whereas millennials were born between 1981 and 1996, post-millennials are the generation born after 1996 until 2012. See Michael Dimock, "Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins," *Pew Research Center*, January 17, 2019, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>.

<sup>3</sup> Olga Kudryashova, "Novyi zakon o SMI: kak gulyat' po Lezviyu nozha i ne poranit'sia," *Kursiv*, January 11, 2018, <https://kursiv.kz/news/obschestvo/2018-01/novyy-zakon-o-smi-kak-gulyat-po-lezviyu-nozha-i-ne-poranit-sya>.

<sup>4</sup> Amina Malakshinova, "Mazhilis v pervom chtenii odobril zapret religioznykh obriadov vne mecheti i tserkvi," *Informburo*, May 16, 2018, <https://informburo.kz/novosti/minreligiy-vystupilo-za-zapret-religioznyh-obryadov-vne-mecheti-i-cerkvi.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Asylkhan Mamashuly, "Pochemu v Kazahstane slozhno poluchit' razreshenie na miting," *Radio Azattyq*, October 1, 2018, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-otkaz-provedenie-mitinga/29518448.html>.

<sup>6</sup> "Tsifrovaia Tsentral'naia Aziia. Chast' pervaia: dostup k internetu," Central Asian Analytical Network, June 3, 2018, <http://caa-network.org/archives/13349>.

<sup>7</sup> "Tsifrovaya Tsentral'naya Aziya. Chast' vtoraya: mobil'nye telefony," Central Asian Analytical Network, March 28, 2018, <http://caa-network.org/archives/12707>.

<sup>8</sup> "Nazarbayev poluchil pravo pozhiznenno vozglavliat' Sovbez Kazakhstana," *Zakon*, July 12, 2018, <https://www.zakon.kz/4927697-nazarbaev-smozhet-pozhiznenno.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Youth Scientific Research Center, "The Youth of Kazakhstan 2018 National Report," December 21, 2018, <http://eljastary.kz/articles/62/2>.

<sup>10</sup> Khadisha Akayeva and Irina Mednikova, "Apatichnaia i ishushaia motivatsiia—molodezh' postsovetetskogo prostranstva," *Zhas Camp*, November 8, 2018, <https://zhascamp.kz/news/02028d66-1eb8-4fdb-ac33-b377b58980d6/>.

The aim of this study is not to speculate on the forthcoming succession in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, using this “known unknown” historical event to problematize state-youth relations in today’s fragile post-financial crisis and pre-transition context is an urgent task, due in particular to generational differences between the ruling class and the youth. Notwithstanding that the political establishment is slowly rejuvenating, with politicians born in the 1970s<sup>11</sup> taking up ministerial and mayoral posts, the persistence of nomenklatura-style management practices alienates post-Soviet generations. There is no strong bond between the two—and the consensus may become weaker if outdated engagement techniques are not changed.

As post-Karimov Uzbekistan has demonstrated, in its first years in power a new leadership aims to win the hearts and minds of ordinary citizens.<sup>12</sup> It is unclear whether this populist trend will continue or end once president Shavkat Mirziyoyev secures his own power vertical, but the power transition has created a window for certain democratic changes that offer a rare chance for the establishment of new relations between the young and the authorities. Kazakhstan, too, may one day open such a “transition window,” and if it does, it will be vital for civil society to be prepared to clearly articulate the demands and expectations of young voters.

The underlying assumption of this paper is that the future development of Kazakhstan will depend significantly on to what extent the government is prepared to adapt to changes in demographics, generational dynamics, and societal values. It is also driven by the author’s personal experience of engaging with youth as an institutional researcher at the private Narxoz University, where as many as 8,000 millennials and post-millennials study. My interaction with representatives of these two generations has intensified since joining the online media outlet *Steppe*,<sup>13</sup> which has thousands of young readers

across Kazakhstan. As an editor, I have had the privilege of speaking with many young Instagram celebrities, entrepreneurs, artists, and scholars, and have noticed that social media is providing millennials and post-millennials with an alternative public space to gain recognition from their peers and voice their concerns about key social and political issues.

The main argument of this paper is that millennials and post-millennials are using Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook not only to watch funny videos, post selfies, or read news, but also to consume political content created mostly by agemates. In this study, I focus on four of the most vivid and popular digital content creators, who are practicing civic activism on social media and raising youth awareness about many issues. Topics recognized as worthy of coverage by young content-makers may provide us with insight into what “politics” means to young people and how they use social media to drive interest in civic activism. It is particularly important to examine how young activists are framing and presenting their messages and ideas to “win the hearts and minds” of their peers. Indeed, social media provides a platform for diverse cultural exchange; knowing the latest trends, tastes, and mindsets of youth allows content-producers to get their attention.

Before proceeding to the selected cases, it would be useful to provide (1) a general youth portrait and (2) a detailed analysis of post-millennials. As they move toward adulthood, their attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles have the ability to shape or influence official rhetoric and government policies in key areas. The authorities already monitor social media on a daily basis to understand popular sentiment and prevent mass demonstrations; millennials and post-millennials, as the most active social media users, will therefore come to be on the radar of government agencies and will push the latter to formulate responses to their concerns and expectations. In light of this, I

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<sup>11</sup> Gul’nara Bazhkenova, “Kazahstanskije ‘Semidesiatniki’ v Politike”, *Radio Azattyq*, August 13, 2015, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/semidesyatniki-blog-bazhkenovoy/27186368.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Neil Buckley, “Once-Repressive Uzbekistan Begins a Post-Karimov Opening,” *Financial Times*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/6c37419c-0cbf-11e8-8eb7-42f857ea9f09>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://the-steppe.com/>

will also describe (3) the social media practices of Kazakh youth.

As these generations get older, their interest in politics will grow. It is therefore important not only to learn how they differ from older generations in terms of their use of social media, but also to scrutinize (4) the social media strategies young key opinion leaders (KOLs) use to attract attention and shape the views of their audiences. In many ways, this depends on the content's topical focus, how the content is produced, its length and visual design, and the language of the producer. It is also important to examine what meaning KOLs give to their social media presence and the content they have created.

### Kazakh Youth

According to 2018 figures, citizens aged 14-29 comprise one-fifth of Kazakhstan's population (21.5 percent or 3.9 million people).<sup>14</sup> While 43 percent of youth live in rural areas, there is continuous migration to cities, stimulated by the desire to find a decent job and take advantage of urban leisure and consumption infrastructure.<sup>15</sup> According to the private Brif Research Agency, young people have several major traits. First, they are conformist in the sense that family and marriage are the two most important goals in their lives. Only 10-15 percent of youth prioritize career, travel, and self-improvement over family.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, as a study by the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies revealed, helping other people, being an influential man or woman, having a good reputation, and being independent are not priorities for youth. They put material comfort above love and possession of knowledge. Notably, too, only 12

percent of respondents described faith as an "absolute value."<sup>17</sup>

Consequently, young boys and girls generally consider work a means to earn money. They care deeply about work insofar as it is a means of ensuring their comfort and welfare, but they do not believe it to have any inherent value. Although young people want to earn good money, therefore, they have no desire to work hard. Polls also show that most of them see university education as a waste of time, nothing more than a ritual necessary to get a diploma. However, parents and adolescents tend to lack an awareness that graduation from university is not a guarantee of a job and that there are few opportunities in the "prestigious professions" students often choose to study at university.<sup>18</sup> Hence, 41 percent of Kazakhstan's young citizens wish to leave the country to acquire permanent residency in a foreign country, find a job, or get education at a foreign university.<sup>19</sup> Official figures show that 120,000 Kazakh students are studying abroad, the vast majority of whom are enrolled in Russian and Chinese universities.<sup>20</sup> Such socio-economic problems as the low quality of local education, expensive housing, and unemployment push youth to migrate and seek better opportunities.<sup>21</sup>

These problems, according to the director of the Youth Information Service of Kazakhstan, Irina Mednikova, translate into a lack of motivation, political passivity, and paternalism.<sup>22</sup> Millennials and post-millennials can hardly name any official and civic initiatives that target youth. Even if they have learned about key government strategies, such as "Kazakhstan-2030," in school or university,

<sup>14</sup> Youth Scientific Research Center, "The Youth of Kazakhstan 2017 National Report," May 10, 2017, <http://eljastary.kz/articles/14/2>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Pyotr Val'ter and Dmitriy Kazakov, "5 interesnykh faktov o kazahstanskoi molodezhi," *Kapital*, March 3, 2018, <https://kapital.kz/gosudarstvo/67369/5-interesnykh-faktov-o-kazahstanskoi-molodezhi.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Roman Ivanov, "Mnogodetnye sem'i vozraschaiutsia v modu," *Info 365*, October 29, 2018, <https://365info.kz/2018/10/mnogodetnye-semi-vozvrashhayutsya-v-modu-sredi-molodezhi-issledovanie/>.

<sup>18</sup> Marat Shibutov, "Ekonomicheskoe budushchee Kazakhstana pod ugrozoi: trudovye perspektivy molodezhi," *Regnum*, April 9, 2018, <https://regnum.ru/news/2401645.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Val'ter and Kazakov, "5 interesnykh faktov."

<sup>20</sup> Ilya Astakhov, "Skol'ko kazahstanskikh studentov uchitsia za granitsej," *Today.kz*, March 5, 2018, <http://today.kz/news/kazahstan/2018-05-03/765342-skolko-kazahstanskikh-studentov-uchitsya-za-granitsej/>.

<sup>21</sup> Youth Scientific Research Center, "The Youth of Kazakhstan 2017."

<sup>22</sup> Akayeva and Mednikova, "Apatichnaia i ishushaia motivatsiia."

they do not consider politicians “role models.”<sup>23</sup> High-ranking officials, in particular, are widely perceived to be corrupt. Although young people are much happier and more optimistic than adults, they are also concerned with rising food prices, university fees, expensive rent prices, and low salaries. These issues might push young men and women in big cities, particularly in the capital, Astana, to participate in mass protests once they become adults and have more responsibilities. Nevertheless, the nationwide results of a Public Opinion Institute and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung survey shows that so far young Kazakh citizens are not interested in taking part in civic initiatives or engaging in politics.<sup>24</sup>

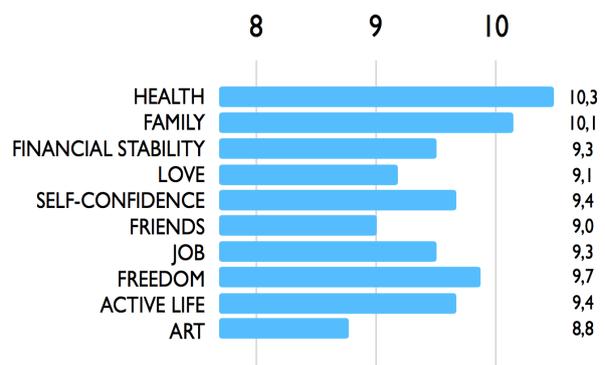
### Values of Post-Millennials

According to a survey conducted by a team of researchers (including myself) among post-millennials in five major cities in Kazakhstan,<sup>25</sup> the three things teens value most are health, family, and freedom. Of course, all of them want to avoid being sick, but the huge and growing popularity of social media apps—particularly Instagram, Dubsplash, and Musically—has motivated many of them to care about how they look in the mirror and what they eat. Thanks to high oil prices in the 2000s, practicing a “healthy lifestyle” (*zdorovyi obraz zhizhni*, or ZOZh) became trendy among the upper and middle classes: people were able to afford higher-quality food, sport activities, and even vacations in Turkey or Egypt. Although the fat years came to an abrupt end with the 2008 economic crisis and the decline in the oil price, which hit economic growth in Kazakhstan hard, the culture of ZOZh has certainly affected the younger generation, as it made their parents much more

concerned about what their children had on their plates and what they did after school.

Even if Kazakhstan is the largest consumer of alcohol in Central Asia,<sup>26</sup> teens drink less than members of the older generation,<sup>27</sup> who lived through mass unemployment and limited leisure after the fall of the Soviet Union. The proliferation and popularity of gyms and fitness centers across major cities<sup>28</sup> stimulates people to have an attractive physical appearance. Universities likewise encourage people to look cool and stylish. Young boys and girls use being healthy, fit, and sexy as a way to get respect and recognition from their peers—or, to put it in Bourdieusian terms, to gain and increase their symbolic capital.

**Figure 1. The most important values for teens**



Source: Author's survey

Another—and much darker—reason for the younger generation to prioritize their health is that Kazakh society has become excessively atomized, with families caring only about their own security and well-being. Severe economic problems have affected household incomes, aggravated unemployment, and forced the government to cut back its social provisions. Citizens expect less and less from the government in terms of improving their living standards. They view each new

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, “Molodezh Tsentral’noi Azii. Kazahstan,” 2016, <http://www.fes-centralasia.org/ru/statja/v-svet-vyshel-perevod-publikacii-molodezh-centralnoj-azii-kazahstan.html>.

<sup>25</sup> In 2017, the research team—consisting of higher education manager Arailym Ashirbekova, marketer Vitaly Lee, sociologist Aiman Zhussupova, and myself—conducted a survey among 1,500 schoolchildren in 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> grades from Atyrau, Pavlodar, Shymkent, Kyzylorda, and Semey.

<sup>26</sup> The World Bank, “Total Alcohol Consumption Per Capita (Liters of Pure Alcohol, Projected Estimates, 15+ Years of Age),” 2016, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.ALC.PCAP.LI?end=2016&locations=KZ-KG-TJ-UZ&start=2016&view=chart>.

<sup>27</sup> A. Nashkenova, D. Zhamaliyeva, and A. Zholaushibekova, “Rasprostranennost’ alkogolizma v Kazahstane,” 2015, <https://kaznmu.kz/press/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/РАСПРОСТРАНЁННОСТЬ-АЛКОГОЛИЗМА-В-КАЗАХСТАНЕ-.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Askar Mashayev, “Ia veru v fitness,” *Expert Kazahstan*, July 4, 2017, <http://expertonline.kz/a14976/>.

government initiative with suspicion, thinking that these projects are created and launched only to steal money from taxpayers. Raised in this circumspect atmosphere, teens understand that if they do not care for their health now, they will not be able to achieve anything in the future.

Since parents want their children to be successful, to thrive financially, and to care for them when they get old, young people feel constant pressure to get good marks in school, pass university entrance exams, and find a decent job after graduation. Like “helicopter parents” in the US,<sup>29</sup> parents in Kazakhstan are over-focused on their children: though they may want children to take responsibility for their own actions and decisions, elders seek to control and direct young people’s lives as much as possible.

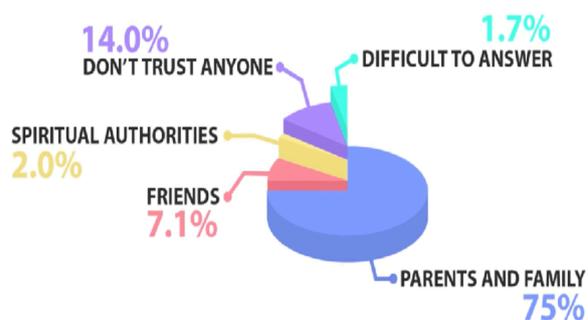
Two local drivers of such behavior need to be specifically mentioned. First, having been traumatized themselves by the harsh realities of the 1990s, the older generation simply does not want their children to find themselves in similar conditions and therefore overprotects them. Second, the Kazakh tradition of helping relatives during bad economic times as a survival strategy is still being practiced, leading to expectations that young people will likewise care about their elders in the future. The stakes are even higher for the one-third of Kazakh children who are being raised by a divorced single parent.

Accordingly, family is the second most important thing to teenagers after health. The two are, in fact, related: young people are aware of the precarious conditions in which their families live and the tough competition in the labor market, and know that they must be physically and mentally strong to live up to their parents’ expectations. They also feel how weak they are without the moral and financial support of their parents, particularly during the university years. Exposed to consumerist culture via the internet and media, young urbanites realize that their parents are their main sponsors, since the vast majority of teenagers do not work to get pocket money. Nevertheless, as Figure 1 shows, concerns about financial stability are significant.

That is why teens value self-confidence and ascribe huge importance to employment. With social mobility in steep decline, teenagers realize that the support of their parents is critical to tackling the harsh realities of the adult world.

The other side of the coin is that three-quarters of the new generation most trusts their parents and family members. Meanwhile, 14 percent do not trust anyone, 7 percent most trust their friends, and just 2 percent of respondents count on spiritual leaders. Their views may evolve in the future, but facts on the ground show that Kazakh youth consider family the one and only source of authority. This reflects the broader societal trend of a loss of confidence in national-level institutions.

**Figure 2. Whom do teenagers trust most?**



Source: Author's survey

In a context where teens are socializing less and less with their peers offline, the very concept of friendship needs to be re-evaluated. Interactions with classmates and neighbors are less binding and “self-sacrificing” than in the past: they may go out together, but just to relax and take their minds off test preparation for a while. Adolescents in 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> grade spend most of their after-school time on national university entrance tests. Parents and school managers exert strong pressure on students and expect them to get high scores. While families want their children to get government scholarships, principals and teachers are primarily concerned with the school’s ranking. The pressure is so strong and expectations so high that some boys and girls

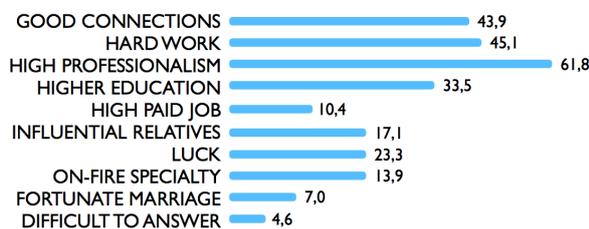
<sup>29</sup> Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (London: Penguin, 2018).

have committed suicide after failing to receive high scores.<sup>30</sup>

For many teenagers, passing university exams becomes the ultimate goal, forcing them to spend all their time on test preparation. Although young people are very critical about the quality of higher education in Kazakhstan, they almost universally agree that a university diploma is a prerequisite to getting a job. To the majority of our respondents (73 percent), having a degree is an extremely important asset to building a career. That being said, only 27.8 percent think that their parents could afford to contribute to this education. In a context of rising tuition fees and falling incomes, most elders cannot send their children to prestigious and expensive universities. Teens are therefore obliged to compete with their peers to secure a scholarship and decrease the burden on their families.

Symptomatically, young Kazakh citizens are embracing individualism. Almost one-third assume that their personality is what sets them apart from their agetates. Sixty-one percent think that being a high-quality professional will make them successful in life. Forty-five percent believe in the benefits of hard work and 43 percent acknowledge the importance of having or establishing good connections with other people. One-tenth of young people think that working at a highly-paid job would mean they were successful, while only 7 percent of teens consider an advantageous marriage a means of achieving success.

**Figure 3. What defines success?**



Source: Author's survey

These findings clearly illustrate that adolescents raised in a period of slow economic growth are quite realistic about their capabilities. That is why they acknowledge the importance of being an in-demand professional who can withstand any difficulties as an adult in an individualistic, non-meritocratic society.

Accordingly, almost half of them believe that good connections (*khorošie sviazi*) matter. Accustomed to paying bribes or using connections to get imported goods and receive state services quicker than others during the Soviet era, the older generations continue to rely on the assistance of their relatives, close friends, and acquaintances when seeking a job, organizing expensive celebrations, and enrolling their kids in kindergarten or school. Adolescents are aware of the importance of having influential elders: many of them have heard rumors about professors and university staff taking bribes from students in exchange for high marks. Moreover, teens have grown accustomed to stories about elders helping their own children to get positions in local government entities. This reality has also led young people to mistrust various institutions in Kazakhstan.

**Figure 4. What teens think their lives are lacking**



Source: Author's survey

### Youth and Social Media

Kazakh millennials and post-millennials spend a great deal of time online. In this, they are not entirely different from older generations: all in all, 70 percent of the population is now using various social media platforms to chat, share opinions, post

<sup>30</sup> Madiya Torebayeva, "Podrostkovyi suitsid: pugaiushchaia statistika Kazahstana," DW, July 3, 2015, <https://www.dw.com/ru/подростковый-суицид-пугающая-статистика-казахстана/a-18559354>.

photos, or watch videos.<sup>31</sup> The difference is which social media these different generations use: young people aged 18-29 are much more active on vKontakte and Instagram, while their elders prefer MoiMir, Odnoklassniki, and Facebook.<sup>32</sup>

While many state-owned and private TV channels have turned to YouTube and other social media platforms to reach alternative audiences, it is telling that the private “Gakku” Kazakh music channel is the most popular YouTube account in the country, with 1.4 million subscribers and 892 million views.<sup>33</sup> The second most popular channel on YouTube is “Channel 7,” known for a variety of sitcoms produced in the Kazakh language.<sup>34</sup> Young Russian-speaking video-makers known as the “Yuframe,” who first became famous on Instagram, decided to launch their own YouTube channel in 2015.<sup>35</sup> They now have over 635,000 subscribers and their small video sketches, social videos, and pranks have been watched 141 million times. The “Khakha Show,” established in 2015, is another popular channel, with videos produced exclusively for a Kazakh-speaking audience.<sup>36</sup>

In 2018, it became possible to observe a certain institutionalization of social media production with the establishment of the “Salem Social Media” (SSM) agency, headed by Aleksandr Aksyutits, former Press Secretary of Nur Otan, the presidential party.<sup>37</sup> Salem provides financial, logistical, and technical support to young talents producing a wide range of video content. The agency has co-opted several successful projects and attracted very popular Instagram and YouTube celebrities to various shows, events, and video products. It now controls 8 major YouTube accounts with a total of 740,000 subscribers. These channels include “Normal’no obshchaites” [Talk No

Bullshit], “Shou Iriny Kairatovny” [The Irina Kairatovna Show], and “Shtat Nebraska” [The State of Nebraska], all of which were very popular before the establishment of SSM. In addition, over 200 short videos produced by SSM are published and promoted each month via 9 Instagram accounts with a total of 1.3 million followers.<sup>38</sup>

Consequently, young citizens play a major role in the development of Kazakhstan’s social media and their saturation with content in the Russian and Kazakh languages. In the absence of a strong meritocracy in many government agencies and employment problems facing youth in the private sector, social media provides one of the few social mobility opportunities available to young people. Given that these creative men and women became popular for their entertaining videos, one might assume that young followers are not interested in consuming political content, but they are in fact not apathetic about what is going on in Kazakhstan.

The huge amount of funny videos circulating on Instagram and YouTube may marginalize producers of political content, particularly content created or sponsored by opposition figures such as Mukhtar Ablyazov. Following France’s decision not to extradite the ex-banker to Kazakhstan, Ablyazov launched a massive YouTube campaign<sup>39</sup> against the Kazakh government and urged citizens of the country to unite and protest. Many political analysts argue that the government’s 2018 decision to block social media platforms in the evenings was occasioned by Ablyazov’s daily YouTube videos and Telegram posts.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Sholpan Zhabayeva, “Itogi oprosa: socsetiami pol’zuiutsia 70% kazakhstanstsev,” *Informburo*, April 21, 2017, <https://informburo.kz/novosti/itogi-oprosa-socsetyami-polzuyutsya-70-kazahstancev.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Gakku TV, <https://www.youtube.com/user/gakkutv>.

<sup>34</sup> The Seven Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/user/TheSevenChannel>.

<sup>35</sup> Yuframe, [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=yuframe](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=yuframe).

<sup>36</sup> Xaxa Show, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSNiekaSWal-al89je8SKQw>.

<sup>37</sup> “Aleksandr Aksyutits naznachen press-sekretarem — rukovoditelem press-sluzhby partii ‘Nur Otan,’” *Kazinform*, May 17, 2016, [https://www.inform.kz/ru/aleksandr-aksyutic-naznachen-press-sekretarem-rukovoditelem-press-sluzhby-partii-nur-otan\\_a2904476](https://www.inform.kz/ru/aleksandr-aksyutic-naznachen-press-sekretarem-rukovoditelem-press-sluzhby-partii-nur-otan_a2904476).

<sup>38</sup> Alexandr Axyutic, “Salem Social Media: Fabric ekskluzivnogo kontenta,” <https://www.slideshare.net/KazakhstanPressClub/salem-media>.

<sup>39</sup> See his YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCf0jMvh9QZrR3sKkyHDjNq>.

<sup>40</sup> Kazakh users’ access to Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Telegram is hindered after 8 pm each day. See Almaz Kumenova, “Kazakhstan blokiruet internet, kogda Ablyazov vykhodit v onlain,” *EurasiaNet*, July 4, 2018, <https://russian.eurasianet.org/node/65305>.

While security agencies are closely tracking those who support Ablyazov, the appointment of younger bureaucrats to several key bodies responsible for engagement with civil society and official propaganda implies that Akorda—the Kazakh presidential administration—cares deeply about Ablyazov’s campaigns and the youth’s estrangement from politicians.

Criticized for its lack of engagement with ordinary citizens, Nur Otan is now striving to rebrand itself and become attractive to young citizens. Part of this effort is the appointment as first deputy of 48-year-old former MP Maulen Ashimbayev,<sup>41</sup> a graduate of Tufts University’s Fletcher School. Former Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies director Erlan Karin’s (age 43) appointment to head the biggest government channel, “Kazakhstan,” and his active recruitment of creative millennials to various projects, as well as the introduction of new TV programs, confirms the authorities’ conscious desire to attract young people’s attention to the state-controlled media. After former mayor of Astana Asset Issekeshiev (age 48) became Head of the Akorda Presidential Office, popular Facebook blogger Zhana Ilyicheva was invited to a press conference given by Nazarbayev. The Minister of Information and Communication, Dauren Abayev (age 39), is himself a very active Facebook user, using the platform to respond to ordinary citizens’ questions and polemicize with famous bloggers and entrepreneurs. These appointments might simply be part of Akorda’s outreach in advance of the next presidential election, but the decision to make 2019 “the Year of Youth” implies that there is more to it than that, a more thoughtful strategy of reconciling the youth with the political authorities.

### Young Activists on Social Media

In this section, I look at young activists that use different social media platforms to practice civic activism and increase their followers’ awareness of many political issues in Kazakhstan. Although these content creators and influencers are millennials, a

substantial share of their subscribers are post-millennials.

**Za Nami Uzhe Vyekhali.** Two former journalists, Dmitry Dubovitsky (age 29) and Dmitry Khagai (age 30), decided to launch this YouTube channel in August 2017. Although the first six months were in beta testing mode, their vlogs on contemporary political issues have started to attract the attention of adult viewers, turning these ex-journalists into one of the most popular content-creators in the Kazakhstani blogosphere. Today, they have more than 104,000 subscribers, the vast majority of whom are 18 or older. With their videos having been viewed more than 16 million times, the channel is now able to monetize its popularity by advertising various new applications, news outlets, betting firms, etc.

The main mission of the channel is to pose the hard questions that media outlets do not dare ask of politicians, corporate players, and celebrities due to (self-)censorship. The authors argue that YouTube allows for independent editorial policy and provides a forum to talk about things that ordinary citizens care deeply about. The topics of the most popular videos are the possibility of early presidential elections, the bankruptcy of local banks, the illegal behavior of rich kids, the resignation of Nazarbayev’s closest affiliates, the tragic killing of figure skater Denis Ten, security sector reforms, the scenario of Russian secession, etc. By talking about these critical issues, they hope to awaken civic consciousness.

**Figure 5. The cover of “Za Nami Uzhe Vyekhali” Channel**



<sup>41</sup> “Zhas Otan Must Be Core of Kazakhstan’s Youth Policy—Maulen Ashimbayev,” *Inform.kz*, January 23, 2019, [https://www.inform.kz/en/zhas-otan-must-be-core-of-kazakhstan-s-youth-policy-maulen-ashimbayev\\_a3491041](https://www.inform.kz/en/zhas-otan-must-be-core-of-kazakhstan-s-youth-policy-maulen-ashimbayev_a3491041).

Source: “Za nami uzhe vyekhali” YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCILLaUQtcaabbw9-uQysRjw>.

Dmitry Dubovitsky, the co-founder of the channel, thinks that YouTube allows content-creators to reach far more people than do TV channels, newspapers, and other online media resources. According to him, there is no longer any need to hire too many journalists or pay for the creation and maintenance of a website or publishing house to print your newspapers: “If the video you created is interesting, then YouTube will suggest it to other users. You don’t need to pay for an advertisement.”<sup>42</sup> This means that with little money you can become a visible and popular content-creator within the local YouTube sphere.

Rapid feedback from viewers is crucial, as it helps content-makers adapt their work to make the audience feel that their suggestions and opinions matter. This in turn helps build a strong bond between producers and consumers, which is necessary to increase the number of subscribers and amount of payments from future clients. Although the project is currently far from bringing in substantial revenue, making videos and talking explicitly about sensitive issues brings the creators a sense of self-fulfillment.

While declining to frame themselves as political activists, the founders of the channel embrace civic activism. They want ordinary citizens to understand that each political development, from an increase in gasoline prices to the ratification of the Caspian Sea agreement, directly affects their lives. In this respect, the project is driven by a desire to foster individuals’ involvement and interest in political issues. However, they do not agitate people to go into the streets and organize mass demonstrations. The founders affirm that they are not going to join any oppositional forces and do not see any of them as constructive movements.

“*Jurttyñ Balasy.*” Murat Daniyar, a 22-year-old Russian-speaking blogger from Almaty, uploaded his first video to YouTube in September

2017. Since then, he has produced 37 videos, prompting 20,925 users to subscribe to his channel, “Jurttyñ Balasy” (Other People’s Child).<sup>43</sup> Eighty percent of subscribers are men aged 18-34, mostly from Almaty. Murat does everything alone: he writes scenarios, films footage, and edits.

Murat prioritizes YouTube over other platforms because Instagram is full of “Viners,”<sup>44</sup> people who produce short, fun videos and do not push people to think about social problems. According to him, if one can generate interesting content on YouTube, one easily increases one’s number of followers. Murat describes Kazakhstan’s blogging sphere as sterile and argues that many public figures, particularly famous Viners, are deliberately staying silent on social and political problems. He urges these celebrities to publicly voice political opinions, since millions of young citizens are paying close attention to what they do. He says that it is not a crime to be civically engaged and explicitly opine about the wrongdoings of national or local governing bodies.<sup>45</sup>

**Figure 6. Murat Daniyar in one of his blogs on YouTube**



Source: “*JURTTYŃ BALASY*” YouTube channel, [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCImqO1ELiMtzP2YGXhWE\\_lw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCImqO1ELiMtzP2YGXhWE_lw).

In his 5-10-minute-long blogs Murat talks about controversial issues and critically examines many sins of contemporary Kazakh society. The problems of urban transportation in Almaty are what first provoked him to go to YouTube. To his surprise, his first video received positive feedback from many

<sup>42</sup> Personal written interview with Dmitry Dubovitsky, November 25, 2018.

<sup>43</sup> His channel is available at [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCImqO1ELiMtzP2YGXhWE\\_lw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCImqO1ELiMtzP2YGXhWE_lw).

<sup>44</sup> Kristina Nikulina, “Vainer—kleimo ili blagoslovenie? Skol’ko zarabatyvaiut na Instagram v Kazahstane,” *The Steppe*, August 15, 2016, <https://the-steppe.com/news/business/2016-08-15/vaynery>.

<sup>45</sup> Personal written interview with Murat Daniyar, November 24, 2018.

viewers. Commentators encouraged him to continue making blogs and agreed, if necessary, to donate money to support him in doing this. Subsequent videos were dedicated to the hottest issues, including the renaming of one of the central streets of Almaty to Nazarbayev Avenue, the latinization of the Kazakh alphabet, and public hearings on the construction of a new ski resort in the Kok Zhailau valley. The young YouTuber heavily criticizes key opinion leaders, claiming that they engage in “political prostitution.” He assumes that those public figures who supported the construction of the ski resort are corrupt and wicked. Murat laments that Kazakh society is not shaming these individuals, whom he claims are rotten at the core.

Murat is also critical of some Soviet-style practices that persist in today’s Kazakhstan. Many university students are, for instance, forced to attend official political celebrations as “extras.” The blogger blames city administrations for this and treats the Kok Zhailau case as evidence of a confrontation between civil society and the authorities. He thinks officials should stop treating citizens as mindless “sheeple,” since times have changed and the Soviet Union no longer exists.

Accordingly, the main goal of “Jurttyn balasy” is to raise awareness among young citizens and increase their interest in politics. Although Murat hesitates to call himself a political blogger, he acknowledges that with each passing day the number of videos on his channel about political issues increases. He therefore admits that what he does is directly related to politics and political activism. He argues that young people, tired of moral admonition and the criticism of their elders, would rather listen to an agemate than to an adult male. Consequently, he positions himself as an ordinary guy who loves to hang out with friends, play video games, and read books. Murat believes that the new generation will make Kazakhstan a better place and must show that the youth is ready for change.<sup>46</sup>

*Le Shapalaque Comics.*<sup>47</sup> Launched in March 2017 by several enthusiasts from Astana in their early twenties, Le Shapalaque produces comics and satirical illustrations. Its popular topics include corruption, power relations between the younger generation and their elders in the family and work, the differences between the former capital (Almaty) and the current one (Astana), traditions, popular culture, and everyday practices of ordinary citizens.

With 20,700 followers on Instagram, the Le Shapalaque team argues that social media helps them communicate directly with readers and reach them faster than classical media outlets, including newspapers and television. It is less visible on other social media, with only 1,486 followers on VKontakte, and even fewer on Facebook and Telegram. Half of consumers of Le Shapalaque comics are aged 18-24; they are university students or recent graduates from Almaty, Astana, Shymkent and Karaganda. Just over half are women. According to the creators of the comics, this particular audience prefers Instagram because it is old enough to have left vKontakte, but still too young to be active on Facebook.

While regarding themselves as artists, the goal of the creators of Le Shapalaque is to push people to think critically. For them, it is a political project, but they are hesitant to consider it a form of political activism. When asked about means of engaging in politics, they somewhat sarcastically responded that one needs to be a member of the ruling political party, Nur Otan, hinting that opportunities are scarce for young creative people like them. They have never participated in any political campaigns and contend that politics needs to be fixed.<sup>48</sup>

The authorities turn a blind eye to many socio-economic and political problems. Le Shapalaque comics try to create a bond with ordinary citizens by demonstrating that someone else does care about these issues. According to Le Shapalaque founder Adil Zakenov, humor is often the only tool that can help people tackle the world’s

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

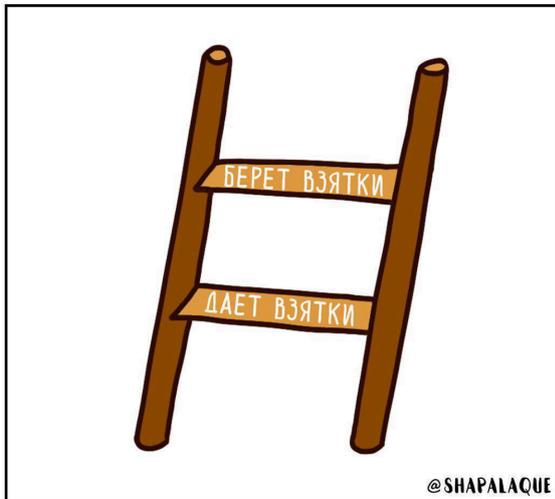
<sup>47</sup> *Le Shapalaque* is a Francization of the Kazakh “Шапалақ” (slap).

<sup>48</sup> Personal written interview with Adil Zakenov, November 25, 2018.

toughest challenges.<sup>49</sup> One of their comics, for instance, describes the career ladder of state employees: first give bribes to access power, then take bribes once in power (see Figure 7). Aware of the legal risks in a country like Kazakhstan, the team members consult with lawyers before publishing some of their works on social media.

**Figure 7. The career ladder of a state employee: give bribes, take bribes**

### КАРЬЕРНАЯ ЛЕСТНИЦА ЧИНОВНИКА



Source: La Shapalauque Comics [@shapalauque] Instagram profile, <https://www.instagram.com/shapalauque/>.

**#SaveKokZhailau.** Environmental issues are becoming a crucial element of youth mobilization. The new generation of activists and influencers is, for instance, calling on social media users to sign a petition against the construction of a ski resort in the mountainous Kok Zhailau area of Almaty that has been lobbied for by local authorities. While activists of different ages and backgrounds are united against this expensive initiative, the engagement of the #SaveKokZhailau team could be seen as a turning point. Their publications on

Instagram helped to collect over 33,000 signatures after the online petition was launched at the beginning of November 2018. Although the final decision has not yet been made, local authorities have been forced to use different tactics to accommodate these protests. In early December, Almaty mayor Baurzhan Baybek said that the authorities had taken into consideration all critical remarks and suggestions coming from civil society and had decided to make certain changes, such as decreasing the area of deforestation.<sup>50</sup>

Responding to some of the skeptics, art-activist Sunbike Suleimenova (age 25) argues that the Instagram hype around Kok Zhailau is “returning voices, rights, and freedom to the people,” as many citizens are fed up with being silent. Instagram is a “virtual square” that allows people to gather, rise up, and talk about important things.<sup>51</sup>

Madina Mussina, an Instagram influencer, invites her 72,100 followers to share posts about “Save Kok Zhailau.” She thinks that in order to achieve their ultimate goal, activists need to boost the hype. After her first several publications on this topic, students began to send her private messages saying that university or college authorities were telling them to put their signatures on blank sheets of paper or on documents to support the construction of the ski resort.<sup>52</sup> According to Mussina, times have changed: applying Soviet-era style methods of scaremongering and treating people as a “herd of sheep” no longer works. In the era of digital technology, social media, and a diversity of information sources, there is a need for an open and sincere dialogue between society and rulers.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Mariya Dubovaya and Zhadra Zhulmuhametova, “Baybek o Kok Zhailau: nam piatatiutsia naviazhyvat’ zabluzhdenie, chto kurort—eto vredno,” *Informburo*, December 7, 2018, <https://informburo.kz/novosti/baybek-o-kok-zhaylyau-nam-pytayutsya-navyazyvat-zabluzhdenie-cto-kurort-eto-vredno.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Oksana Tarnetskaya, “Haip ili sovremennoe vyrazhenie grazhdanskoi Positsii,” *Living Asia*, November 13, 2018, <http://livingasia.online/2018/11/13/haip-ili-sovremennoe-vyrazhenie-grazhdanskoi-pozicii/>.

<sup>52</sup> Madina Mussina [@devochkakolbasa], “Sokhranim Kok Zhailau,” *Instagram*, November 8, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bp53yFWnUHA/>.

**Figure 8. Instagram influencer Madina Mussina**



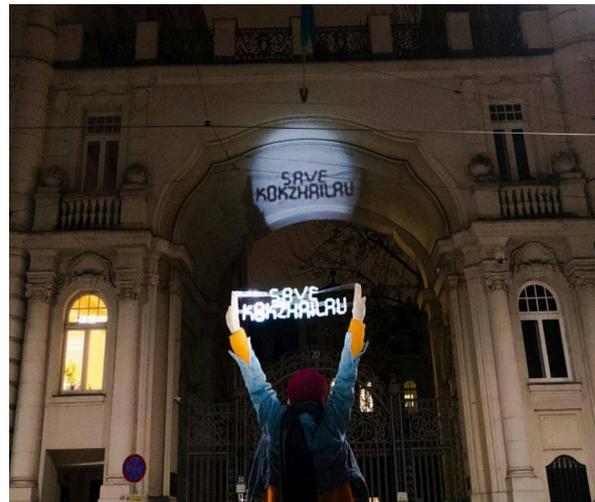
Source: Madina Mussina [@devochkakolbasa] Instagram profile, <https://www.instagram.com/devochkakolbasa/>.

Mussina calls herself a citizen with soul, feeling, and opinion. She does not want to be afraid of sharing her point of view, since she is “not agitating for violence, drug abuse and murder, but for preserving nature.”<sup>53</sup> What she cares about is protecting the environment and preventing the implementation of the “crazy ideas of fat men with a lot of money.” While the influencer acknowledges that her interest in this topic emerged only recently, similarly to blogger Murat Daniyar, she criticizes celebrities and so-called “opinion leaders” for abstaining from sharing their own views on Kok Zhailau. She thinks that if someone has many followers and is respected by the people, he or she should talk about social issues. Mussina argues that there is no need to organize or attend street protests, since social media can help pressure the authorities with no more than a click.

Following Madina Mussina, 30-year-old actress and Instagram influencer Aisulu Azimbayeva (96,600 subscribers) has at least once urged her followers to assert themselves and defend Kok Zhailau against “rich men who do not care about the people.”<sup>54</sup> To complement this Instagram activism, young artists Anvar Musrepov and Nazira Karimova staged a performance near the Embassy of Kazakhstan in Vienna at the

beginning of November 2018. They protested against the ski resort by organizing a “luminous picket.” On his Instagram account, Musrepov explained that the government of Kazakhstan has never considered the opinion of ordinary citizens and only cares about its international image. They thus decided to attract the attention of an international audience to trigger an official response from Astana. Even if this picket went largely unnoticed, it is an example of the kind of tactics employed by young Kazakh activists. In November 2018, a group of Kazakh students gathered in Times Square to raise global awareness about Kok Zhailau and show solidarity with their fellows in Kazakhstan. To be heard and to avoid being sentenced for protesting by Kazakhstan’s law enforcement agencies, young activists choose foreign cities, such as Vienna or New York, for their street actions.

**Figure 9. An art performance by Anvar Musrepov and Nazira Karimova**



Source: Anvar Musrepov [@anvarmusrepov] Instagram profile, <https://www.instagram.com/anvarmusrepov/>.

## Conclusion

Even as the Kazakh authorities are refashioning the content of state-owned TV channels, using social media, and appointing younger bureaucrats to the ministries and agencies that curate so-called

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Aisulu Azimbayeva [@strangeice], “Sokhranim Kok Zhailau,” *Instagram*, November 8, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bp5By89IDme/>.

“ideological work,” millennials’ and post-millennials’ lack of trust in official institutions persists. The political indifference of young citizens is driven by fear of organizing and attending mass demonstrations, as well as by a lack of faith that the government will listen to their claims.

Nevertheless, the growing popularity of the content created by young bloggers, satirists, and influencers implies that coverage of political and socio-economic issues is beginning to sell. Social media platforms act as safe spaces with less censorship and government control, giving young activists a unique opportunity to share their

political views and interact with their audiences without any mediators. The topics they cover, ranging from urban transportation to corruption and environment, show that creators and audience alike are concerned with national and city-level problems. Even if the Kazakhstani youth is largely apolitical, their very ignorance and lack of respect for the authorities is, in essence, an unconscious political attitude that limits the impact of state propaganda. On the eve of a presidential transition, Akorda authorities are faced with the serious challenge of finding a common language with the country’s youth, which seems to be slowly entering a new era of at least partial civic activism.

## Chapter 4.

# Choosing Your Battles: Different Languages of Kazakhstani Youth Activism

Nafissa Insebayeva<sup>1</sup> (2019)

*“The state is obliged to listen to its citizens and, most importantly, to hear them,”*

- Kassym-Jomart Tokayev<sup>2</sup>

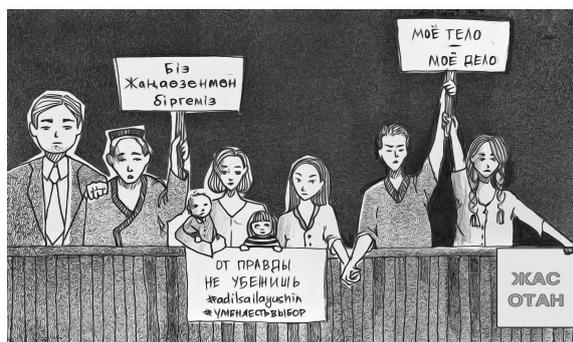


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On March 19th, 2019, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the first president of the Republic of Kazakhstan, announced his resignation as the nation’s leader after nearly three decades in office. In a televised national address, Nazarbayev handed power over to the Chairman of the Upper House Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, while stating he would “remain the Chairman of the Security Council, which is vested with serious powers.”<sup>3</sup> The timing of this decision

took many Kazakhstanis by surprise, causing significant speculation regarding the country’s future.

The next day, during his speech at the Joint Session of the Chambers of Parliament, President Tokayev praised Nazarbayev’s decision to “voluntarily relinquish his powers as the Head of State,” and suggested Nazarbayev’s name be “immortalized” in the capital’s name.<sup>4</sup> The news about renaming of the capital from Astana to Nur-Sultan was met with mixed reactions. While some believed it was an appropriate way to honor Kazakhstan’s distinguished contemporary,<sup>5</sup> others took to the streets<sup>6</sup> and social media with slogans such as “Нурсултан не мой город” and “У меня есть выбор” (translation “Nursultan is not my city”, “I have a choice”) to express their disapproval of the proposal.<sup>7</sup>

Although these demonstrations surrounding the first transition of power in Kazakhstan were not the largest in scale, they served as a starting point and inspiration for future youth movements. In the months since this

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<sup>2</sup> Aidana Yergaliyeva, “Kazakh President Calls for Gradual Reforms in First National Council of Public Trust Meeting”, *The Astana Times*, September 7, 2019. Accessed September 12, 2019

<sup>3</sup> Nursultan Nazarbayev, “Address of the Head of State Nursultan Nazarbayev to the People of Kazakhstan”, Astana, March 19, 2019. Accessed September 12, 2019

<sup>4</sup> Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, “Speech by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at the Joint Session of the Chambers of Parliament”, Astana, March 20, 2019. Accessed September 2, 2019

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Janibek Bektemissov, “Renaming Capital an Appropriate Way to Honour Kazakhstan’s Founding President”, *The Astana Times*, March 26, 2019. Accessed March 27, 2019

<sup>6</sup> Reuters, “V Kazhastane Zaderzhany Uchastniki Aक्सii Protesta Protiv Pereimenovaniya Stolitsy”, *Golos Ameriki*, March 21, 2019. Accessed March 29, 2019 <https://www.golos-ameriki.ru/a/police-detain-protesters-in-kazakhstan/4840818.html>; Asemgul Mukhitkyzy and Erzhan Amirkhanov, “V Gorode Nazarbayeva’. Pereimenovanie Stolitsy i Zaderzhaniya v Astane”, March 21, 2019. Accessed March 22, 2019

RFE/RL’s Kazakh Service, “Kazakh Police Detain Protesters In Several Cities During Norouz Celebrations”, *RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty*, March 22, 2019. Accessed March 23, 2019 <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-police-detain-protesters-in-several-cities-during-norouz-celebration/29835901.html>

<sup>7</sup> For example, there are about 5000 posts with #умениествьбор (translation “I have a choice”) on Instagram. Moreover, one of the petitions against renaming of the capital collected as many as 45,000 signatures in a couple of days. See “My Protiv Pereimenovaniya Stolitsy”, March 20, 2019. Accessed October 17, 2019

transition, the country has witnessed an unprecedented number of protests and demonstrations: from youth digital activism campaigns and protest art to “solitary pickets” and rallies. Thousands of people have reportedly been arrested for their involvement in peaceful, but “unsanctioned” protests.<sup>8</sup> While various forms of activism existed long before Nazarbayev’s resignation, it is the relative scale of mass participation, media coverage, and an emerging sense of urgency that make post-Nazarbayev instances of youth civic engagement of a particular interest.



Illustration by Mori. All rights belong to the author.

While many works have studied the activist field in the Kazakhstani setting,<sup>9</sup> the existing discourses of Kazakh-language and Russian-language activism, beyond the widespread “ethnic vs. civic Kazakh nationalism”<sup>10</sup> nexus, remain unexplored. Despite the linguistic heterogeneity that persists in the country, the role of language in civic engagement and political participation among youth has not yet received due attention. This is particularly important in light of these recent developments in Kazakhstan. There is thus a great need to highlight the profound effect of language on the undeniable increase of youth activism in Kazakhstan. It is important to emphasize that the point of this

particular discussion is not to differentiate between Kazakh and Russian speakers per se, but to explore how themes and discourses of activism vary depending on the language.

This study acknowledges that language plays a crucial role in youth’s socialization as engaged citizens and, consequently, their decisions in regard to ‘formal or informal’ and ‘traditional or alternative’ political behavior. Various informational and cultural environments shape people’s identities and value systems over time, and, by extension, impact their interpretations of civic engagement. This paper also acknowledges that language is not the only factor that informs stakeholders’ behaviors; other socio-cultural and economic variables play a vital role as well. While this is an interesting avenue for further research, the scope of this study focuses more narrowly on the trends and narratives of Kazakh- and Russian-language civic engagement exhibited by Kazakhstani youth. In addition, the general focus of the study is to analyze Kazakh- and Russian-language activism in the two biggest cities in Kazakhstan: Nur-Sultan and Almaty.

This paper therefore seeks to answer the following question: What are the key differences and similarities between existing discourses of Kazakh- and Russian-language social and political activism in Kazakhstan? The study concludes that language does not constitute the key differentiating factor between socially and politically active youth in Kazakhstan; rather, it is the activists’ willingness to cooperate with government-supported organizations and movements which largely dictates the divisions in the activist space.

The work draws on extensive key-informant interviews, media materials, and relevant legal documents—such as the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan and others. Interviews were chosen as one of the major sources of qualitative data due to their ability to cover both factual data

<sup>8</sup>Reid Standish, “Kazakhstan’s Second-Ever President Can’t Tolerate Protest”, *Foreign Policy*, June 10, 2019. Accessed October 2, 2019 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/10/kazakhstans-second-ever-president-cant-tolerate-protest/>;

Associated Press, “Kazakhstan Updates Tally of Protest Arrests to Nearly 4,000”, *Voice of America*, June 18, 2019. Accessed October 2, 2019 <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/kazakhstan-updates-tally-protest-arrests-nearly-4000>

<sup>9</sup>For example, Sergey Marinin, “Agents of Change? Civic Engagement of Western-Educated Youth in Kazakhstan,” *CAP Paper* #222. The George Washington University, Washington DC, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Serik Beisembayev, “Fenomen Kazakhskogo Natsionalisma v Kontekste Segodnyashnei Politiki: Ot Otritsaniya k Ponimaniyu,” *Central Asian Analytical Network*, 2015 <https://caa-network.org/archives/4360>.

and subjective perceptions of interviewees about the subject of discussion. As a result, the conducted interviews serve as a vital source of information that sheds light on the events and discourses surrounding observed political activity in Kazakhstan.

Structured, semi-structured, and open-ended interviews were conducted in Kazakh and Russian with leaders of various activist youth organizations from ages 18 to 38. Convenience and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants of this study, with the primary criteria being subjects' participation in rallies, marches, campaigns, demonstrations, protests, or other types of civic engagement. The range of issues of primary concern for the interviewed activists was not limited in scope and did not serve as a selection criterion. Furthermore, an approximately equal number of female and male activists were interviewed as a part of this study.

### Existing Literature

Traditionally, much of the existing literature on youth and political participation used to revolve around the decline of orthodox or conventional manifestations of civic and political engagement, such as voter turnout and party membership (Skocpol, Fiorina 1999; Norris 1999; Dalton 1998; 2006). These studies showed that although youth had increasingly become disengaged from traditional modes of political activity, they were more likely to exhibit alternative political behaviors (i.e. demonstrations, boycotts, and social media activism) (Mann et al., 2009). With the diffusion of the Internet, youth that were raised during the times of major shifting landscapes and tumultuous change have shaped a unique relationship with politics. These observed trends have thus fueled a rapid expansion of research that concentrates on alternative channels of political involvement and

their impact on citizen participation in political decision-making. (O'Toole, Lister, and Marsch, 2003; Ó Beacháin and Polese 2010; Ekman and Amna, 2012;<sup>11</sup> Halpern and Gibbs, 2013; Boulianne, 2015; Ekström et al., 2014; Dimitrova et al., 2014).

In the Kazakhstani setting, where youth comprise a growing segment of the population and a potential potent political force, major contributions in the field have been made during recent years. For instance, Kosnazarov (2019) explores a less direct or latent form of political participation – consumption of politically charged content on social media – arguing that apolitical youth exhibit an “unconscious political attitude” by refusing to participate in traditional structures and engaging with “at least partial civic activism.”<sup>12</sup> Another study by Junisbai, Junisbai and Whitsel (2017),<sup>13</sup> attempts to investigate whether “differences in regime type translate into differences in political attitudes in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.” The research concludes that, in comparison with their Kyrgyz counterparts, Kazakhstani youth are less likely to “support practices associated with democracy or to be concerned about the domination of narrow interests over the common good.”

While these studies have made a great contribution to our understanding of local youth and their political involvement, the issue of language in relation to political participation and civic engagement in the Kazakhstani context remains an underexplored matter. While some prominent studies, such as those prepared by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation of Kazakhstan<sup>14</sup> and Kazakhstan's Ministry of Education and Science, have presented some interesting findings on the values of Kazakhstani youth, they lack linguistic dimension and tend to draw distinctions on the basis of ethnicity instead.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Joakim Ekman and Erik Amna, “Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology,” *Human Affairs* 22 (2012): 283-300.

<sup>12</sup> Daniyar Kosnazarov, “#Hashtag Activism: Youth, Social Media and Politics in Kazakhstan,” *CAP Paper* #217. The George Washington University, Washington DC, 2019. <https://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Kosnozarov-CAP-Paper-217-February-2019.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Junisbai, Azamat Junisbai, and Christopher Whitsel, “What Makes ‘Ardent Democrats’ in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan?” *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* #489. The George Washington University, Washington DC, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Tolganay Umbetaliyeva, Botagoz Rakisheva, and Peer Teschendorf, “Youth in Central Asia: Kazakhstan. Based on a Sociological Survey,” Friedrich Ebert Foundation Kazakhstan, Almaty, Kazakhstan, 2016 <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kasachstan/13343.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Yeshpanova, D., Narbekova, G., and Biekenova, N., “Sotsial'naya Aktivnost' Molodezhi Kazakhstana v Sovremennykh Sotsialno-politicheskikh Realiiyah,” *Institutes of Philology, Political and Religious Studies*. Almaty, Kazakhstan, 2014 <http://iph.kz/doc/ru/486.pdf>.

The importance and power of language in the political context is constituted by its ability to create influence through words. Language plays a crucial role in people's socialization as engaged citizens and, subsequently, their decisions regarding their formal or informal and traditional or alternative political behaviors. Various informational and cultural environments shape people's identities and value systems over time, thus impacting their interpretations of civic engagements. Language proficiency and language preference offer exclusivity in access to and consumption of some media sources and social environments, which in turn shape people's attitudes toward the "political." This results in different linguistic groups, each developing a different set of attachments and aspiration—potentially becoming a big enough part of one's identity to motivate an active position and civic participation in demonstrations and protests.

#### **Linguistic divides: Concerns over language in the activist space**

Most activist initiatives in Kazakhstan have been increasingly utilizing both Kazakh and Russian languages to promote their agenda. In light of recent events, the Kazakh-language activist space has significantly widened. Although many employ the national language in their rhetoric, the goals they set and demands they press vary greatly.

Unsurprisingly, in accordance with the findings of Serik Beisembayev (2015), one of the main issues of mounting concern expressed through Kazakh-language media sources and digital activism was the current status of the Kazakh language. The participants of this study, whose primary "language of activism" is Kazakh, also expressed their dissatisfaction with how the national language is perceived, treated, and utilized in everyday life. Concerns over language have traditionally been associated with ethnic nationalist attitudes, which, in the Kazakhstani context, are sometimes interpreted as one of the primary drivers of ethnic tensions. Nevertheless, according

to the respondents, there are many activists who are concerned with the development of the Kazakh language but do not have any ethnically driven political aspirations. To them, their nationalist beliefs lay in the space of civic nationalism, which aims to elevate the status of the national language among other things.

Interestingly, with activist attitudes on the rise, these language-based concerns have not been limited to criticisms of the government's language policies; they have also spilled onto the activist space. All respondents felt that it was difficult to find reliable Kazakh-language materials dedicated to human rights, sexual education, technology, and other topics—which would sometimes constrict them solely to Russian or English-language sources in their work. It also meant less exposure to some of those topics among communities who primarily rely on Kazakh-based media platforms for information and communication.

In addition to these factors, some Kazakh-speaking interviewees believed Kazakh-language media were less likely to post content that criticizes the government:

*"Qazaq tildi media belsendilik tanyta qoimaydy. Sebebi olar da memlekettik organdarğa táýeldi bolǵandyqtan, oppozitsııalyq kózqarasty bildirýge múddeli emes" (Kazakh).*

*"Kazakh-language media are not very active. This is because they are not interested in expressing oppositional attitudes due to their dependence on government agencies. "*

Others felt that while Kazakh-language media sources are capable of covering politically and socially important issues, their interest in those topics is limited in scope. Most respondents maintained that one is more likely to read Kazakh-language articles about the events in Zhanaozen<sup>16</sup> and anti-Chinese attitudes than about women's rights, for example.

Indeed, even from a quick glance on social media, the prevalence of Russian-language activism pertaining to the rights and freedoms of the

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<sup>16</sup> Serik Beisembayev's (2013) content analysis of Kazakh-language media websites a few years ago seems to have corresponded with currently reported observations. For details, see Serik Beisembayev, "Kontent-analiz Kazakhoyazychnyh Saitov Obschestvenno-politicheskoi Napravlenosti," *Obshestvennyi Fond Strategiya*, Almaty, Kazakhstan, 2013 <http://nomad.su/i2013/0710.pdf>

LGBTQ+ community or sexual liberation for women, for instance, is evident. This does not necessarily imply that leaders and participants of those movements represent a homogenous linguistic group (Russian-speakers), but it points at which language more effectively empowers these groups in one instance versus another. The Russian language allows one to establish a dialogue with other Russian-speaking communities outside of Kazakhstan, which, in turn, brings a spirit of comradeship.

Moreover, Kazakh-language activists revealed that they often feel that the Kazakh language is being neglected in the activist space, or as one of the respondents put it, even being “mocked.”

*“Aty shyly ‘oıanǵan’<sup>17</sup>, ‘synı oıly’ sektorda da kóbinese qazaq tiline qarsy kemsitýshilik máselesi elenbeidi & tipti kúlkige aınalady synı oıly.”*  
(Kazakh)

*“In the well-known “awakened,” “critical thinking” sector, the issue of discrimination against the Kazakh language is often ignored and even becomes a laugh.”*

They shared that, from their point of view, many activists tend to minimize or outright neglect the impact of Kazakh activism in certain areas, and they assume all Kazakh-speakers are inherently more traditional and less liberal. According to the respondents, while smaller in numbers, Kazakh-language activists that focus on women’s rights, for instance, also exist. They just do not have the same outreach, opportunities, and resources to spread their message.

## Women as Agents of Change

Another important similarity between Kazakh- and Russian-language activism is the prominent role of women in both. Indeed, protests and campaigns led by women that target women’s and children’s issues have been on the rise for the past couple of years. Mothers continuously press their demands for better social welfare benefits,<sup>18</sup> feminist advocates march for better protection of women’s rights and freedoms,<sup>19</sup> and women actively participate in anti-sexual harassment and violence campaigns.<sup>20</sup>

While the dominant narratives and main themes of Kazakh- and Russian-language female activism vary greatly, what unifies them is the role of women as agents of change. This is not surprising since women, just like men, do not represent a homogenous group, and have different life experiences and different priorities and needs. Whether they are demanding adequate support for “hero-mothers”, which has been a concern expressed in protests across the country,<sup>21</sup> or fighting for sexual liberation, which is still a taboo in the country,<sup>22</sup> women in Kazakhstan are actively engaging in the country’s social, political, and economic life.

*“Как я вижу, в активизме в основном находятся женщины, потому что созданы довольно сложные преграды нашему активному участию в управлении государством.”* (Russian)

<sup>17</sup> Here the interviewee refers to the supporters of the movement “Oyan, Qazaqstan!” (translation from Kazakh “Wake up, Kazakhstan!”), which is an initiative that pushes for political reforms in Kazakhstan.

<sup>18</sup> For example, see RFE/RL’s Kazakh Service, “Dozens of Mothers Protest in Kazakhstan Demanding Government Support,” *RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty*, February 8, 2019. Accessed September 28, 2019 <https://www.rferl.org/a/dozens-of-mothers-protest-in-kazakhstan-demanding-government-support/29759290.html>;

Chris Rickleton, “Kazakhstan Jails Mothers to Be on The Safe Side,” *Eurasianet*, July 4, 2019. Accessed September 20, 2019 <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-jails-mothers-to-be-on-the-safe-side>

<sup>19</sup> For example, see Georgii Kovalev, “Almatinskie Feministki Vyshli na Miting,” *Kursiv*, September 29, 2019. Accessed October 1, 2019 <https://kursiv.kz/news/obschestvo/2019-09/almatinskie-feministki-vyshli-na-miting>

<sup>20</sup> For example, see Human Rights Watch, “Kazakhstan: Little Help for Domestic Violence Survivors,” October 17, 2019. Accessed October 29, 2019 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/17/kazakhstan-little-help-domestic-violence-survivors>;

Colleen Woon, “#MeTooTalgo: Kazakh Activists Push to Toughen Rape Law,” *The Diplomat*, August 29, 2019. Accessed September 2, 2019 <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/metootalگو-kazakh-activists-push-to-toughen-rape-law/>

<sup>21</sup> For example, see Sarah Dorr, “What Is The Kazakh Regime Learning From Citizen Protests?” *OpenDemocracy*, April 16, 2019. Accessed August 19, 2019 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/what-kazakh-regime-learning-citizen-protests/>

<sup>22</sup> For example, see Ulpan Ramazanova, “‘V Strane Devochki Vzrosleyut Zazhatye Uyatom:’ Devushki Snyavshiesya v Zhanre Nyu,” *The Village*, January 25, 2018. Accessed September 1, 2019 <https://www.the-village.kz/village/people/people/1197-uyat-emes-1>

*“As I see it, women are mainly active because complicated barriers have been created to our active participation in the government.”*

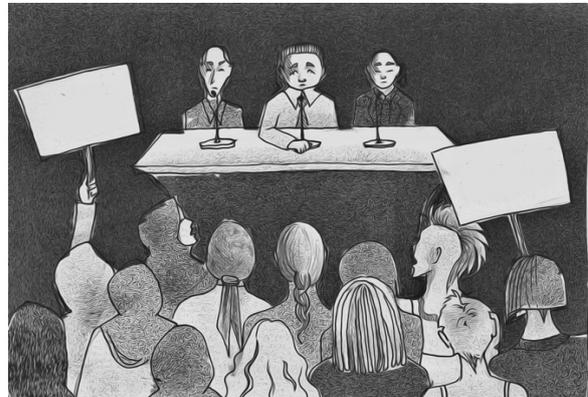
Most respondents believed that it is time to have more women in office, which will help ensure women’s issues and rights are placed at the forefront of the country’s agenda. Once again, many referred to the recent women-led protests and demonstrations to show that it is time to change the current state of affairs in our country.

Indeed, although Kazakhstan committed to ensuring equal rights for all and preventing gender imbalances by approving the Concept of Family and Gender Policy in 2016,<sup>23</sup> the country’s performance in those areas should still be improved. In 2017, the Global Gender Gap Report ranked Kazakhstan at 52<sup>nd</sup> of 144 countries. A year later, the country lost 8 positions, and it is now ranked 60<sup>th</sup>.<sup>24</sup> Even though some progress has been made in regard to improving women’s participation in the nation’s economy—primarily in the form of government-funded trainings and loans<sup>25</sup>—the role of women in government remains limited. According to the latest official statistics, while women constitute 28% of the deputies in the Lower House—a relatively impressive number—female representation in the Upper House drops to a jaw-dropping 4%.<sup>26</sup> In comparison, respondents reported that women play the key role in most, if not all, civil society organizations, activist groups, and social movements in the country.

### **Jas Otan, Oyan Qazaqstan, and Someone in Between**

The language divide was not the only issue that respondents found to be polarizing, and this is an

issue that both Kazakh- and Russian-language activists seem to agree on. The interviews suggested that in the aftermath of the 2019 elections, tensions within the growing activist space



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in Kazakhstan have also increased.

According to the interview participants, regardless of one’s political stance, a significant amount of stigma exists surrounding political beliefs in Kazakhstan. More specifically, there seems to be a clear division between those who engage in social and political activism in support of the national government and those who oppose the government’s approach altogether. Some people revealed that cooperation with the government is immediately frowned upon by those who push for reforms, regardless of what area this cooperation is in. A few respondents shared their experience of being labelled “nur-bots”<sup>27</sup> or being criticized for their involvement with the youth wing of the ruling political party Nur Otan - “Jas Otan” (translation “Young Motherland”).<sup>28</sup> To them, this felt like they were being stripped of their identity as activists who are striving for positive change, as their intentions and motivations were questioned

<sup>23</sup> “Republic of Kazakhstan,” UN Women, Accessed September 1, 2019 <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/where-we-are/kazakhstan>

<sup>24</sup> “Zhenshchiny i Politika,” Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Accessed September 29, 2019 <http://www.akorda.kz/ru/osnovnie-napravleniya-nacionalnoi-komissii/uchastie-zhenshin/zhenshini-i-politika>. For full report, go to [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2018.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Diana Vassilenko, “Atameken Offers Free Business Training To Women Across Kazakhstan,” *The Astana Times*, August 15, 2019. Accessed September 10, 2019 <https://astanatimes.com/2019/08/atameken-offers-free-business-training-to-women-across-kazakhstan/>

<sup>26</sup> “Zhenshchiny i Politika.”

<sup>27</sup> The term “nur-bot” refers to fake social media accounts that actively engage with social media users by expressing their support for the government. Since the term’s invention, it has been adopted by some to refer to individuals who express their support for the government. For further information, see Pavel Bannikov, “The Nation Leader’s Farm: Who Manages the Bot and Troll Networks in Kazakhstan,” *FactCheck*, October 23, 2019. Accessed November 2, 2019 <https://factcheck.kz/en/facts-en/the-nation-leaders-farm-who-manages-the-bot-and-troll-networks-in-kazakhstan/>

<sup>28</sup> For further information, visit <http://www.jasotan.com/> and [https://www.instagram.com/jas\\_otan/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/jas_otan/?hl=en)

due to their willingness to work together with the government or government-supported groups. However, according to these interviewees, their activism and their identity as Jas Otan members or partners do not have to be mutually exclusive. They also understand the need for reforms in Kazakhstan, but they choose to look for opportunities under the current order and make gradual changes to political and social structures. Some respondents have shared that their view of the self-proclaimed civil movement Oyan, Qazaqstan!<sup>29</sup> (translation Wake up, Kazakhstan!) is largely based on their perceptions of the movement's anti-government attitudes:

*“Для многих людей они (Oyan, Qazaqstan!) являются новыми героями, такими революционерами, которые что-то хотят поменять. И я не хочу, чтобы они учили людей слепо критиковать власть. Не все, что делает правительство плохо... Со всеми можно вести диалог.” (Russian)*

*“For many people, they (Oyan, Qazaqstan!) are the new heroes—revolutionaries, who want to change something. And I do not want them to teach people to blindly criticize the government. Not everything the government does is bad... You can have a dialogue with everyone.”*

Despite this significant trend, however, all respondents agree that it is important to establish a dialogue with each other and to make the society at large—and the activist space specifically—less fragmented.

*“bogemialyq orys tildi liberal ‘oianǵandar’ men qazaq tildi ‘namystylar’ arasynda dialog artıy tiis.” (Kazakh)*

*“A dialogue between the bohemian Russian-speaking liberal “awakened”<sup>30</sup> and Kazakh-speaking “dignitaries”<sup>31</sup> should be established.”*

*“Когда я говорю об активизме, я готова прислушаться к мнению абсолютно всех групп, всех представителей” (Russian)*

*“When I’m talking about activism, I am ready to listen to the opinions of all groups, all representatives”*

In addition, most interviewees, regardless of the language of their activism, believed that the events that Kazakhstan has witnessed in the past several months have further diminished public trust. For instance, some referred to the post-election statements of presidential candidate Amirjan Qosanov as one of the factors that contributed to this phenomenon. Qosanov, who was a candidate from the Ult Tagdyry Party, ran his platform on supporting political freedoms, strengthening the status of the national language, and fighting against corruption<sup>32</sup> among others. According to the official poll, 16% of voters chose Qosanov as Kazakhstan's next president, but many argued that the elections were not as transparent as they should have been. While many of his supporters were ready to continue to question the results of the elections, Qosanov was quick to issue a public statement proclaiming the elections to be fair. Such a reaction from the presidential candidate, whose message many citizens believed in, caused public anger and frustration, and Qosanov was labelled a “traitor to the public interest.”<sup>33</sup> Hence, in the aftermath of this “betrayal,” some people hesitate to trust any political movement:

*“Qazir qoǵamda belsendilik bar, biraq senim zhoq.” (Kazakh)*

*“Now, there is activity in society, but there is no trust”*

### **National Council on Public Trust, #SaveKokZhailau, and Political Prisoners**

The rising tensions between the government and the citizens eventually evolved into an issue that demanded an immediate response from lawmakers. As such, during President Tokayev's official inauguration, he made a list of promises to improve government's efficiency and transparency. In the face of increasing public concern, Tokayev acknowledged the need to engage in a dialogue

<sup>29</sup> For further information, visit <https://oyan.digital/> and <https://www.instagram.com/oyanqazaqstankz/?hl=ru>

<sup>30</sup> Oyan, Qazaqstan! members/supporters

<sup>31</sup> Here, the interviewee refers to the nationalist patriots.

<sup>32</sup> For further information, see <http://qosanov2019.kz/platform>

<sup>33</sup> For example, see Merei Sugirbayeva, “Predatel’ Interesov Naroda Ili Simvol Protesta?” *Exclusive*, June 11, 2019. Accessed September 22, 2019 <http://www.exclusive.kz/expertiza/politika/116139/#.XP9CvrNeRCY.twitter>

with a broad range of prominent public figures and civil society representatives to improve the government's public responsiveness. On July 17th, in compliance with subpoint 20, article 44 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Tokayev ordered the creation of the National Council on Public Trust.<sup>34</sup> The Council was created as a dialogue platform between the government and the public to ensure citizens' engagement in the nation's policy-making process.<sup>35</sup>

The Council currently consists of 41 invited members and is intended to have no less than three meetings per year.<sup>36</sup> In Tokayev's words:

*"Each of the members of the National Council has their own opinion and position. This is a completely natural state of a developed civil society. We all must proceed from the thesis that I expressed in my inaugural speech, 'Different opinions – one nation.' Indeed, without alternatives, initiative, and activity, there is no development"*<sup>37</sup>.

While the premise and objectives of the Council sound promising, its composition has raised many eyebrows. Only 5 women were invited to the Council, and, given the current mood among politically and socially active citizens, this lack of female representation in the body that is supposed to bridge the communication gap between citizens and ruling elites is quite concerning.

While many have expressed their skepticism regarding the Council's potential to improve the role of citizens in policy-making, some respondents are rather hopeful. Despite their active political position that criticizes how the government functions, all participants of this study did not believe that positive changes were only possible if the government was changed. In fact, respondents emphasized that their active political and social position is aimed at reforms, and the key element

of their civic engagement is not to force the government to resign, but the desire to be "heard" by the officials.

*"Для меня необязательно, чтобы Токаев ушел...я хочу увидеть, что они (власть) могут услышать". (Russian)*

*"For me, it is not necessary for Tokayev to leave ... I want to see that they (the authorities) can hear (us)."*

The most hopeful were youth activists concerned with ecology and environmental protection. According to these individuals, problems pertaining to ecology are more likely to be received with a level of "flexibility" in the government. It should be noted that interviewees highlighted that this has not always been the case, and that not too long ago, engaging in this kind of activism could come at the price of their jobs or "talks" with the authorities.

One of the most prominent, well-supported environmental campaigns was the movement known as #SaveKokZhailau. The movement was primarily Russian language based to start and has sometimes been accused of being "anti-Kazakhstani" in nature.<sup>38</sup> This issue dates back to 2005, when talks about building a ski resort on the territory of one of Kazakhstan's most treasured national parks, Kok Zhailau, were receiving significant attention from the public.<sup>39</sup> The proposal was heavily criticized by activists who expressed concerns regarding the potential environmental damage the plan could cause. Ever since that time, the talks about potential construction would partially die out, slowly resurface, and then get stalled again. More recently, after a new ski resort proposal was presented to the government, 32,000 people signed a petition demanding that it be abolished. Despite the public outcry, preparatory works in Kok Zhailau continued until earlier this

<sup>34</sup> "Ob Utverzhdenii Polozheniya i Sostava Natsional'nogo Soveta Obshchestvennogo Doveriya Pri Prezidente Respubliki Kazakhstan," *Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, July 17, 2019. Accessed September 2, 2019 [http://www.akorda.kz/ru/legal\\_acts/decrees/ob-utverzhdenii-polozheniya-i-sostava-natsionalnogo-soveta-obshchestvennogo-doveriya-pri-prezidente-respubliki-kazahstan](http://www.akorda.kz/ru/legal_acts/decrees/ob-utverzhdenii-polozheniya-i-sostava-natsionalnogo-soveta-obshchestvennogo-doveriya-pri-prezidente-respubliki-kazahstan)

<sup>35</sup> Yergaliyeva, "Kazakh President".

<sup>36</sup> "Ob Utverzhdenii Polozheniya."

<sup>37</sup> Yergaliyeva, "Kazakh President".

<sup>38</sup> Manas Bistayev, "Zashchitnikov Kok-Zhailau Obvinili v Rabote Protiv Kazakhstana," *NUR.KZ*, November 2, 2018. Accessed March 2, 2019 <https://www.nur.kz/1761287-zasitnikov-kok-zajlau-obvinili-v-rabote-protiv-kazahstana-foto-video.html>

<sup>39</sup> Nariza Kozhanova, "The Kok Zhailau Problem and Kazakh Civil Society," *The Diplomat*, December 25, 2018. Accessed September 12, 2019 <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/the-kok-zhailau-problem-and-kazakh-civil-society/>

year. Finally, before the world entered the year 2020, Tokayev banned construction in Kok Zhailau citing the opinions of “professional ecologists” and “competent” representatives of the general public.<sup>40</sup> For environmental activists it was a big achievement—a great reward after several years of hard work:

*“Сколько было вложено усилий по защите Кок Жайлау... Это не один год. Сколько мы призывали людей, собирали подписей... наконец это было услышано главой государства... Мы добились, это - наша победа” (Russian)*

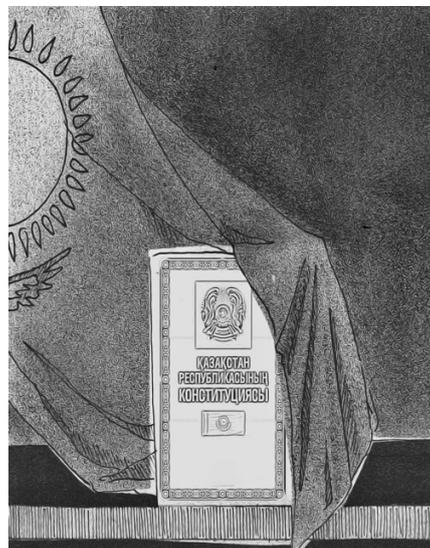
*“How much effort has been put into protecting Kok Zhailau ... This was not (done in) one year. How many people we called upon (for action), collected signatures ... finally it was heard by the President ... We have achieved it, this is our victory.”*

The least amount of hope has been shown by Kazakh-speaking and Russian-speaking activists, whose primary goal is to assist political prisoners in Kazakhstan. This issue has become one of major importance across the nation and has attracted many civil and human rights supporters, regardless of the language activists use in their rhetoric. It has also been pointed out that both Kazakh- and Russian-language activism refer to the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan and other official documents in an attempt to establish a dialogue with the government and press their demands. In their words, it is important to use the “language policy-makers use” when trying to get your point across.

While it is too early to celebrate any major achievements in this area, the activists do not lose their hope. Many express positive attitudes towards the recent shifts they have observed in the country.

*“Границы того пространства,... в котором все взаимодействуют, оно намного расширилось. Теперь разные интересы могут более активно в публичном*

*пространстве высказываться. И это - большое достижение.” (Russian)*



*Illustration by Mori. All rights belong to the author.*

*“The boundaries of the space ... in which everyone interacts, they have been significantly expanded. Now, different interests can be more actively expressed in the public space, and this is a great achievement.”*

## Conclusion

The discussion presented in this paper reveals that the Kazakh-language and Russian-language activist fields in Nur-Sultan and Almaty have some significant differences, but also share important similarities.

First, the issue of a possible gap in access to certain Kazakh-language information has been extensively discussed by Kazakh-language activists. Contrary to popular belief, Kazakh-language activism is not only concerned with “ethnic” issues. While mass protests around the widely discussed Zhanaozen events and Kazakhstan’s relations with China are significantly larger in scale, it is important to shed light on Kazakh-language activism that goes beyond these issues. As highlighted by the participants of this study, it is vital that more information on human rights, sexual health, and other topics are made available in the Kazakh language—not only

<sup>40</sup> “Tokayev Bans Construction of Kok Zhailau Ski Resort,” *Interfax*, October 29, 2019. Accessed November 2, 2019 [https://www.interfax.kz/?lang=eng&int\\_id=21&news\\_id=40940](https://www.interfax.kz/?lang=eng&int_id=21&news_id=40940), Mirkhat Azhigaliyev and Shokan Alkhabayev, “Zapreshchayu Zanimatsya Proektom ‘Kok-Zhailau,’ - Tokayev,” *Tengrinews*, October 29, 2019. Accessed November 2, 2019 [https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/zapreshchayu-zanimatsya-proektom-kok-jaylyau-tokayev-382757/](https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/zapreshchayu-zanimatsya-proektom-kok-jaylyau-tokayev-382757/)

through media outlets, but through other sources as well. This is essential to ensure access to reliable information for youth who choose to function in an environment where Kazakh is the dominant social and commercial language.

Second, both spaces seem to treat political beliefs as one of the main dividing factors among politically and socially active youth. In this regard, it is not the language that becomes a differentiating factor; rather, it is the activists' willingness to cooperate with organizations and movements that either support or are supported by the government. For some, the only way to push for reforms is to break out of the existing structures and engage in an active protest to voice concerns over fundamental flaws of the Kazakhstani system. For others, reforms are more effectively achieved gradually by taking advantage of opportunities presented by the existing order and changing the system from within. While holding different opinions is not fundamentally bothersome, such division can undermine the potential positive changes that politically and socially active youth could achieve through an effective dialogue platform. There is a clear need for a mechanism that would facilitate communication between these groups and effectively engage both of them in the nation's policymaking.

Finally, leaving aside the disparities in demands, the majority of respondents acknowledged the role of women in shaping Kazakhstan's activist landscape. Despite making official commitments to tackle gender disparities across various sectors, the Republic of Kazakhstan has not made progress pertaining to female representation in politics. Problems related to religious freedoms, welfare for "hero mothers," wider representation of women on boards of directors, sexual harassment, and domestic violence are just some of the issues that women-led Kazakh- and Russian-language activist initiatives have raised. Accordingly, the government's response should be to more effectively include women's voices in the current policymaking process. More women in leadership means more

competition, and more innovative approaches. It means better quality of leaders, a wider range of policy issues discussed, and a more efficient government.

## Recommendations

Given the discussion provided above, specifically the portion concerning female representation in the government, I recommend **the National Council of Public Trust under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan** to:

1. *Ensure higher gender representation in the Council by increasing the number of female representatives from the current 5 to at least 10 (out of 40 - 25%).*

Furthermore, acknowledging the fact that **Non-governmental Organizations, Government and Government-supported Development Agencies** also play a major role in assisting activists, I recommend they:

2. *Fund existing and new non-partisan initiatives that disseminate Kazakh-language information on issues such as sexual health, human rights, and environmental awareness. Examples of these initiatives include the magazine "Wake up, Kazak,"<sup>41</sup> the website 1001surak.kz, and others.*

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<sup>41</sup> Different from the similarly named movement "Oyan, Qazaqstan!" ("Wake up, Kazakhstan!") or online videos under hashtag "Men Oyandym" ("I woke up").

## PART II.

# FACTORS BEHIND REGIONAL INEQUALITIES IN KAZAKHSTAN AND KYRGYZSTAN

## Chapter 5. Factors Behind Regional Inequality in Education in Kazakhstan

Aigerim Kopeyeva<sup>1</sup> (2019)

*"I do not see how one can look at figures like these without seeing them as representing possibilities. [...] The consequences for human welfare involved in questions like these are simply staggering: once one starts to think about them, it is hard to think about anything else."*

—Lucas, 1988

In the fall of 2016, Kazakhstan was building momentum in the international educational arena. For the first time, the country's school students ranked in the top 10 internationally for their performance in math and science, according to the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).<sup>2</sup> Kazakh fourth- and eighth-graders demonstrated ability and knowledge comparable to their peers from countries like Finland, South Korea, and Singapore and outpaced students from Great Britain, the USA and Australia, a reality that was disappointing to the latter group of countries.<sup>3</sup>

This was a great achievement for the country and indicated the rising quality of education at national level. Yet when disaggregated by region, language, or urban/rural residence, the data from TIMSS and other large-scale assessments paint a bleaker picture.

There is a knowledge and skill gap of several years between students from different regions of Kazakhstan. According to the results of the OECD's Programme for International Students

Assessment (PISA), most recently administered in Kazakhstan in 2015, 15-year-olds in the West and South of the country (Atyrau, Mangystau, South Kazakhstan, and Almaty oblasts) are at least two years behind their peers in Almaty city in reading, math, and science. As a national report on the PISA results shows, half of 15-year-olds in Atyrau oblast are "functionally illiterate" in science,<sup>4</sup> while more than half of students in South Kazakhstan<sup>5</sup> and Mangystau oblasts are functionally illiterate, meaning that they could not complete tasks of the first level of difficulty.

This seems like an unacceptable reality for a unitary state that is committed to the education of all citizens. As Lucas put it, if one considers the consequences for human welfare, it is hard to think about anything else.<sup>6</sup> Although Lucas was talking about national-level performance, wondering if one country's positive economic experience might be applied to another, I find his words staggeringly appropriate for the situation in Kazakhstan.

Once we start to analyze a country's economic performance, we inevitably circle back to the quality of education. Since school is—and will long remain—the single institution where a citizen spends the longest period of his/her life, it has both

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<sup>2</sup> I. V. S. Mullis, M.O. Martin, P. Foy, and M. Hooper, "TIMSS 2015 International Results in Mathematics," 2016, accessed July 6, 2019, <http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/timss2015/international-results/timss-2015/mathematics/student-achievement/>.

<sup>3</sup> AAP, "Education Minister Embarrassed by Australia's Declining Maths and Science Results," *9News*, November 30, 2016, <https://www.9news.com.au/national/australian-students-still-falling-behind/b67b2f62-c07f-402d-b96f-b356971cc2fe>.

<sup>4</sup> Information-Analytic Centre, "Osnovnye rezultaty mezhdunarodnogo issledovaniia PISA-2015: Natsional'nyi otchet," Astana, 2017, [http://iac.kz/sites/default/files/nac\\_otchet\\_pisa-2015\\_final.pdf](http://iac.kz/sites/default/files/nac_otchet_pisa-2015_final.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> In 2019, South Kazakhstan oblast was split into Turkestan oblast and city of Shymkent, which gained "republican significance" status. Since data for 2015 assessments is available only for South Kazakhstan as a whole, I refer to this old territorial division where applicable.

<sup>6</sup> Robert E. Lucas, Jr., "On the Mechanics of Economic Development," *Journal of Monetary Economics* 22, no. 1 (1988): 3-42. doi: 10.1016/0304-3932(88)90168-7.

the highest privilege of and the biggest burden of responsibility for his/her “formation.”

In this paper, I analyze *regional student achievement* in Kazakhstan from the basis that it is vital for regional and national human capital development and predetermines a country’s potential for economic growth. In other words, I argue that education is the single most important factor in developing a nation’s human capital and thus determining its economic growth. Achieving positive change therefore requires understanding the factors behind gaps in student achievement.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Education, Human Capital, and Economic Growth*

Human capital is generally understood as the collection of skills and experiences that an individual, firm, or country possesses. The World Economic Forum defines human capital as “knowledge and skills people possess that enable them to create value in the global economic system.”<sup>7</sup>

In his seminal work “On the Mechanics of Economic Development,” Lucas formulates human capital as the “skill level” of an individual, linking it directly to work productivity.<sup>8</sup> The World Bank defines human capital as the “knowledge, skills, and health that people accumulate over their lives, enabling them to realize their potential as productive members of society.”<sup>9</sup>

Today, there are several international surveys performed by major analytical institutions measuring the quality of human capital worldwide. These include the UNDP’s Human Development Index (HDI), the World Economic Forum’s Global

Competitiveness Index (GCI), and the World Bank’s Human Capital Index (HCI). In addition to rankings, such studies provide thorough analysis of human capital components and the trends in their development.

As World Bank experts note, “a country’s human capital is critical for its economic success,” comprising 64 percent of a nation’s wealth.<sup>10</sup> The notions of *human capital and economic growth* are tightly intertwined in policy and economic discourse across the globe, with studies showing a positive correlation between the two. Pelinescu found a positive relationship between a country’s capacity to innovate and its GDP per capita.<sup>11</sup> Barro compared the potential input of human and physical capital to economic outcomes, noting that a higher ratio of human to physical capital “tends to generate higher economic growth” due to both a country’s capacity to absorb technology and the fact that human capital is more difficult to adjust than physical capital.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, “a country that starts with a high ratio of human to physical capital—such as in the aftermath of a war that destroys primarily physical capital—tends to grow rapidly by adjusting upward the quantity of physical capital.”<sup>13</sup>

The OECD views education as central to human capital development, observing a correlation between education level, GDP per capita, and overall economic growth.<sup>14</sup> Education is often used as a proxy for human capital in studies of the effect of human capital on economic growth. Blundell et al., for example, identify three main components of “human capital”: early ability (acquired or innate); qualifications and knowledge acquired through formal education; and skills,

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<sup>7</sup> World Economic Forum, “The Global Human Capital Report 2017,” 2017, [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_Global\\_Human\\_Capital\\_Report\\_2017.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Human_Capital_Report_2017.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Lucas, “On the Mechanics of Economic Development.”

<sup>9</sup> World Bank Group, “Human Capital Index. Kazakhstan (2-Page Brief),” Washington D.C., 2018, [https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/hci/HCI\\_2pager\\_KAZ.pdf](https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/hci/HCI_2pager_KAZ.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Harry Anthony Patrinos and Noam Angrist, “Global Dataset on Education Quality : A Review and Update (2000-2017),” World Bank Group, Washington, D.C., 2018, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/390321538076747773/Global-Dataset-on-Education-Quality-A-Review-and-Update-2000-2017>.

<sup>11</sup> Elena Pelinescu, “The Impact of Human Capital on Economic Growth,” *Procedia Economics and Finance* 22 (2015): 184-190. doi: 10.1016/s2212-5671(15)00258-0.

<sup>12</sup> Robert J. Barro, “Education as a Determinant of Economic Growth,” in *Education in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. E. Lazear (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2002), 9-24, [http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/0817928928\\_9.pdf](http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/0817928928_9.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann, “The High Cost of Low Educational Performance: The Long-Run Economic Impact of Improving PISA Outcomes,” OECD, Paris, 2010, <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/44417824.pdf>.

competencies, and expertise acquired through on-the-job training.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, there seems to be a strong sense that there is a direct correlation between education and the country's overall economic performance. In fact, education parameters are present in every major human capital index:

- “Expected Learning-Adjusted Years of School” is one of the three components of the Human Capital Index (along with “Survival” and “Health”). The component reflects the quantity and quality of education.<sup>16</sup> The measures “adjusted years of schooling” and “harmonized test scores” have been developed by World Bank experts to better reflect the quality of schooling.<sup>17</sup>

- In its Global Human Capital report, the World Economic Forum placed knowledge and skills at the core of all four key elements of human capital.<sup>18</sup> “Capacity” stands for the formal education level of the population, while “Development” measures the formal education and upskilling of the workforce and the next generation. “Deployment” and “Know-How” measure adults’ application of their skills and the depth of specialized skills that labor market participants possess.

- The Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), an annual survey of cross-country competitiveness also performed by the WEF, analyzes countries’ performance on 12 main pillars, including “skills.”<sup>19</sup>

On all of these rankings, education is represented by two main indicators: the highest

level of education obtained by the population (or years of schooling) and educational outcomes in math, science, and reading as measured by international large-scale assessments (ILSAs).

As OECD experts note, all economic growth theories “see education as having a positive effect on growth.”<sup>20</sup> Barro and Lee’s database of international data on average years of schooling is often used as a point of reference when calculating the effect of education on economic outcomes like GDP per capita.<sup>21</sup> Return on investment in education is normally calculated as the ratio of costs incurred by a citizen or a state to his/her earnings at the given moment.<sup>22</sup>

The effect of education on countries’ economic performance has been confirmed by multiple studies, performed both by larger institutions like the World Bank and by individual researchers.<sup>23</sup> In the United Kingdom, for example, it has been found that citizens with formal qualifications “have significantly larger returns than individuals with the same number of years of schooling but who completed no formal qualification.”<sup>24</sup>

In their analysis of the determinants of economic development in 110 countries, Gennanioli et al. have tested the effect of geography, education, institutions, and culture, finding education to be the single most influential variable explaining variations in income level both between and within countries.<sup>25</sup> The authors’ analysis of data for over 1,500 subnational regions

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Blundell, Lorraine Dearden, Costas Meghir, and Barbara Sianesi, “Human Capital Investment: The Returns from Education and Training to the Individual, the Firm and the Economy,” *Fiscal Studies* 20, no. 1 (1999): 1-23. doi: 10.1111/j.1475-5890.1999.tb00001.x.

<sup>16</sup> Aart C. Kraay, “Methodology for World Bank Human Capital Index (English),” World Bank Group, Washington, D.C., 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Noam Angrist, Simeon Djankov, Pinelopi Koujianou Goldberg, and Harry Anthony Patrinos, “Measuring Human Capital (English),” World Bank Group, Washington, D.C., 2019, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/540801550153933986/Measuring-Human-Capital>.

<sup>18</sup> World Economic Forum, “The Global Human Capital Report 2017.”

<sup>19</sup> Klaus Schwab, “The Global Competitiveness Report 2018,” World Economic Forum, Geneva, <http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GCR2018/05FullReport/TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2018.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Hanushek and Woessmann, “The High Cost of Low Educational Performance,” 12.

<sup>21</sup> Robert J. Barro and Jong-Wha Lee, “A New Data Set of Educational Attainment in the World, 1950–2010,” *Journal of Development Economics* 104 (2013): 184-198. doi: 10.1016/j.jdeveco.2012.10.001; Deon P. Filmer, F. Halsey Rogers, Noam Angrist, and Shwetlana Sabarwal, “Learning-Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS): Defining A New Macro Measure of Education (English),” World Bank Group, Washington, D.C., 2018.

<sup>22</sup> George Psacharopoulos and Harry Anthony Patrinos, “Returns to Investment in Education: A Decennial Review of the Global Literature (English),” World Bank Group, Washington D.C., 2018, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/442521523465644318/Returns-to-investment-in-education-a-decennial-review-of-the-global-literature>.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, the decennial review of the literature on the returns to investments by Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, “Returns to Investment in Education.”

<sup>24</sup> Blundell et al, “Human Capital Investment,” 4.

<sup>25</sup> Nicola Gennanioli, Rafael La Porta, Florencio Lopez-de-Silanes, and Andrei Shleifer, “Human Capital and Regional Development,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 128, no. 1 (2013): 105-164. doi: doi:10.1093/qje/qjs050.

showed that education is the only factor that explains a substantial share of regional variation.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, I do not plan to go into much detail on this aspect. It is, however, worth mentioning several major trends that can be observed from these studies:

- There is strong evidence that primary education brings a higher return on investment than secondary or higher education. This is due to the foundational quality of the first years of education, when an individual's cognitive abilities are formed. As the effect of education is cumulative, the returns on secondary or higher education (any additional year of training) tend to be smaller.<sup>27</sup>

- Return on investments in girls' education are higher than those on investments in educating

boys. Blundell et al. have found that the average annual return for men with a first degree is almost two times less than that for women.<sup>28</sup>

- Finally, less economically developed countries tend to enjoy higher rates of economic growth than developed ones (due to the diversity of needs and spending in more developed countries).<sup>29</sup>

Researchers often refer to large-scale studies like PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), or PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) to calculate return on investment in education. These studies provide the most thorough and representative database on international academic performance.

### Box 1. International Large-Scale Assessments.

- PISA is administered by the OECD and tests 15-year-olds' competencies in reading, science, and math. The assessment takes place once every 5 years, with roughly 45-50 participant countries in each round. The OECD does not rank the countries on the basis of their results, instead preferring to group them into broader clusters. However, the test scores allow countries to determine their positions in relation to other countries.
- TIMSS and PIRLS are performed by the IEA once every four years. While TIMSS tests fourth- and eighth-graders' knowledge of math and science, PIRLS targets only fourth-graders, assessing their reading literacy. The IEA's results are more straightforward than those from the OECD in the sense of producing a clear ranking of countries on the basis of their test results.
- The principal difference between the PISA and TIMSS assessments (which overlap in their coverage of subjects and also age groups) has been articulated as a difference in the *areas* measured. While PISA problems aim to measure functional literacy (ability to apply knowledge learned to real-life situations), TIMSS provides data on the extent to which a student has effectively consumed the school curriculum.<sup>30</sup> Both studies disaggregate their test results by level of difficulty and collect background information about factors that influence academic performance: student's family, school infrastructure, teacher training, etc.

There are plausible concerns about whether it is entirely appropriate to use the tests to measure quality of schooling—that is, the extent to which

absolute learning outcomes represent school processes and the factors that impact overall academic success. There is also a question about

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>27</sup> Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, "Returns to Investment in Education."

<sup>28</sup> Blundell et al., "Human Capital Investment."

<sup>29</sup> Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, "Returns to Investment in Education."

<sup>30</sup> Ben Durbin, "One-Dimensional Interpretations of TIMSS and PISA Shouldn't Distract from Their Genuine Value," *Times Educational Supplement*, December 8, 2016, <https://www.tes.com/news/one-dimensional-interpretations-timss-and-pisa-shouldnt-distract-their-genuine-value>.

the appropriateness of using “years of schooling” (normally the period of pre-school and school education) to measure human capital. One of the main reservations is that such an approach automatically assumes that every country in the ranking (or every region in a country) delivers the same amount and quality of learning to every student in one year of schooling, which is undoubtedly not the case. According to the authors of the Human Capital Index, there is “a gap in human capital formation: students are in school but are not learning.”<sup>31</sup> The OECD argues that measuring cognitive skills allows for a more objective analysis of economic growth than does a mere measurement of the quantity of school years attained.<sup>32</sup>

However, given that these assessments remain the primary sources of insight into academic achievement in the international context, they will probably continue to be utilized for human capital studies for a long time yet. Barro found that international test scores have strong explanatory power for economic growth and are more accurate in predicting it than years of schooling.<sup>33</sup>

#### *Factors Influencing Educational Outcomes*

Students’ socioeconomic status (SES), mostly understood as their family background and exposure to learning resources, is the contextual factor most often seen to impact student achievement in academic research. Studies like PISA or TIMSS, along with other international

databases, make it possible to study the effect of a particular variable on educational outcomes.

Harding et al. and Crede et al., for instance, studied impact of parental education on student achievement.<sup>34</sup> Parents’ career level was also found to influence student achievement,<sup>35</sup> as was a child’s access to educational resources at home.<sup>36</sup> Blundell cites local environment and the quality of schools in a student’s neighborhood as affecting educational attainment.<sup>37</sup>

Interestingly, a number of recent studies have focused on—and demonstrated—the direct and indirect influence of a mother’s human capital on the development of her child. Harding et al. constructed a framework in which a mother possesses a certain level of social, cultural, and human capital that she can transmit to her child.<sup>38</sup> These modes of transmission may include choosing a better school, finding better educational opportunities, her implicit behavior, and even the “quality” of her immediate social circle (friends and colleagues).

However, a mother’s commitment to work does not show such a clear positive influence on a child’s academic success or future earnings. Wilson has found that having a mother who works full-time correlates negatively with a child’s income level in his or her early twenties.<sup>39</sup> Muller likewise found that children whose mothers work part-time achieve better results than their peers with mothers who are employed full-time.<sup>40</sup>

As yet, there is not much evidence or research on the possible influence of an individual’s values on his/her academic performance and

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<sup>31</sup> Angrist et al., “Measuring Human Capital (English).”

<sup>32</sup> Hanushek and Woessmann, “The High Cost of Low Educational Performance.”

<sup>33</sup> Barro, “Education as a Determinant of Economic Growth.”

<sup>34</sup> Jessica Harding, Pamela Morris, and Diana Hughes, “The Relationship between Maternal Education and Children’s Academic Outcomes: A Theoretical Framework,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77, no. 1 (2015): 60-76. doi: 10.1111/jomf.12156; Julia Crede, Linda Wirthwein, Nele McElvany, and Ricarda Steinmayr, “Adolescents’ Academic Achievement and Life Satisfaction: The Role of Parents’ Education,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (2015). doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00052.

<sup>35</sup> Susana Claroa, David Paunesku, and Carol Dweck, “Growth Mindset Tempers the Effects of Poverty on Academic Achievement,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113, no. 31 (2016): 8664-8668. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1608207113; Peter Mortimore, *The Road to Improvement: Reflections on School Effectiveness* (Abingdon: Swets and Zeitlinger, 1998), 299-315.

<sup>36</sup> Jason D. Edgerton, Tracey Peter, and Lance W. Roberts, “Back to the Basics: Socio-Economic, Gender, and Regional Disparities in Canada’s Educational System,” *Canadian Journal of Education* 31, no. 4 (2008): 861-888.

<sup>37</sup> Blundell et al., “Human Capital Investment.”

<sup>38</sup> Harding, Morris, and Hughes, “The Relationship between Maternal Education and Children’s Academic Outcomes.”

<sup>39</sup> Kathryn Wilson, “The Determinants of Educational Attainment: Modeling and Estimating the Human Capital Model and Education Production Functions,” *Southern Economic Journal* 67, no. 3 (2001): 518.

<sup>40</sup> Chandra Muller and David Kerbow, “Parent Involvement in the Home, School, and Community,” in *Parents, Their Children, and Schools, 1st ed.*, ed. J. Coleman (New York: Routledge, 2018), 192.

subsequent “success in life.” Nevertheless, in this paper I place a certain amount of emphasis on this aspect, as there are indications that this might be the next most important impact factor behind a student’s SES.

For instance, according to Wilson, one’s decision to proceed to another level of education might be influenced by perceived economic returns on schooling and by the advantages (utilities) an individual actually experiences given his/her socioeconomic background. She has found that both perceived economic returns and students’ SES influence their educational attainment. The accomplishments of older individuals in their neighborhood, who have a similar background, influence students’ perceptions of the value of education, perhaps prompting them to want to acquire higher education. In other words, “youths respond rationally to economic incentives in education.”<sup>41</sup>

This utility-maximizing perspective is predominantly shaped by the surrounding neighborhood and/or by students’ immediate circle of communication. The more successful are those who have proceeded to higher education and are now working, the higher are the chances that a school graduate will follow their example. By contrast, if the costs of getting higher education (including the potential loss of income compared to being employed during this period) are too high in the eyes of a teenager or his/her parents, the young person might opt out of going to university. This calculus might also influence a student’s interest in learning while still at school—if there is no point of going to university, then doing well in school also loses its value: as Edgerton et al. put it, “perceived penalties for underperforming academically may pose less of a deterrent to lower SES students who are not anticipating substantial return from continued formal education, while the cost of

underperforming for higher SES students may be perceived more intensely.”<sup>42</sup>

Regional development is another important factor influencing student achievement. Since the economy of the region is reflected in the quality of life of students’ families and in their neighborhoods, regional development is often seen as having an indirect impact on student achievement. Edgerton et al., for example, assert that “observed interprovincial differences in academic proficiency are in general consistent with long standing disparities between provinces in fiscal capacity.”<sup>43</sup> This is echoed by Tesema and Braeken, who found in their research on the regional factors impacting education in Ethiopia that “whenever different regions within a country have major economic differences, it is likely that students from economically less developed regions are more disadvantaged.”<sup>44</sup>

Gennanioli et al. have tested the influence of intra-regional characteristics like geography (oil reserves, weather conditions, etc.), culture (mutual trust), institutions, and education (educational attainment) on human capital in more than 1,500 subnational regions in 110 countries.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, the authors found that oil reserves do not explain any significant income variation within or between countries. Quality of institutions, while accounting for 25 percent of inter-country income variation, likewise does not explain intra-country differences in per capita income.

Meanwhile, regional education explained 58 percent of inter-country and almost 40 percent of intra-country variation in per capita income. In other words, of the factors tested, “none come close to education in explaining within-country variation in income per capita.”<sup>46</sup> The authors concluded that regional education was “a critical determinant of regional development, and the only such determinant that explains a substantial share of regional variation.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Wilson, “The Determinants of Educational Attainment,” 545.

<sup>42</sup> Edgerton et al., “Back to the Basics,” 877.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 880.

<sup>44</sup> Melaku Tesfa Tesema and Johan Braeken, “Regional Inequalities and Gender Differences in Academic Achievement as a Function of Educational Opportunities: Evidence from Ethiopia,” *International Journal of Educational Development* (2018): 51-59, 52.

<sup>45</sup> Gennanioli et al., “Human Capital and Regional Development.”

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

Thus, there is strong evidence of the importance of socio-economic factors for student achievement and for the contention that these factors may vary between regions of a country. The primary focus of the present paper is student

achievement in Kazakhstan disaggregated to regional (oblast<sup>48</sup>) level. The data on Kazakhstan’s performance in recent large-scale assessments is taken from official international and national reports.

### Box 2. Regional Performance in Kazakhstan: Context

Variation in economic performance across Kazakhstani regions is not surprising given the country’s large territory and the uneven distribution of its population. So far, regional performance in Kazakhstan appears to have been fairly understudied.

Below are some of the most recent available data on regional performance and education provided by international and national rankings, along with relevant statistics.



#### EBRD Regional Capability Index (2015)

One attempt to study the tendencies in regional development in Kazakhstan was made by Whiteshield Partners in 2015 (funded by the EBRD and the Government of Kazakhstan). They used their Regional Capability Index to group the 16 administrative units of Kazakhstan into “winning,” “stagnating,” and “losing” clusters. The key criteria were economic complexity, diversity, and industrialization in the years leading up to 2014.

Table 1. Regional performance, 2014<sup>49</sup>

Winning	Stagnating	Losing
Almaty oblast	Almaty city	East Kazakhstan oblast
Zhambyl oblast	Aktobe oblast	South Kazakhstan oblast
North Kazakhstan oblast	Akmola oblast	West Kazakhstan oblast
	Astana city	
	Kostanay oblast	
	Karagandy oblast	
	Pavlodar oblast	

Source: Whiteshield Partners, “Diversification of Kazakhstan’s Economy: A Capability-Based Approach,” EBRD, Astana, 2015, <https://www.ebrd.com/news/2015/new-study-urges-diversification-of-kazakhstans-economy.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Oblast – administrative and territorial division of Kazakhstan.

<sup>49</sup> The authors of the Whiteshield Partners study did not include Mangystau and Kyzylorda oblasts due to “lack of diversity.”

Among the main factors influencing regional capability development, the authors cited business barriers and quality of governance, education, and institutions. Despite the fact that Almaty oblast and South Kazakhstan oblast are the two most populated areas and have “comparable economic structure[s],” the authors acknowledge that Almaty oblast is more diversified and thus more open to innovation, while South Kazakhstan specializes in simpler manufacturing.<sup>50</sup>

*IAC Ranking of Regional Education Systems (2015-2017)*

The Information-Analytic Centre under the Ministry of Education (IAC) publishes an annual National Report on Education ranking the regional educational systems. The ranking provides an aggregated index of regional performance across three levels of education (primary, secondary, and higher). The index groups regional education systems into those with “very high,” “high,” “average,” and “low” effectiveness. In 2015-2017, none of the oblasts was classified as “very high” in effectiveness. Pavlodar oblast received the accolade of “highly effective” in 2015 and 2016, the only education system to do so, but in 2017 none of the regions made it into that category.<sup>51</sup>

**Table 2. Effectiveness of regional education systems index (IAC)**

	2015		2016		2017	
	index	rank	index	rank	index	rank
Pavlodar oblast	0.741	1	0.725	1	0.643	2
East KZ oblast	0.68	2	0.602	5	0.572	8
Karagandy oblast	0.654	3	0.608	4	0.579	5
West Kazakhstan oblast	0.642	4	0.651	2	0.576	6
<b>Astana city</b>	0.634	5	0.592	6	0.573	7
North Kazakhstan oblast	0.61	6	0.575	9	0.621	3
Aktobe oblast	0.605	7	0.528	12	0.491	12
Mangystau oblast	0.601	8	0.509	13	0.478	13
Akmola oblast	0.6	9	0.583	8	0.544	9
<b>Almaty city</b>	0.583	10	0.639	3	0.659	1
Zhambyl oblast	0.57	11	0.554	10	0.581	4
Kostanay oblast	0.57	12	0.535	11	0.53	11
Atyrau oblast	0.528	13	0.475	15	0.441	14
Kyzylorda oblast	0.517	14	0.587	7	0.531	10
South Kazakhstan oblast	0.502	15	0.408	16	0.361	16
Almaty oblast	0.485	16	0.639	14	0.432	15

<sup>50</sup> Whiteshield Partners, “Diversification of Kazakhstan’s Economy: A Capability-Based Approach,” EBRD, Astana, 2015, <https://www.ebrd.com/news/2015/new-study-urges-diversification-of-kazakhstans-economy.html>.

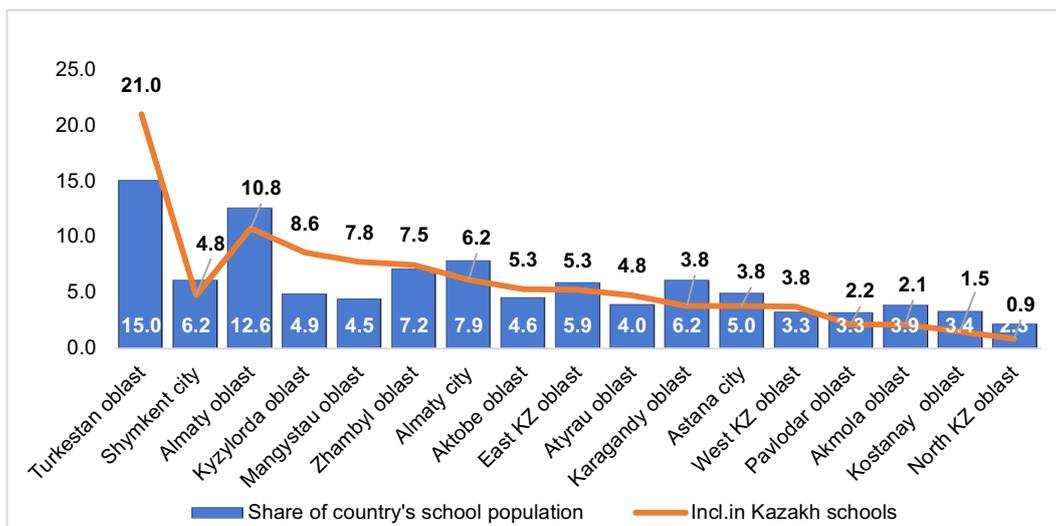
<sup>51</sup> Information-Analytic Centre, “Natsional’nyi doklad o sostoianii i razvitiu sistemy obrazovaniia Respubliki Kazakhstan po itogam 2015 goda,” Astana, 2016, [http://iac.kz/sites/default/files/nd-2016\\_po\\_itogam\\_2015\\_goda\\_kratkaya\\_versiya\\_rus.yaz.\\_iac\\_zashchita.pdf](http://iac.kz/sites/default/files/nd-2016_po_itogam_2015_goda_kratkaya_versiya_rus.yaz._iac_zashchita.pdf); Information-Analytic Centre, “Natsional’nyi doklad o sostoianii i razvitiu sistemy obrazovaniia Respubliki Kazakhstan (za gody Nezavistimosti Kazakhstana),” Astana, 2017, [http://iac.kz/sites/default/files/nacdok-2017\\_ot\\_kgk\\_final\\_09.08.2017\\_10.00-ilovepdf-compressed.pdf](http://iac.kz/sites/default/files/nacdok-2017_ot_kgk_final_09.08.2017_10.00-ilovepdf-compressed.pdf); Information-Analytic Centre, “Natsional’nyi doklad o sostoianii i razvitiu sistemy obrazovaniia Respubliki Kazakhstan po itogam 2017 goda,” Astana, 2018, [http://iac.kz/sites/default/files/nacionalnyy\\_doklad\\_zh\\_2017\\_god\\_s\\_oblozhkami\\_dlya\\_sayta.pdf](http://iac.kz/sites/default/files/nacionalnyy_doklad_zh_2017_god_s_oblozhkami_dlya_sayta.pdf).

Whereas the regions with education systems that fall into the “average effectiveness” cluster are typically from North, East, and Central Kazakhstan, those with “low” effectiveness are usually from the Southern and Western regions of the country. Kostanay (North) and Akmola (Central) oblasts also fell into the latter group in 2017. South Kazakhstan and Almaty oblasts are continuously ranked as the least effective in terms of education; Atyrau oblast is also usually found in the bottom part of the ranking.

#### National Statistics

- In 2018, the population of Kazakhstan reached 18 million people. The territorial distribution of the population has always been uneven. The most striking difference is between sparsely populated North and West Kazakhstan and the densely populated South. While Atyrau, Mangystau, Aktobe, and West Kazakhstan oblasts together account for 16 percent of country population, the southern part of Kazakhstan (Almaty, Zhambyl, Kyzylorda, South Kazakhstan oblasts) is home to 37 percent of the population.<sup>52</sup> South Kazakhstan oblast alone has a population of 2.9 million people, 16 percent of the country’s total, and continues to grow.
- Accordingly, as can be seen from Figure 1, South Kazakhstan accounts for the highest share of the country’s school-age population. Of the country’s over 3 million school students, one-fifth live in Turkestan oblast and Shymkent city (former South Kazakhstan oblast) and a further 13 percent live in Almaty oblast.

Figure 1. Distribution of school student population across Kazakhstan, 2018



Source: IAC, “Education System Statistics in the Republic of Kazakhstan,” national report, 2019.

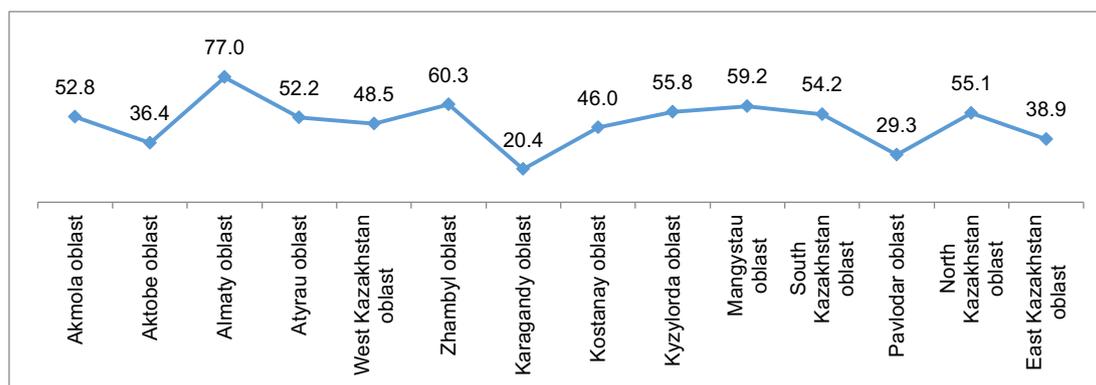
- There are clear differences in terms of regional migration. South Kazakhstan region experiences the largest outflows—in Zhambyl oblast in 2016, the negative balance of migration doubled in comparison to 2015 to reach over 16,000 people, and it stood at over 17,000 in 2017. According to the Statistics Committee, the negative outflow in South Kazakhstan oblast reached almost 30,000 people in 2016, while in 2015 and 2017 it totaled around 14,000 people. In contrast, both Astana and Almaty cities showed a positive balance of over 30,000 people in 2017. In the Western region, however, outbound migration is minimal, with Atyrau oblast even showing a positive balance of over 100 people in 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Statistics Committee of Kazakhstan, “Regions of Kazakhstan in 2017,” Astana, 2018, <http://stat.gov.kz>.

Outside of the Southern region, the highest negative balance (close to 14,000 people in 2017) is observed in East Kazakhstan oblast.

- Forty-three percent of Kazakhstanis live in rural areas. The largest share of the rural population is registered in Almaty oblast (77 percent in 2018). The variation in the size of the rural population in recent years is not significant (a decline of two percent in North, West, and East Kazakhstan oblasts compared to 2015, and a four percent increase in Mangystau oblast since 2015).

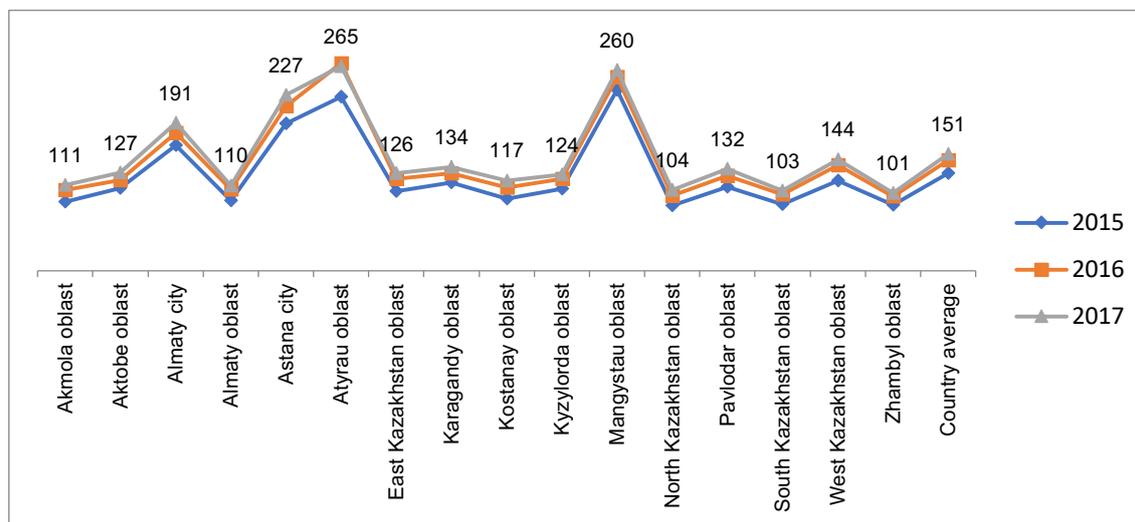
**Figure 2. Rural population as a share of the regional total (percent), 2018**



Source: Statistics Committee, Ministry of National Economy (2019)

- In 2017, the average monthly wage in Kazakhstan was KZT 150,827 (approx. US\$454).<sup>53</sup> Oil-producing Mangystau and Atyrau oblasts show the highest average monthly wage, over 70 percent higher than the national average. Meanwhile, the lowest monthly wage is observed in South Kazakhstan, North Kazakhstan, and Zhambyl oblasts, where it is around 30 percent lower than the national average.

**Figure 3. Average monthly wage in Kazakhstan (thousand KZT), 2015-2017**



Source: Statistics Committee, Ministry of National Economy (2019)

<sup>53</sup> In 2017, US\$1 was equal (on average) to 332 KZT (see <https://corner.kz/post/usdkzt-za-dekabr-i-ves-2017-god>).

## Methodology

To analyze gaps in student achievement between regions of Kazakhstan, I use TIMSS 2015 data. The choice of TIMSS over PISA is explained, first and foremost, by the structure of the sample: TIMSS includes only school students, whereas PISA (being tied to age) allows college students to be included as well.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, using TIMSS data makes it possible to follow the methodology of the World Bank’s Human Capital Index, which likewise uses TIMSS data to calculate the achievement gap between countries.<sup>55</sup> Finally, TIMSS is preferable to PISA due to the fact that the latter’s 2015 data for Kazakhstan is incomplete.<sup>56</sup>

My particular focus is on South and West Kazakhstan. From the three major international large-scale comparative studies in which Kazakhstan has participated recently (PISA 2015, TIMSS 2015, and PIRLS 2016), it is evident that

those regions have demonstrated the lowest student achievement. Moreover, it is possible to see that some oblasts are underperforming across all areas of assessment—both by discipline and by cohort.

Table 3 shows the number of times that different oblasts have been ranked among the three with the lowest performance across all 8 assessment areas: math and science for fourth- and eighth-graders in TIMSS; math, science, and reading for 15-year-olds in PISA; and reading for fourth-graders in PIRLS.

All data on regional student achievement are taken from national reports issued by the Information-Analytic Centre, the national coordinating institution for international large-scale studies. For full student achievement ranking tables for all three studies, see Appendix 1.

**Table 3. Number of times oblasts were ranked in the bottom three on the eight assessment areas of recent ILSAs**

Region	Oblast	Appearance in bottom 6 (times)	Appearance in bottom 3 (times)
West Kazakhstan	West Kazakhstan oblast	1	0
South Kazakhstan	South Kazakhstan oblast	7	4
	Almaty oblast	6	4
West Kazakhstan	Atyrau oblast	8	6
	Mangystau oblast	8	7
North Kazakhstan	Kostanay oblast	6	2
West Kazakhstan	Aktobe oblast	3	0
Central Kazakhstan	Akmola oblast	6	1
Central Kazakhstan	Karagandy oblast	1	0
Central Kazakhstan	Astana city	2	0

It is hard to ignore the fact that regardless of the area of study (science, math, or reading) or the age cohort (fourth-graders, eighth-graders, or 15-year-olds), certain regions tend to underperform. A striking example is Mangystau oblast, which was

among the bottom three regions in seven of eight assessment areas. Students in another oil-producing region, Atyrau oblast, showed the lowest achievement in five assessment areas in all three studies (see table 4).

<sup>54</sup> PISA assesses the functional literacy of 15-year-olds.

<sup>55</sup> Angrist et al., “Measuring Human Capital (English).”

<sup>56</sup> The international report on PISA 2015 results only includes Kazakhstan’s results for closed-ended questions.

**Table 4. Bottom 6 oblasts across eight assessment areas of recent ILSAs (ranking 11-16 out of 16 oblasts in Kazakhstan)**

	TIMSS 2015				PISA 2015			PIRLS 2016
	4 <sup>th</sup> -grade science	4 <sup>th</sup> -grade math	8 <sup>th</sup> -grade science	8 <sup>th</sup> -grade math	Science	Reading	Math	Reading
11	West Kaz oblast	Atyrau oblast	South Kaz oblast	Astana city	Kostanay oblast	Akmola oblast	Aktobe oblast	Karagandy oblast
12	Akmola oblast	South Kaz oblast	Kostanay oblast	Akmola oblast	Akmola oblast	Almaty oblast	Mangystau oblast	Astana city
13	Atyrau oblast	Akmola oblast	Aktobe oblast	Almaty oblast	Aktobe oblast	Aktobe oblast	Kostanay oblast	South Kaz oblast
14	South Kaz oblast	Kostanay oblast	Almaty oblast	Kostanay oblast	Mangystau oblast	South Kaz oblast	Akmola oblast	Almaty oblast
15	Almaty oblast	Almaty oblast	Mangystau oblast	Atyrau oblast	South Kaz oblast	Mangystau oblast	South Kaz oblast	Mangystau oblast
16	Mangystau oblast	Mangystau oblast	Atyrau oblast	Mangystau oblast	Atyrau oblast	Atyrau oblast	Atyrau oblast	Atyrau oblast

Both South Kazakhstan and Almaty oblasts were ranked among the bottom three in terms of their performance on four out of eight assessment areas. Although three administrative units of Central Kazakhstan also show student achievement below the national average, only one of them performed in the bottom three (Akmola oblast in math).<sup>57</sup>

It would be reasonable to argue that it is inappropriate to draw conclusions about regional educational performance based solely on such a simplistic interpretation of rankings. The rankings may not fully represent the quality of secondary education; they may also be affected by out-of-school factors. Yet both objections are “features” of my argument rather than “bugs” in it: we need to understand exactly what lies behind regional variations in student achievement before we can treat these test results as indicators of education quality in any particular region.

To be dramatic about it, the role, value, and status of school as an institution is at stake here,

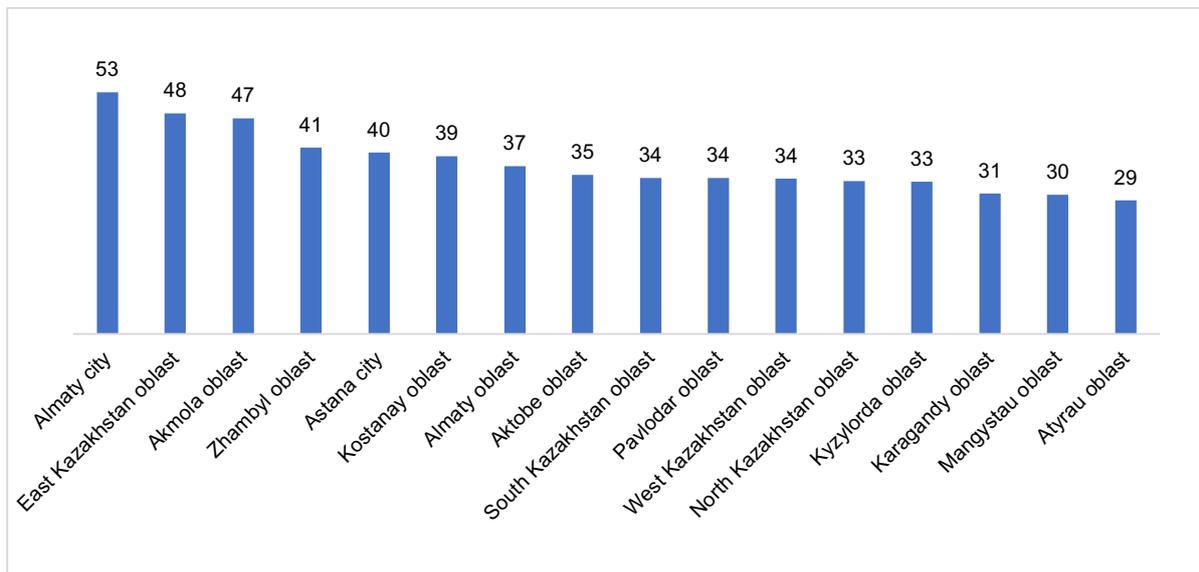
especially in regions with low achievement. Can we be sure that test results fairly reflect the amount of work local teachers put in to get a failing student past the threshold? Or perhaps the external factors in a region are so significant that a school’s efforts merely scratch the surface—or worse, are made in vain?

Moreover, the answers to these questions have clear implications for educational policy. Any plans for strategic improvements or systemic interventions should be grounded in certainty that a good initiative will not have uneven regional effects due to varying conditions in the regions.

Figure 4 shows the results of the External Assessment of Learning Achievement (EALA) administered to ninth-graders in 2015. This national standardized test measured students’ knowledge in math and science (physics, biology, geography, and chemistry). The national average score was 37 out of 80 points.

<sup>57</sup> PISA 2015.

Figure 4. External Assessment of Learning Achievement (EALA), 2015<sup>58</sup>



Calculating Learning-Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS) for 16 Regions of Kazakhstan<sup>59</sup>

We can see that students achieved the lowest scores in Mangystau and Atyrau oblasts. In South Kazakhstan and Almaty oblasts, ninth-graders showed achievement close to the national average.

Since the age cohorts tested in TIMSS (eighth-graders) and EALA (ninth-graders), as well as in PISA (15-year-olds) and PIRLS (fourth-graders) are different (although there is a possible overlap between TIMSS, PISA, and EALA), I do not perform correlation analysis between these results.

The Learning-Adjusted Years of Schooling measure was recently developed by the World Bank to assess the quality of education under the Human Capital Index framework. As the authors of the measure note, the advantage of LAYS is that it reflects both the quantity and the quality of schooling.<sup>60</sup>

This approach was originally used to measure differences between countries. In this work, I apply it to calculate the difference in learning-adjusted years of schooling between 16 oblasts in Kazakhstan.

### Box 3. TIMSS 2015 in Kazakhstan

TIMSS 2015 was administered across 57 countries, with over 580,000 students taking part worldwide. The Kazakh sample consisted of 9,579 students, 44 percent of whom were from rural areas.

National analysis revealed that across all regions of Kazakhstan, students in schools where Russian is the language of instruction perform better than their peers who study in Kazakh. Rural students significantly lag behind their urban peers, while boys and girls show nearly similar achievement levels. The highest gap in average TIMSS scores is observed between the eighth-graders instructed in Russian and Kazakh, respectively, in Atyrau oblast, with the latter lagging over 120 points behind the former in math and science.

<sup>58</sup> Information-Analytic Centre, "Analiz rezul'tatov vneshnei otsenki uchebnykh dostizhenii uchashchikhsia 9 klassov (VOUD-2015)," Astana, 2015, <http://iac.kz/ru/analytics/analiz-rezultatov-vneshney-ocenki-uchebnykh-dostizheniy-uchashchihhsya-9-klassov-voud-2015>.

<sup>59</sup> I am analyzing data for 16 regions instead of 17 because TIMSS 2015 was administered *before* the division of South Kazakhstan. Thus, separate data for academic achievement of Shymkent city and Turkestan oblast, as well as data on their economic performance in 2015, are not available at present.

<sup>60</sup> Filmer et al., "Learning-Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS)."

Children whose parents have higher education score significantly higher than those whose parents have only secondary or vocational education. Similarly, if a child attended preschool education facilities for 3 years of more, his/her scores are higher than those of students who attended for less than 3 years.<sup>61</sup>

As the authors note, “schooling is not the same as learning.”<sup>62</sup> While educational attainment rates (highest level of education) are still widely used to measure the quality of educational systems, it is also clear that countries (or regions) with the same expected years of schooling are hardly equal in academic achievement. Thus, combining quality and quantity of schooling is an important step toward making assessments of educational systems truer to life.

The overarching formula for LAYS is:

$$LAYS_c = Sc * R \frac{n}{c}$$

where  $Sc$  is equal to average years of schooling in country  $c$  and  $R \frac{n}{c}$  is the measure of average

learning for the relevant cohort and country relative to a benchmark country.<sup>63</sup>

For the purposes of my work, I use region-level data instead of country-level data and take Almaty city as a benchmark region, since it has the highest scores in all areas but one. I provide a detailed explanation of the World Bank’s formula and my adjustments in the Appendix.

### *Limitations*

It is important to mention two possibly significant limitations relating to the calculation of LAYS in this work. First of all, since LAYS was originally designed to calculate country-level results, there is a possibility of significant standard error when comparing region-level data, which could affect the final calculations.

Broader concerns relate to the extent to which student achievement as reported by large-scale studies can represent both in-school

processes and a student’s family context. In other words, do these tests measure actual quality of learning/schooling in a particular school? While there is no ultimate answer to this question, as school effectiveness is a constantly developing movement in education science, I refer to the multiple previous studies that have employed PISA and TIMSS data as the most complete information dataset on countries’ educational performance to date.

In the Kazakhstani context in particular, there are some concerns about the extent to which test tasks reflect the local school curriculum. However, these are not particularly troublesome. According to the national coordinating institution (Information-Analytic Center), TIMSS is more focused on assessing students’ academic knowledge of the curriculum than on determining their ability to apply it in real-life situations (as the OECD’s PISA does). Thus, given the strong traditions of science and math teaching that are still present in Kazakh secondary schools, TIMSS data seem to reflect the Kazakh curriculum even more than does PISA.<sup>64</sup>

### *Expert Survey*

To gain a better understanding of the scope of factors affecting student achievement in regions, I conducted a survey of experts. The aim of the survey was twofold: a) to understand the level of general awareness of regional disparities in student achievement; and b) to get a pool of professional opinions on what factors underpin low academic achievement in Kazakhstan’s regions. The expert sample consisted of 16 respondents specializing in education (10) and other professional spheres (6).

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<sup>61</sup> Information-Analytic Centre, “Natsional’nyi doklad o sostoianii i razvitii sistemy obrazovaniia Respubliki Kazakhstan po itogam 2015 goda.”

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> For a detailed explanation, see Filmer et al., “Learning-Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS).”

<sup>64</sup> Information-Analytic Centre, “Natsional’nyi doklad o sostoianii i razvitii sistemy obrazovaniia Respubliki Kazakhstan (za gody Nezavistimosti Kazakhstana).”

**Table 5. Sample of experts**

	E1 *	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	E7	E8	E9	E10	E11	E12	E13	E14	E15	E16
Gender, age	M, 56	F, 55	F, 26	F, 42	F, 70	M, 32	M, 50	M, 34	M, 35	M, 36	M, 29	F, 27	M, 34	M, 58	F, 36	M, 32

\*E1, E2, etc.—Expert 1, expert 2, etc.

## Data and Results

### LAYS Calculation Results

Table 5 displays the results of LAYS calculations. These are presented by TIMSS discipline (science, math) and cohort tested (fourth- and eighth-graders). The first column shows each region’s test score, while the LAYS column shows years of schooling adjusted for the “quality” of learning.

Almaty city receives a score of 11 in every LAYS column, as it acts as a benchmarking (numeraire) region. However, it is also three years behind the expected 14 years of schooling for the country.<sup>65</sup> The calculations presented in Table 6 are made with an assumption that learning starts in kindergarten, leading to three years of learning in preprimary education and 4/8 years in school. Calculations on the assumption that learning starts at school (first grade) can be found in Appendix 1.

**Table 6. Learning-adjusted years of schooling (LAYS) for regions of Kazakhstan**

	TIMSS score 4 grade, science	LAYS	TIMSS score 4 grade, math	LAYS	TIMSS score 8 grade, science	LAYS	TIMSS score 8 grade, math	LAYS
<b>Almaty city</b>	<b>623</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>608</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>591</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>575</b>	<b>11</b>
East Kazakhstan	588	10.2	582	10.4	574	10.6	560	10.6
Zhambyl	581	10.1	582	10.4	580	10.7	573	11.0
Kyzylorda	582	10.1	582	10.4	570	10.5	581	11.1
Pavlodar	573	9.9	561	9.9	556	10.2	544	10.2
North Kazakhstan	554	9.4	549	9.6	554	10.1	523	9.7
Aktobe	557	9.5	548	9.6	511	9.1	530	9.9
Karagandy	547	9.3	540	9.4	529	9.5	522	9.7
Astana city	544	9.2	536	9.3	530	9.6	515	9.5
West Kazakhstan	544	9.2	535	9.3	525	9.4	519	9.6
Atyrau	536	9.0	533	9.3	471	8.2	478	8.6
South Kazakhstan	530	8.9	533	9.3	522	9.4	522	9.7
Akmola	538	9.1	529	9.2	528	9.5	511	9.4
Kostanay	549	9.3	523	9.0	516	9.2	494	9.0
Almaty	519	8.7	511	8.8	507	9.0	504	9.3
Mangystau	504	8.3	508	8.7	473	8.2	476	8.6

<sup>65</sup> World Bank Group, “Kazakhstan” country brief, 2018, accessed July 22, 2019, [https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/hci/HCI\\_2pager\\_KAZ.pdf](https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/hci/HCI_2pager_KAZ.pdf).

As can be observed from the table, the regions closest to Almaty city on the LAYS measure are Kyzylorda oblast (which even outperforms Almaty city on eighth-grade math), Zhambyl oblast, and East Kazakhstan oblast. The gap in learning-adjusted years of schooling between these regions and Almaty city is around half a year.

**Thus, not the entire South Kazakhstan region lags significantly behind in academic achievement.** However, Almaty oblast is more than 2 years behind Almaty city. This means that in 11 years of school, students there only cover knowledge equal to around 9 years in the schools of Almaty city. From the map above, we can also observe that Mangystau oblast, technically classified as a western region (it is also similar to Atyrau oblast in its oil-production economy), is geographically closer to the southern region of Kazakhstan. This fact was previously mentioned by Alimkhanova in her analysis of the NEET situation in South Kazakhstan.<sup>66</sup>

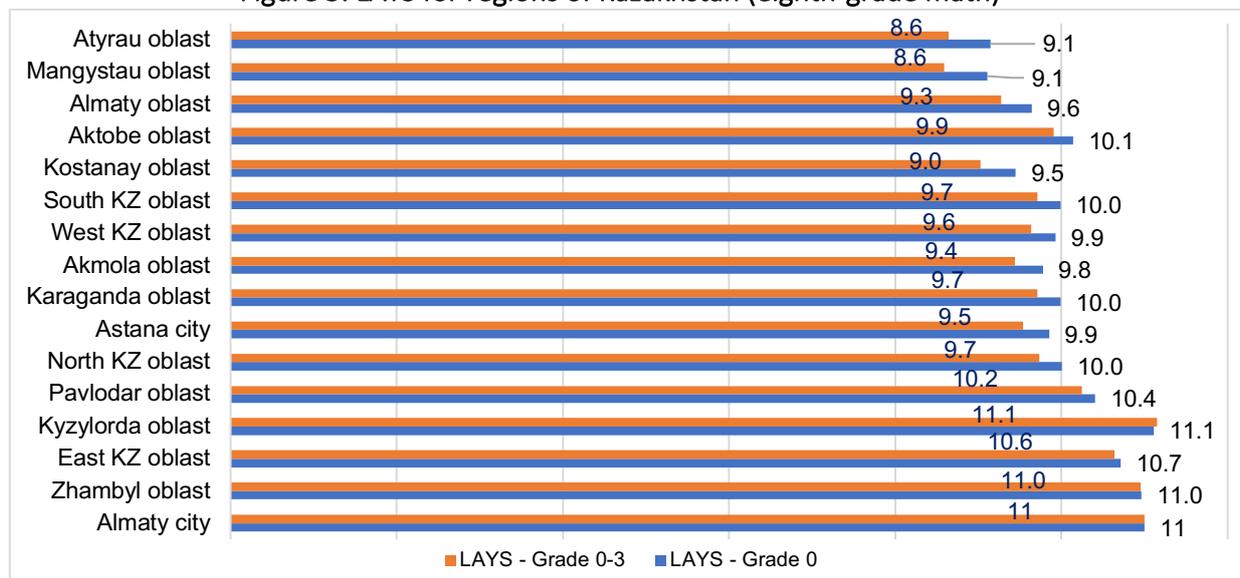
**The results for West Kazakhstan as a whole are more homogeneous than those for the South.** We can observe that both Atyrau and Mangystau oblasts are more than two years behind Almaty city in academic achievement. In

their eleven years at school, eighth-graders in Atyrau and Mangystau oblasts are projected to cover an amount of learning equal to just 8-8.5 years in an Almaty city school (there is an almost three-year gap in science). For West Kazakhstan oblast, LAYS varies from 9.4 years in science to 9.6 in math, thus showing an approximate 1.5-year difference from Almaty city. Aktobe oblast is almost 2 years behind Almaty city in science and 1 year behind in math.

**Another pattern worth mentioning can be seen across the Central Kazakhstan region.** Karagandy and Akmola oblasts, as well as the capital city, Astana (Nur-Sultan), all lag 1.5 years behind Almaty city in achievement.

Figure 5 shows the results of LAYS calculations for eighth-graders' math scores, with learning starting at Grade 0 and Grade -3. This approach to calculation is offered by Filmer et al. to compare adjusted learning outcomes for different assumptions on when the learning starts—either at Grade 0 of school or 3 years before that, when a child goes to kindergarten.<sup>67</sup> The numeraire region is Almaty city and the correlation between the two measures is 1.

Figure 5. LAYS for regions of Kazakhstan (eighth-grade math)



<sup>66</sup> Dinara Alimkhanova, "Understanding the Rising NEET Phenomenon in Southern Kazakhstan," *CAP Paper 206*, George Washington University, Washington, DC, June 2018, <https://centralasiaprogram.org/archives/12460>.

<sup>67</sup> Filmer et al., "Learning-Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS)."

Predictably, there is also a strong correlation between LAYS for different subject areas (science and math)—0.93 for eighth-grade scores.

#### *Expert Survey Results*

The ultimate goal of the expert survey was to serve as preliminary grounds for a larger study on the reasons for educational underperformance in regions, providing a broad range of answers to exploratory questions and helping to develop an informed hypothesis.

Survey questions were clustered into three major subgroups: level of awareness; reasons for regional underperformance in secondary education; and what can be done to shift the situation.

- Subgroup 1: Public awareness (is there a problem?)

#### **Q1. What do you think about the quality of secondary education in Kazakhstan (as shown by student achievement, final grades, project work, academic contests)?**

Six of the experts surveyed consider secondary education to be of either low or “below average” quality in general. Some of their criticisms relate to the perceived overall “elitism” of secondary education, where a lot of attention is given to catering to talented and/or well-off students rather than to underperforming students. Other experts pointed to specific problems: a disparity in educational outcomes between urban and rural schools, regional differences, and a big gap in achievement between gifted and struggling students.

**E5:** “Kazakhstan’s education system is like a big field with built-in ‘quality islands’ resulting, I think, from the education ‘elitization’ politics realized throughout the past decades.”

**E13:** “...There’s too much focus on ‘gifted’ kids, while no work is being done with underperforming or struggling children.”

**E11:** “There are schools that offer world-class education and schools where kids do not learn even basic skills.”

Only two respondents consider secondary education to be of “good quality” or to have made significant progress in recent years. These respondents also mentioned the development of institutions for gifted children in support of their argument, as well as increased financial support for the system as a whole.

**E14:** “I think the quality of secondary education is rising. It is connected with 100-percent school enrollment, good-quality preschool preparation, parental involvement, and increased social activism, as well as the work of the state government to strengthen the quality of education and the work of Nazarbayev Intellectual schools<sup>68</sup>.”

Overall, among the majority of the experts there is a clear consensus that the quality of education cannot be generalized at national level due to the heterogeneity of the schools in the system and their varying prerequisites.

#### **Q2. What else do you think can serve as an indicator of the quality of education?**

Experts mentioned functional literacy (the ability to communicate and work with various types of information, the ability to apply knowledge to real life) and university enrollment/competitiveness of graduates as the most important indicators. Equality of opportunity and inclusiveness was the second most frequently mentioned indicator, while only two experts mentioned parent, student, and teacher satisfaction as evidence of the system’s quality.

**E14:** “... We need to focus not so much on the current numerical indicators, but rather on quality indicators, as well as on the range of indirect impact factors (economic, demographic, sociological) that accompany the sphere [of education].”

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<sup>68</sup> The Nazarbayev Intellectual schools (NIS) are a network of 20 schools for gifted students established in 2008. They were also a main developer of the renewed national curriculum.

**E5:** “The indicators mentioned here (academic achievements, participation in school Olympiads and contests) are ‘classic’ indicators used to make educational rankings by educational systems that still function in the ‘knowledge paradigm.’ If a system of education aims to facilitate students’ acquisition of a broad range of competencies, the indicators will be broader as well—like students’ ability to make decisions, teamwork skills, communication skills, etc. In other words, the range of indicators of the quality of education is directly or indirectly connected with the conceptual platform of the national system of education.”

**E1:** “Skills of working with information: find it, analyze it, and make conclusions.”

**E9:** “The main indicator is the share of graduates enrolled in the world’s top universities.”

**E13:** “One of the key indicators of educational quality is reducing the gap in achievement between struggling and successful students.”

**Q3. How well, in your opinion, is Kazakhstani society informed about the achievements or limitations of achievements of the secondary education system? What do you yourself know about its key development indicators?**

Experts held similar views regarding the level of social awareness of the achievements and pitfalls of the country’s secondary education system. The majority believe that society is either completely unaware of or insufficiently informed about recent developments in secondary education.

**E6:** “On average, society does not know anything. [Those on] Facebook know a set of populist facts, analysts might know about PISA, etc.”

**E4:** “Society is not sufficiently aware. The secondary education system in Kazakhstan functions according to a top-down approach, which does not always contribute to developing teachers’ initiative and their readiness to changes. That is why the key indicator of the system’s improvement is their inclusion as experts in the process of developing textbooks, curricula, and assessment systems, which should contribute to teachers’ professional development.”

**E3:** “The general public in Kazakhstan mostly knows about the successes and failures of the system of secondary education from their own or their community’s personal experience. The nationwide PR policy on education requires improvement.”

**E10:** “I think the public is not sufficiently informed about the state system of secondary education in Kazakhstan. On the one hand, this could be due to a lack of interest on the part of the people themselves, except those directly involved in the educational process (teachers, managers, students and their parents, state institutions). On the other hand, much is underpinned by a lack of systematic communication from the schools and the state. The only key indicator of the development of secondary education system of which I am aware is the UNT.”<sup>69</sup>

**E12:** “They [the public] are completely unaware. We need an effective communications campaign, although it is still not in the interests of the state apparatus to shed light on the real issues at hand.”

After the first segment of five broad questions, experts were offered the chance to look at the results of three large-scale comparative studies (TIMSS, PISA, PIRLS) and asked whether they could draw any conclusions from that information.

**Q4. If it possible, in your opinion, to trace the quality of schooling in specific regions based on these results?**

Overall, there is a high level of trust in LSAs among the experts surveyed. Twelve of 16 experts believe they can be used as reliable sources of information about the quality of secondary education. Among the four who answered this question in the negative, two referred to the need to integrate the data into a larger analysis with additional data in terms of the quantity of observations and other indicators such as university enrollment data. Two experts disregarded the international test results completely, expressing their distrust in the integrity of the data and the administration of the tests in Kazakhstan in general.

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<sup>69</sup> Unified National Testing, a standardized test that school graduates must pass as a final examination.

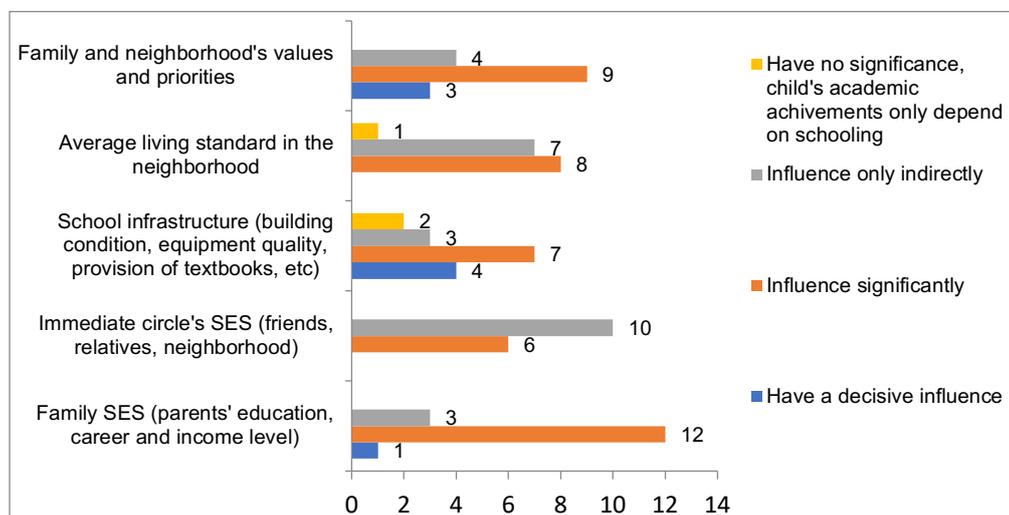
On the other hand, as mentioned by one of the experts, since the methodology of a particular test is the same for all the regions, it provides a good starting point for further analysis, showing that particular regions have lower results across all three studies.

○ Subgroup 2: Reasons for regional underperformance

**Q5. How important are background (contextual) factors in determining a child's academic achievement? (multiple choice)**

Before addressing specific regional underperformance, the experts were asked to answer a multiple-choice question regarding the influence of contextual factors (as opposed to features of schooling, happenings in school) on a child's academic achievement. As can be seen from Figure 6, the majority believe that family SES and the values system with which children are raised play a significant role in their academic success. Living standards in their neighborhood and school infrastructure come second in terms of their influence on academic achievement.

**Figure 6. Role of contextual factors in determining academic achievement**



**Q6. What key factors, in your opinion, might influence the quality of secondary education in a region?**

**Q7. In your opinion, can internal regional characteristics impact underperformance [in secondary education]?**

It is possible to identify *four main factors* that the experts consider to be the most influential in determining regional educational achievement:

- Regional SES (including the share of urban/rural population, education expenditure, school financing, and the poverty level in the region/neighborhood);
- Quality of teaching (teachers' qualifications and professional development opportunities);

- Language (Kazakh versus Russian languages of instruction, share of Kazakh-speaking population in the region); and
- Values and traditions of local population (importance of education in regional strategic development, traditions and local views regarding the value of education)

**E6:** "If it is a mining/trading or an agriculture-oriented region, it is no place for intellectual teachers. Moreover, the average parent would be engaged in non-intellectual work. It is challenging to achieve a high quality of education in such conditions."

**E3:** "The gap in achievement might be due to intraregional characteristics. It is important, for example, what type of production the region specializes in."

**E5:** “South Kazakhstan oblast is peculiar due to its high density of school students from various backgrounds; the population has a more traditional value system in which education might occupy a firm position but not be a first priority.”

**E6:** “...However sad or shameful it is to acknowledge this fact, [regional underperformance] might also be connected with the share of Russian-speaking population in the region, although this should change with time.”

**E11:** “In Mangystau and Atyrau oblasts, [low educational achievement] might be due to the outflow of human capital from teaching to higher-paid professions. Moreover, along with South Kazakhstan oblast, these regions are more Kazakh-speaking and it is no secret that instruction in Kazakh is not the same quality as instruction in Russian or English, which means low-quality textbooks and lower-quality teachers.”

**E9:** “I think the results will correlate with the urban/rural population ratio. The results of urban

students will always be higher than those of their rural peers, so it is not quite right to compare the city of Almaty and Mangystau oblast.”

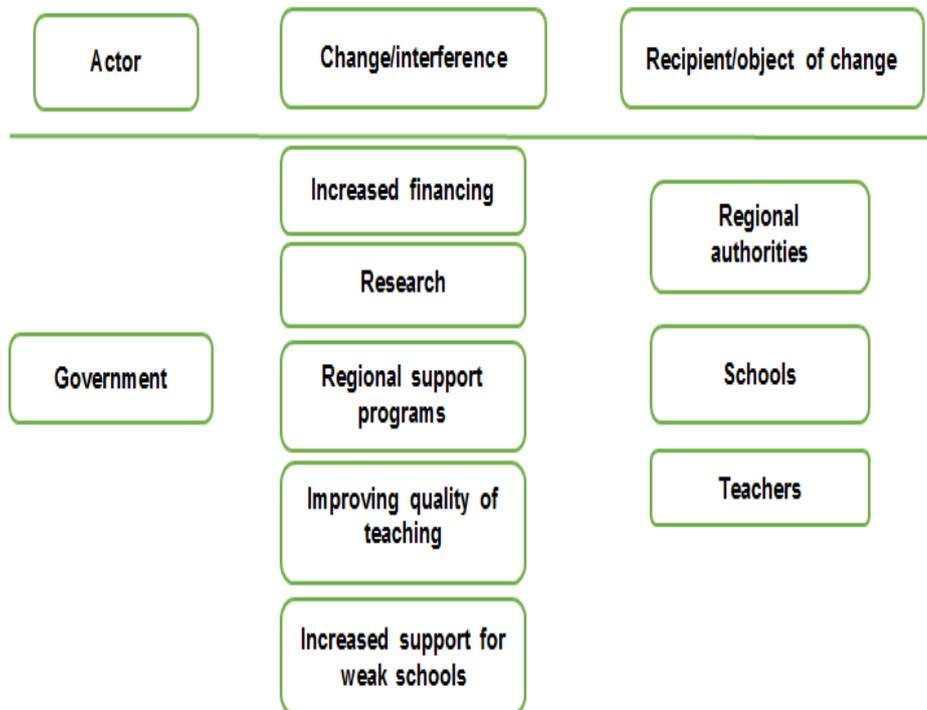
**E14:** “The fact that particular regions are lagging behind might depend on the urban/rural population ratio, living standards in the region, ecology, and traditions.”

o Subgroup 3: Character of change required

**Q8. What could be done (in both the short and long term) to shift the situation of failure (both regionally and nationwide)?**

It is possible to disaggregate expert opinions here into several categories that emerged during the analysis: a) actor (who should author the change); b) character of change (type of interference required); and c) object of influence (what or whom the change should address). The measures suggested by the experts to reduce inequality in access to quality education ranged from additional funding to changing the structure of education system management at both national and regional level.

Figure 7. Actor, change, and object of change proposed by experts



Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of expert interview

### Actor

As was to be expected, all experts link any potential change to the central government, represented by the Ministry of Education and other decision-making bodies. This is a fair perception in a centralized system, where decisions involving finance, infrastructure and capacity-building are normally made only by higher authorities. This is also mostly true for region-level activities, especially in the field of education—regional activities in this sphere are planned on the basis of the State Program for Education Development, which states national and regional priorities.

### Type of Change

The most important and urgent measure, in experts' opinion, is to increase financial support for the education system in general, as well as for the regions. That includes raising teachers' salaries and targeting financial aid to weak schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

**E2:** "... regional support programs, targeted support for weak schools and struggling children."

**E1:** "Increased financial support, including for poverty alleviation, increased salaries for teachers."

**E12:** "Increase per capita funding, give [schools] autonomy."

There is a consensus among the majority of experts that measures to reduce the achievement gap should originate from within the region, based on the regional context and issues at hand. Two experts mentioned the need for research to understand the reasons for regions' poor performance prior to enacting new measures.

**E2:** "Support programs for weaker regions, targeted support for ineffective schools and struggling children."

**E3:** "Before introducing any measures, we need to conduct deep research into the reasons for regional

inequality in education. And after the reasons are clear, specific regional measures can be initiated."

**E8:** "I think we need a specific regional policy to reduce the disparity in the quality of education. Perhaps we need a special salary bonus for teachers in the western region, where the average salary [for teachers] is much less than the region's average wage."

**E9:** "I suggest 1) delegating the prerogative of school financing and teacher salaries to the local authority level; 2) that the Ministry of Education should concentrate only on coordination of and methodological support for the schooling process; and 3) getting rid of the archaic secondary education management scheme (district/city/oblast authorities), as they pose a corruption risk and are of no use."

**E13:** "On a regional level, [we should prioritize] 1) developing infrastructure; 2) improving teacher quality; and 3) adopting targeted regional programs with increased financing. Nationwide, there is a need for a support program for disadvantaged children and schools."

**E15:** "There is a need for a deep analysis of the issues underpinning quality of education (impact factors) and possible solutions."

Improvement of teacher quality and status is another step that was often mentioned by the experts, who are alarmed by the poor quality of future teachers admitted to training programs at universities and the lack of teacher autonomy in Kazakhstan. Some experts view improving the status of teachers as a vital part of the overall improvement of the quality of education in the regions.

**E10:** "[We need] a higher level of teachers (financial stimuli, better preparation and more rigorous selection by pedagogical programs, focus on attracting professionals without teaching experience but with appropriate practical expertise."

**E4:** "Continuous improvement of teachers' professional excellence, focused not on their formal qualifications but on improvement of their practice; establishing teaching as a profession rather than a semi-profession."

**E11:** *“Improving teachers’ status, reducing administrative workload, and motivating them to engage in continuous (!) capacity-building, including rural teachers.”*

It was also suggested to facilitate the development of private schools and to roll back the educational reforms launched in the past five years, including trilingual education, which are seen as possibly too big a burden on schools and teachers in particular. It is worth mentioning that there are certain indications of dissatisfaction with the curriculum and textbooks—one expert suggested replacing national textbooks with foreign editions, while another believes that the whole “Kazakhstani” model of secondary education is ineffective, suggesting that the example of developed countries should be followed instead.

**E7:** *“[We need to] give up the idea of building a specifically ‘Kazakhstani’ model of secondary schools. It is sufficient to analyze the models implemented in developed countries (like the USA, Finland, Russia, etc.) and copy one of them. I insist—just copy as it is, and do not change even 0.01 percent of its content.”*

#### *Object of Change/Influence*

As for “what has to change,” there are several areas which, in the experts’ opinion, should be targeted to improve the quality of education both nationwide and regionally. As mentioned before, the quality of teachers is associated with the quality of education, which is why there are a number of recommendations relating to providing support for their continuous professional development and rethinking the enrollment policies of university teacher-training programs.

However, qualifications are not the only issue. Teachers’ low wages were frequently mentioned as the main limiting factor. Teachers’ welfare is likewise cited as an important condition for the holistic educational process and is associated with both compensation and the status of the profession.

Experts express their concern about the top-down school management system,

arguing that schools need more autonomy to be able to improve. An increase in the number of schools financed through per capita funding is also seen as a necessary step toward building a more sustainable school environment. Certain concerns and criticisms addressed the work of the regional educational authorities, including distrust in the transparency of their decision-making. Finally, there is skepticism about the recent reforms in secondary education, including trilingual education and the renewed curriculum, with some experts suggesting that they are having a detrimental effect on the quality of secondary education as a whole.

#### **Discussion**

*“It is certainly true that schooling should be easier to influence than family, peer, or broader social and economic trends, but this does not invalidate their influence.”*

—Mortimore and Witty (1998, p. 300)

Certain regions of Kazakhstan are clearly underperforming in secondary education, as can be seen from the results of the international large-scale assessments and the calculation of learning-adjusted years of schooling (LAYS).

According to the LAYS calculation, by the time they graduate from school, current fourth- and eighth-graders in Almaty and Mangystau oblasts will only have acquired knowledge equivalent to 8.5 years of schooling (out of an expected 14 in preschool and school). Even bearing in mind the possible limitations of such calculations (eg., the extent to which test results represent the actual learning happening in the classroom), this seems unacceptable in a state that is determined to provide every child with equal educational opportunities and equal quality of education.

Understanding what lies behind such drastic differences in academic achievement is vital for planning any interventions to change the situation for the better. As mentioned above, much of academic achievement is explained by contextual factors, some of which were highlighted during the expert survey.

According to respondents, a family's socioeconomic status, quality of teachers, a family's values, and language of instruction at school all have a direct influence on the quality of education available to students in Kazakhstan. Yet it appears that most of these factors are not accounted for in educational planning at regional or national level, for a variety of reasons: lack of relevant data, the area being out of the reach of educational authorities, etc.

Mortimore and Witty's rhetorical question "Should we ignore disadvantage in the hope that students themselves will find the necessary strengths to overcome their problems?" sums up the gist of the practical and ethical controversies around the issue.<sup>70</sup> It is my belief, however, that (at least in the case of Kazakhstan) a large share of the contextual or other factors standing in the way of a child's academic achievement can be, if not eliminated, then compensated for. To bring this about, we need political will and a holistic strategy.

The main problem with the current policy on the issue of regional academic underperformance is that there is virtually none. At least, there is no policy specifically aimed at reducing educational inequality across regions based on an understanding of the key impact factors. The two strategic documents outlining educational policies and regional development priorities in Kazakhstan, as well as regional education development strategies, hardly take into account regions' socioeconomic context or local conditions.

For example, the State Program for Education Development (SPED) outlines strategic goals for the education system as a whole, aiming mainly at achieving numerical indicators. The State Program for Regional Development (SPRD),<sup>71</sup> in turn, refers to the SPED on all indicators concerning education. Regional education development strategies, too, are normally drafted

in accordance with and on the basis of SPED goals and indicators.

Under such a unified approach to education development, it is not surprising that regions experience varying effects from the government's well-intentioned national initiatives. While regional inequality in education is continuously brought to attention in national reports and national analyses of TIMSS and PISA results, there is still no specific strategy or action plan in place to reduce it. In short, Kazakhstan's education system "does not act as a social lift but rather increases social inequality."<sup>72</sup>

*E6: "For a child, [low educational achievement in a region] means zero opportunities in terms of employment and career; for the region, it is not so scary, since it is possible to make it attractive to qualified employees/the educated population using administrative resources. However, that requires [political] will and resources. Nevertheless, in a stagnating situation, the low quality of education means the continuing growth of poverty in the region and out-migration."*

*E8: "Consequences manifest in lower chances for children to win a higher education grant and to compete in the labor market."*

*E14: "The basic consequence of low-quality education in a region is, in my view, out-migration—from rural to urban areas and from struggling regions to more well-off ones, like Nur-Sultan, Almaty, and Karaganda cities. Thus, the gap in education quality is ever increasing."*

*E5: "The main consequence is an unfair narrowing of the opportunities for sustainable development available to children and youth, which in the end results in various negative social phenomena like poverty, asocial behavior, etc."*

Besides the legitimate concerns about out-migration in the south of the country, there is another issue—the rising number of NEET youth

<sup>70</sup> Mortimore, *The Road to Improvement*.

<sup>71</sup> Ministry of Economy of Kazakhstan, "Programma razvitiia regionov do 2020 goda," <http://economy.gov.kz/ru/pages/programma-razvitiya-regionov-do-2020-goda-1>.

<sup>72</sup> S. Irsaliyev, "Kazakhstan in TIMSS and PISA 2015: Results and Impact Factors" (presentation at the Collegial Meeting of the Ministry of Education and Science, 2017), accessed July 22, 2019, <http://iac.kz/ru/events/kazakhstan-v-timss-i-pisa-2015-rezultaty-i-factory-vliyaniya-prezentatsiya>.

(those not in education, employment, or training). The share of NEET youth in Mangystau oblast is already 16 percent, and in South Kazakhstan oblast it is 10 percent.<sup>73</sup> As a rule, this number is higher in rural areas, indicating young people's lack of interest in entering higher education or the job market—or their inability to do so. As Alimkhanova mentions, NEET youth mostly come from disadvantaged families and demonstrate low academic achievement.<sup>74</sup> The implications of such youth disengagement are multiple, including increasing prospects of social tension in the regions and the issue of return on educational investment.

The perceived marginalization of Kazakhs born in the Western and Southern regions is evident, perhaps now more than ever. As Koch and White's study shows, the "southerners," in particular, are perceived by other Kazakhstanis as "aggressive," "uncivilized," and "unintelligent," with a certain level of social resentment coming from the "urban" population of bigger cities in Central and North Kazakhstan.<sup>75</sup>

Moreover, as Koch and White find, Kazakhstani citizens consider southern and western regions the "least desirable" to live in, with economic opportunity cited as the most important reason for this. There is a common public perception that people from South Kazakhstan are corrupt.

In a country of inherent controversies, among which language and the opposition between traditional modern mindsets are some of the most apparent, the signs of such alarming social segregation cannot be underestimated. It is imperative to take measures so that children do not become hostages of the socio-economic or cultural issues of their neighborhoods.

Both the underpopulated oil-producing Atyrau and Mangystau oblasts, with the highest average salary and share of the country's GDP, as well as the densely populated and poor South Kazakhstan region (classified by Whiteshield

Partners and EBRD in 2015 as "losing"), demonstrate staggering underperformance in education, a fact that calls for specific attention. If nothing else, this could mean that besides local educational institutions themselves, there are other major factors influencing the effectiveness of regional secondary education systems and that these factors may vary from region to region. Among these, one might, as experts have indicated, list language, the local values system, and the socioeconomic situation.

#### *Language and Values as Determinants of Academic Achievement?*

There is clear evidence that in schools with Kazakh as the language of instruction, as well as in rural schools (and especially when these two overlap), students continue to show much lower achievement.

However, it may be argued that strategic planning in regions does not control for poorer education in these schools. Regional strategic plans, for example, might only include generalized "measures to improve quality of education" and do not stipulate financial advantages or additional funds for poorer schools or Kazakh-language schools (which often overlap). The former South Kazakhstan oblast (now divided into Turkestan oblast and the city of Shymkent), for example, had the lowest expenses per student in 2015.

**There is an intrinsic assumption that all policies and initiatives should work the same across all mainstream schools in Kazakhstan.** However, a drastic difference in academic performance between Kazakh- and Russian-language schools persists. Thus, the effect of any well-intentioned initiative (like trilingual education) is likely to be minimal in Kazakh-language schools, with students receiving less benefit in the end.

In 2018, 53 percent of all schools in Kazakhstan taught solely in Kazakh, accounting for 40 percent of the total school student population (1.3 million students).<sup>76</sup> The distribution of Kazakh

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<sup>73</sup> Alimkhanova, "The Rising NEET Phenomenon."

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

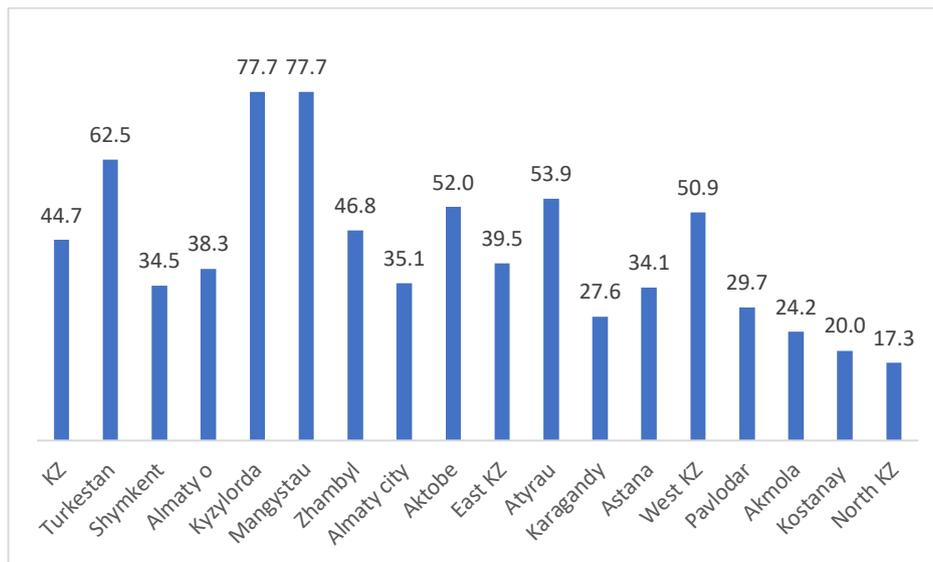
<sup>75</sup> Natalie Koch and Kristopher White, "Cowboys, Gangsters, and Rural Bumpkins: Constructing the 'Other' in Kazakhstan's 'Texas,'" in *Kazakhstan in the Making: Legitimacy, Symbols, and Social Changes*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 181-207.

<sup>76</sup> IAC, "Education System Statistics in Republic of Kazakhstan," national report (2018).

schools across the country reflects the density of the native language-speaking population. In Mangystau oblast, 86 percent of schools teach in Kazakh; in Kyzylorda oblast, another southern region, the figure is 89 percent. In the former South Kazakhstan oblast, there are over 1,000 Kazakh schools, comprising 72 percent of all regional schools and

one-fifth of all Kazakh schools in the country. Kazakh schools represent a clear majority in the west too, with such schools comprising over 65 percent of the total in Aktobe, Atyrau, and West Kazakhstan oblasts. South and West Kazakhstan account for the largest share of the country’s student population studying in Kazakh.

**Figure 8. Share of students in Kazakh-language schools (of total regional school population)**



The language-related disparity in academic achievement is somewhat unique to Kazakhstan and reflects national history. First of all, it is not speakers of the second or foreign language who are lagging behind but those of the state language—the language of the ethnic majority. Also, as has been demonstrated by international assessments, bilinguals (those who speak both Kazakh and Russian at home) score higher than their monolingual peers.

Undoubtedly, the lower quality of education in Kazakh schools is due in part to the Soviet legacy of suppressing national languages and identities, a policy the effects of which are perhaps more vivid in Kazakhstan than in any other post-Soviet state. To this day, Kazakh-language university faculties experience a lack of relevant materials, poorer labs, and lower-quality teaching staff.<sup>77</sup>

However, there are several examples showing that, given the right resources and curriculum, either language can be turned to students’ advantage. The experience of the Nazarbayev Intellectual schools and Kazakh-Turkish Lyceums, which practice trilingual education, has proved that it is possible to create learning environments in which place of origin or first language do not impact academic achievement, but even become a student’s strengths. The graduates of these institutions are the most competitive in the country, often being accepted to top international universities even before graduation.

The problem is with the country’s mainstream schools, which are typically underfunded in overpopulated areas and struggle to attract the best university graduates if—like 75 percent of the country’s schools—they are in rural areas.

<sup>77</sup> Beles Centre for Strategy and Analysis, “Teachers of Kazakhstan: Why Young People Choose This Profession and Why They Stay in It,” 2019, <https://beles-cas.kz/images/teacher.pdf>.

The impact of values, traditions, and priorities on academic achievement is fairly understudied and is even harder to measure and correlate with performance than the language factor.

In Kazakhstan's educational development programs, the closest proxy for values is the indicator of "satisfaction with educational reforms and policies/quality of education." It is one of the target numbers that is set to improve every year.<sup>78</sup> This indicator is isolated and probably not a good reflection of all education policies and the overall quality of education. Yet it is fair to argue that satisfaction can and will appear only *after* the local population sees an improvement in the quality of education in their neighborhoods. Arguably, improvements in Astana (Nur-Sultan), Almaty, or Shymkent cities will not prove particularly comforting for a parent in newly established Turkestan oblast<sup>79</sup> whose child studies in a class with forty classmates.

Values play an important role in understanding the quality of secondary education for girls. Women are an important part of the country's human capital. Several international studies and reports highlight the importance of quality education for women—both in terms of return on investment and in terms of social and cultural capital. Thus, making sure that every girl has a chance to get a higher education or otherwise earn a professional qualification enabling her to enter the labor market and further develop her abilities is extremely important for the nation. Not only does investment in women bring greater returns in the future,<sup>80</sup> but women also transmit their potential and values to their children, both

directly and through the subtle transmission of social and cultural preferences.<sup>81</sup>

Though almost 100 percent of school-age boys and girls are enrolled in secondary education in Kazakhstan, what happens to girls *after school* is an important factor as well.

Both South and West Kazakhstan are known for a tradition of "bride theft," which often happens against a young woman's wishes, often leading to tragic consequences.<sup>82</sup> These regions also feature frequent cases of early marriage. Women are often seen only as housewives and take no part in education or work. This is a direct result of the low value placed on education for women by local people, as well as of the lack of awareness of basic human rights statutes and policies. This also speaks to the need for specific programs at schools to educate both boys and girls about the immorality and illegality of bride theft, as well as to teach girls to raise their voices and advocate for themselves. Ignoring the poor quality of education in these regions would result in, among other things, a further deterioration of human rights.

The values system of the population is not something that exists in isolation. As Wilson notes, particularly for school-aged children, the value of getting higher education or graduating from school might depend on the benefits associated with it.<sup>83</sup> Thus, we circle back to the socioeconomic situation in which a child finds him- or herself—the amount and quality of educational resources available to him/her and the career opportunities they associate with secondary or higher education.

Disbelief in being able to succeed in life when "living by the rules" may lead to conscious disengagement from education. This is especially

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<sup>78</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan of March 1, 2016, "Ob utverzhdenii Gosudarstvennoi programmy razvitiia obrazovaniia i nauki Respubliki Kazakhstan na 2016-2019 gody," 2016, [https://tengrinews.kz/zakon/prezident\\_respubliki\\_kazahstan/konstitutsionnyiy\\_stroy\\_i\\_osnovnyi\\_gosudarstvennogo\\_upravleniya/id-U160000205/](https://tengrinews.kz/zakon/prezident_respubliki_kazahstan/konstitutsionnyiy_stroy_i_osnovnyi_gosudarstvennogo_upravleniya/id-U160000205/).

<sup>79</sup> In 2018, South Kazakhstan oblast was divided into the city of Shymkent, which now has the status of "republican importance," and Turkestan oblast, which has its administrative center in the city of Turkestan.

<sup>80</sup> Richard Blundell, Lorraine Dearden, Alissa Goodman, and Howard Reed, "The Returns to Higher Education in Britain: Evidence From a British Cohort," *The Economic Journal* 110, no. 461 (2000): F82-F99. doi: 10.1111/1468-0297.00508.

<sup>81</sup> Harding, Morris, and Hughes, "The Relationship between Maternal Education and Children's Academic Outcomes."

<sup>82</sup> "Krazhi nevest v Kazakhstane v poslednee vremia priobrel i nebyvalyi razmakh," *Zakon.kz*, November 5, 2012, <https://www.zakon.kz/4522455-krazhi-nevest-v-kazakhstane-v-poslednee.html>; "Krazha nevest v Kazakhstane—komu tragediia, komu schast'e," YouTube video, 7:19, posted by "Pervyi kanal Evraziia," November 19, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hj1w9jIMZSs>; "21-letnii paren' ukral nesovershennoletniuu devushku v Mangistauskoi oblasti," *Karavan.kz*, June 15, 2018, <https://www.caravan.kz/news/21letnij-paren-ukral-nesovershennoletnyuu-devushku-v-mangistauskoi-oblasti-455015/>.

<sup>83</sup> Wilson, "The Determinants of Educational Attainment,"

likely to be the case in the atmosphere of failure that inevitably forms around a schoolchild in a disadvantaged area. One example of this is the rising NEET phenomenon in South Kazakhstan.

### *SES of the Region and Family*

Socioeconomic status, as represented by parents' income and education and child's access to educational resources, is perhaps the trickiest impact factor to address from an educational perspective. As arguably the most influential factor in predicting a child's academic success, it therefore puts increased responsibility on schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods. These schools have *to compensate* for poorer educational opportunities and the family issues that a child often experiences at home. At the same time, they struggle to meet the national criteria prescribed by the unified national education development program and regional strategies.

Thus, we find a situation "where schooling may not automatically transform into human capital because of poor educational institutions, nor be channeled into productive use due to lack of institutional efficiency in the economy."<sup>84</sup>

"Quality" of education depends on a variety of "schooling" factors, including instruction, curriculum, teachers, school infrastructure, school governance, and the quality of management of the local educational authority. As both literature analysis and expert surveys show, other factors outside the school—like family SES and priorities—have a major impact on learning. Therefore, it seems that there is an inevitable policy dichotomy when it comes to raising a resilient, economically active, moral citizen.

While efforts in the education field might be focused on a student's IQ and EQ, the lack of complementary actions or policy implementation failures in other spheres (national economy, social development, health, etc.) puts educators in a difficult position.

First of all, there is increased responsibility. As schools "deal" with citizens for a longer period

of time than any other single institution, society perceives them as responsible for students' "holistic development." This narrative is omnipresent in both official and media publications in Kazakhstan, where school is positioned as a major agent in the "formation of a citizen."

And then there is an unseen obligation to compensate for those other institutions and policies that fail to do their part in this very holistic development, the ones responsible for dealing with the issues of families with low SES, single mothers, families with children with special educational needs, etc., as well as the lack of sports and cultural institutions in rural areas.

So when the other policy or economy spheres do not keep up, schools in disadvantaged areas are in a tricky, no-win situation. That is why we have devoted teachers with high anxiety levels and young teachers not willing to even start work after graduating from universities.<sup>85</sup>

*What if the school is a weak one itself?* As the data show, weak schools appear mostly in economically disadvantaged, rural, Kazakh-speaking communities. And if the quality of teaching is one of the most important factors in determining academic achievement, it is no surprise that weaker schools tend not to attract the best university graduates. Moreover, employment policies are vague at best: because very few young people decide to commit themselves to teaching in rural schools, the latter often employ TVET (vocational education) and school graduates.

In such a closed "vicious circle" environment, a school might fail to do its own part in forming an economically active individual—making it impossible for it to compensate for the shortcomings of other spheres.

Now, if one assumes there is a large concentration of such schools in a particular place that are failing not only to compensate for other institutions but even to fulfill the school's own duties, that would have a detrimental effect on the whole human capital potential of that region and its citizens. Education, and specifically secondary

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<sup>84</sup> Humna Ahsan and M. Emranul Haque, "Threshold Effects of Human Capital: Schooling and Economic Growth," *Economics Letters* 156 (2017): 48-52.

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, Beles Centre for Strategy and Analysis, "Teachers of Kazakhstan."

education, is the foundation of one's future success. A failure to provide it seriously undermines not only a student's personal happiness and professional fulfillment, but also the country's future economic welfare. That may seem too straightforward, yet often we fail to see this bigger picture—and to remember that *even in the case of a bad school, its being bad is not the primary problem.*

### Conclusion and Recommendations

It is evident that the socioeconomic background of a family influences a child's academic achievement and his or her future life prospects. In turn, the neighborhood and success or failure of a child's elders might also impact his/her educational choices, affecting his/her utility-maximizing perspective on education.

There is also evidence that, vice versa, education is the single most important factor influencing regional economic performance. As the literature indicates, in line with my survey results, there are also other impact factors that might significantly impact average regional student achievement. These factors are rooted in each region and may vary from one to another.

Some of these impact factors are unique to the Kazakh context and need to be thoroughly studied. Understanding the causes of things is a key condition for planning effective change. Thus, it seems so far that it is vital to understand a) which impact factors are the prerogative of the main responsible governmental institutions—the Ministry of Education and regional authorities—and which are not; and b) which of them can be turned into measurable indicators and which cannot.

Drastic differences in both quality of life and quality of education in the regions of Kazakhstan call for a targeted, specific approach. If we want to provide equal educational opportunities to every child, producing isolated policies and initiatives solely in the education sphere and expecting them to work is not enough.

Yet before starting to work on reducing such a knowledge gap, the Ministry of Education and other governmental bodies need to have substantial data, which can only be obtained

through rigorous regional research. Moreover, a holistic understanding of the scope of the problem is needed. As secondary education clearly is and will always be primarily the prerogative of the Ministry of Education, it is important to identify exactly what it can change in the "school territory" in a particular region, but only as part of a vision, strategy, and action plan for the whole region.

Thus, **a two-step policy initiative is proposed**—a nationwide study of the reasons for regional inequality in education, followed by human capital development programs for all regions. The "human capital" idea rests on the assumption that changing the quality of secondary education and improving access to it in any region should be a priority of not one but all stakeholder institutions and government bodies.

Convening a group of qualified specialists (researchers, data scientists, economists, sociologists) unaffiliated with any of the local offices is vital for the success of the research stage. Surely, international experience on turnover initiatives for poorly-performing regions should be analyzed closely.

The theoretical goal of this research would be to understand the impact of every possible variable (including SES, language and local values, and any other "invisible" factors) on academic achievement. In practice, the data would make it possible to identify the needs of schools that are lagging behind—in terms of teacher training, school infrastructure, and student body—and target them specifically at both regional and national levels.

These two are the "larger picture" measures aimed at getting holistic data and applying it to developing specific programs in each region.

### In the meantime, certain specific steps can already be taken:

- *Raising standards for enrollment in teacher training programs.* To provide a high quality of education at schools and to have teachers able to work within the renewed curriculum framework, standards for university admissions and employment need to be raised.

- *Raising salaries for teachers and LEA workers.* Besides the international evidence that

teachers' salaries correlate positively with teaching quality and academic achievement, this is also important to attract the best graduates to teaching. Implementing these two steps simultaneously is a precondition for the success of both.

- *Applying positive discrimination in terms of financial support for schools in rural areas.* While research will highlight the impact factors for academic achievement, the disadvantaged reality of rural schools is plain as day. Certain measures can already be taken, including increasing financing and developing school infrastructure.
- *Opening public study facilities in disadvantaged neighborhoods to compensate for families' low socioeconomic status.* Given that exposure to learning resources and gadgets at home has a strong connection to a child's learning outcomes, providing children in remote rural areas with study rooms with free Internet, computers, and libraries could contribute to mitigating this effect. It is important to attract local entrepreneurs and bigger manufacturers as potential sponsors.

- *Attracting Bolashak graduates to teaching and regional LEAs.* Engaging more "Bolashakers" in civil service has long been discussed in policy and media circles, with the prime concern being that they would not be motivated to take low-paid jobs. To this end, creating a pool of Bolashak graduates for state service in the regions would be a good first step toward revitalizing local educational authorities. It is also important to create a pathway for graduates of non-pedagogical faculties to teach in schools, perhaps by introducing a PGCE-like program. Providing the best university graduates with competitive wages is a vital aspect of retaining them in a given profession. To do this, we could draw on the worldwide experience of Teach for All: its Russian analogue, for example, invited large companies to sponsor program graduates' salaries.
- *Inviting more private companies and sponsors to invest in/open private schools and sponsor public schools.* Offering inducements like lighter regulations for private schools in South Kazakhstan region could boost entrepreneurial interest in such activities.

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## Appendix. LAYS calculation

- *Step 1—calculating LAYS on the assumption that learning starts at school*

To calculate region-level learning adjusted years of schooling (LAYS), I follow Filmer et al.'s formula:

$$LAYS_c = S_c * R_c^{\frac{n}{c}}$$

$S_c$  is "the average years of schooling acquired by relevant cohort of the population," and  $R_c^{\frac{n}{c}}$  represents "a measure of learning for a relevant cohort of students in country  $c$ , relative to numeraire (benchmarking country)"—in other words, learning productivity.<sup>86</sup> It is calculated as the ratio of average learning happening per year in respective countries -  $R_c^{\frac{n}{c}} = L_c^{\frac{c}{n}}$ .

I adjust this formula to calculate region-level LAYS for Kazakhstan. I use mean years of schooling for Kazakhstan as calculated by Barro and Lee (originally used for LAYS measure),<sup>87</sup> and I take Almaty city as a benchmarking region (Filmer et al. used Singapore's scores for international-level analysis).

Thus, expected years of schooling for Kazakhstan ( $S_c$ ) is set at 14 (11 years of school plus 3 years of preschool). However, I also performed calculations on the assumption that learning starts at school (grade 1),<sup>88</sup> thus getting the LAYS results for 11 years of schooling instead of 14.

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<sup>86</sup> Filmer et al., "Learning-Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS)," 7.

<sup>87</sup> Barro and Lee, "A New Data Set of Educational Attainment."

<sup>88</sup> TIMSS 2015 was administered in Kazakh schools at the end of spring (the school year ends on May 25). Thus, at that stage, a child had completed 8 years of school education.

TIMSS 2015 scores for eighth grade are used to calculate region's learning per year ( $L_c$ ). For example, if Almaty's score in eighth-grade math is 575 and prior years of schooling equal 8, then its average learning per year is 71.2. To compare, Mangystau oblast's score is 476, which gives us 59.5 as its average learning per year. Thus,  $R \frac{n}{c}$  for Mangystau oblast would be  $59.5/71.2=0.83$ , compared to 1 for Almaty city, which is the benchmarking region. This allows us to calculate LAYS for Mangystau oblast according to the formula above as equal to 9.1 years (see Table 5).

This means that by graduation, students in Mangystau oblast will have covered approximately 9.1 years of learning out of the expected 11.

**Table 7. (LAYS) for regions of Kazakhstan (learning starts at school)**

	TIMSS score 4 grade, science	LAYS	TIMSS score 4 grade, math	LAYS	TIMSS score 8 grade, science	LAYS	TIMSS score 8 grade, math	LAYS
<b>Almaty city</b>	<b>623</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>608</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>591</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>575</b>	<b>11</b>
East Kazakhstan oblast	588	10.4	582	10.5	574	10.7	560	10.7
Zhambyl oblast	581	10.3	582	10.5	580	10.8	573	11.0
Kyzylorda oblast	582	10.3	582	10.5	570	10.6	581	11.1
Pavlodar oblast	573	10.1	561	10.1	556	10.3	544	10.4
North Kazakhstan	554	9.8	549	9.9	554	10.3	523	10.0
Aktobe oblast	557	9.8	548	9.9	511	9.5	530	10.1
Karagandy oblast	547	9.7	540	9.8	529	9.8	522	10.0
<b>Astana city</b>	<b>544</b>	<b>9.6</b>	<b>536</b>	<b>9.7</b>	<b>530</b>	<b>9.9</b>	<b>515</b>	<b>9.9</b>
West Kazakhstan oblast	544	9.6	535	9.7	525	9.8	519	9.9
Atyrau oblast	536	9.5	533	9.6	471	8.8	478	9.1
South Kazakhstan oblast	530	9.4	533	9.6	522	9.7	522	10.0
Akmola oblast	538	9.5	529	9.6	528	9.8	511	9.8
Kostanay oblast	549	9.7	523	9.5	516	9.6	494	9.5
Almaty oblast	519	9.2	511	9.2	507	9.4	504	9.6
Mangystau oblast	504	8.9	508	9.2	473	8.8	476	9.1

These calculations are then modified to account for the years that take place prior to school.

- *Step 2—modifying LAYS on the assumption that learning starts 3 years prior to school.*

In their explanation of the LAYS measure, Filmer et al. pay attention to the question of when learning actually starts and how this might impact the LAYS calculation.<sup>89</sup> Above is the LAYS data I got on the assumption that learning starts at first grade (i.e., at school).

However, as the authors mention, “every child acquires some language, mathematical concepts, reasoning skills and socioemotional skills before arriving at school.”<sup>90</sup> To adjust the formula for the years of learning taking place prior to school,  $L_c$  is now calculated as the ration of test score ( $T$ ) to the sum of years of schooling prior to assessment and years of learning prior to school (3+8).

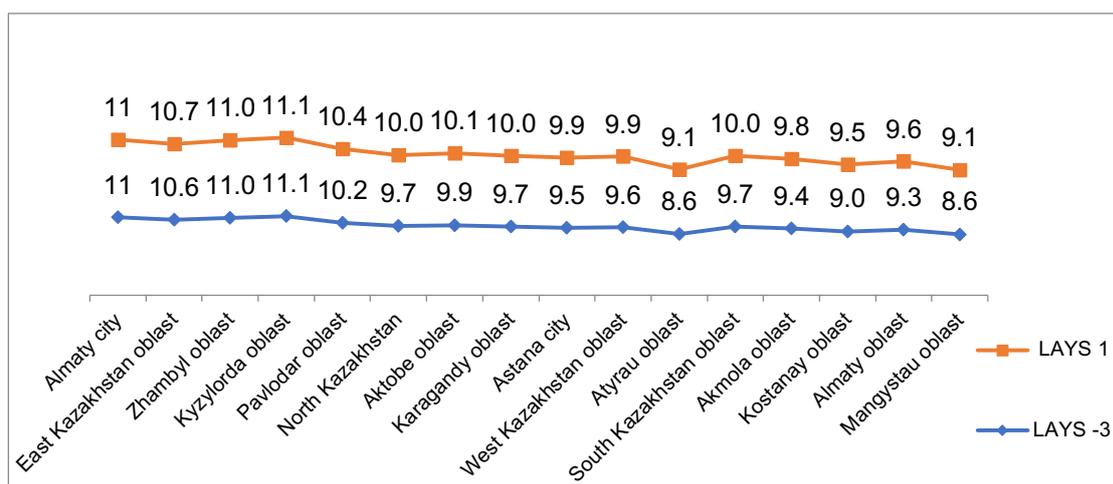
To come back to the example of Mangystau oblast, its  $L_c$  will now be equal to 43.2 (score of 476 divided by sum of 3+8). Almaty city’s learning per year will be equal to 52.3. Thus,  $R \frac{n}{c}$  (learning productivity) for Mangystau oblast will now be 0.82.

Therefore, the modified formula, accounting for 3 years of learning prior to school, will be:<sup>91</sup>

$$LAYS_c = \left[ Sc * R \frac{n}{c} \right] - [Y^p * (1 - R \frac{n}{c})]$$

It is clear that using this second assumption (as I did in my work) will result in lower LAYS scores. I think that this approach is truer to life than the first assumption that learning only starts at school.

- *Correlation between different LAYS calculations*
  - a) Correlation between two LAYS measures for eighth-grade math (learning starts 3 years prior to school and learning starts at school, in first grade) is **1**.

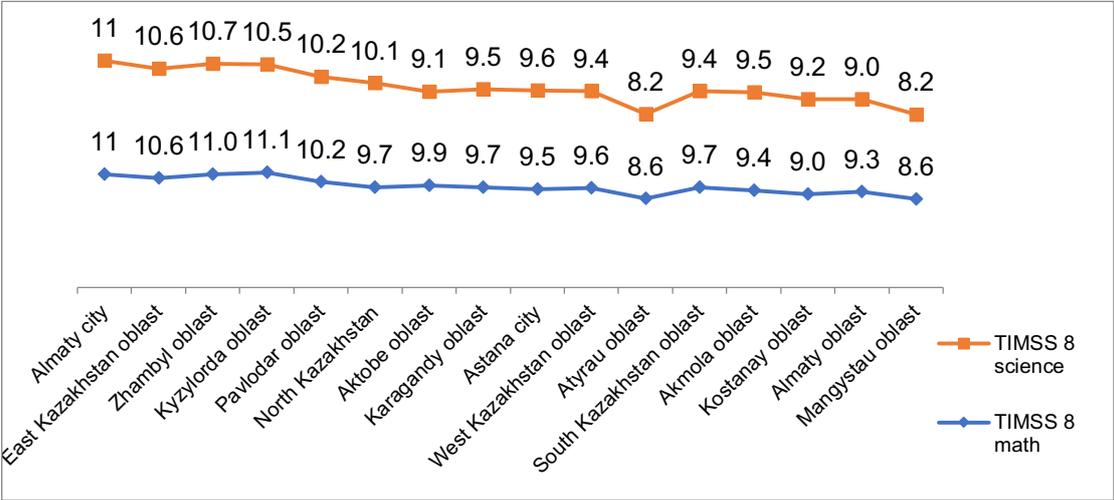


<sup>89</sup> Filmer et al., “Learning-Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS).”

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>91</sup> See Filmer et al., “Learning-Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS),” 14.

b) Correlation between two LAYS measures for TIMSS 2015 eighth-grade *science and math scores* is **0.93**.



## Chapter 6.

# Secondary Schools and Inequality: Navigating the Fragmented Landscape of Educational Choices in Bishkek

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Aigoul Abdoubaetova<sup>1</sup> (2018)

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As of 2018, Kyrgyzstan's GDP per capita was reported to be \$1,221.<sup>2</sup> Yet the cost of tuition at some private schools in the capital city, Bishkek, tells a very different story: annual tuition is \$23,800 at the QSI International School,<sup>3</sup> \$14,155 at the ESCA Bishkek International School, \$13,000 at the Oxford International School, and \$11,000 at the Cambridge Silk Road International School.<sup>4</sup> Parents of students at these schools pay between 3.5 and 7.5 times the average yearly salary on education alone. These numbers are illustrative of growing socio-economic inequality in a country that used to be a Soviet republic where citizens had more or less equal status and equal access to high-quality public education.

Over the past two decades, secondary educational opportunities in Bishkek have become more diversified, due both to the growing number and variety of private schools and to the division of public schools into different categories depending on the quality of education they offer. This paper explores growing inequality in accessing and obtaining secondary education in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in the context of this diversification and fragmentation of schools. The paper sets out to answer the following specific questions:

1. How do parents in Bishkek navigate the fragmented landscape of the secondary

education system and choose schools for their children?

2. To what degree do parent's educational choices reflect and reinforce growing socio-economic inequality in a society that is undergoing significant transformations?

To answer these questions, we employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Our main group of informants included parents of schoolchildren aged 7-17 who attend public and private schools in Bishkek. Religious private schools were not included in the study. We surveyed 115 parents using a questionnaire and supplemented this with 22 in-depth interviews. The survey included questions on parents' motivations and strategies for choosing their children's schools, level of satisfaction with their choices, alternative/complementary ways of acquiring knowledge, and their child's post-secondary plans.

Of the 115 parents who participated in the survey, 79 percent had children in public schools, 19 percent in private schools, and 2 percent in both. These 115 parents completed surveys about the educations of 175 children (87 boys and 88 girls). The majority of parents who participated in the survey were women (95 percent). Most of them had higher education degrees (78 percent). Twenty-eight percent of informants lived in the city center,

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<sup>2</sup> "The Poorest Countries in the World," *Focus Economics* (blog). Last accessed September 2, 2018, <https://www.focus-economics.com/blog/the-poorest-countries-in-the-world>.

<sup>3</sup> Z. Kozhobaeva, "Stoit Li ucheba v chastnykh shkolakh zaplachennykh deneg?" *Azzatyk*, February 6, 2017, last accessed October 11, 2018, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/28281350.html>.

<sup>4</sup> "Gid Kaktus. Chastnye shkoly Bishkeka. Uslovii i tseny," *Kaktus Media*, May 25, 2018, last accessed October 11, 2018, [https://kaktus.media/doc/338956\\_gid\\_kaktus\\_chastnye\\_shkoly\\_bishkeka\\_ysloviia\\_i\\_ceny.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/338956_gid_kaktus_chastnye_shkoly_bishkeka_ysloviia_i_ceny.html).

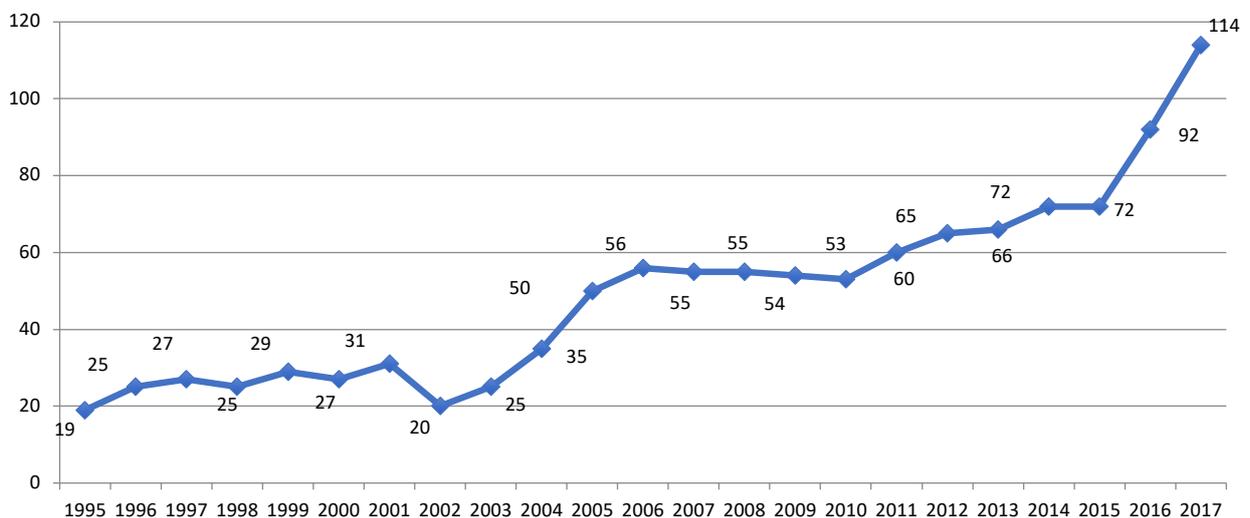
47 percent in the residential micro-districts, and 25 percent in the urban periphery. Sixty-seven percent of participants indicated that they had an average income, 25 percent higher than average, 2 percent high, 2 percent lower than average, and only 1 percent very low. Of the 22 parents interviewed, 13 sent their children to public schools and 9 to private schools.

In addition, we interviewed the principals or top administrators of eight private schools in order to gain greater insight into the work of private schools. The sample included high- and medium-cost private schools. Finally, we conducted interviews with twelve experts in the field of education, who

provided analytical insights into our research questions. We also drew on private school's websites and social media pages, as well as online news sources about schools and online forums for parents.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it provides an overview of the state of secondary education in Bishkek and classifies existing school choices. Next, it explores parental motivations and strategies in choosing schools, before engaging in the wider debate about the link between education choices and inequality. Finally, it draws conclusions and provides recommendations.

**Figure 1. Number of private schools in Kyrgyzstan**



Source: National Statistical Committee

## Overview

Private schools emerged in Kyrgyzstan in the mid-1990s as a result of neoliberal reforms. Figure 1 shows the growth in the number of private schools in post-Soviet Bishkek: from 19 (1 percent of all schools) in 1995 to 114 (5 percent) in 2017. The number of students who attend these schools has risen from 0.3 percent to 2.5 percent of all student.<sup>5</sup> More recent sources state that there are now 187

private schools in the country,<sup>6</sup> most of which are located in Bishkek. While older private schools in Bishkek were often established in the buildings of former kindergartens and other municipal buildings, in recent years several new, elite-style private schools have been constructed. These new elite schools are located in the southern part of Bishkek, where many of the city's wealthy and privileged families live.

<sup>5</sup> National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, Education and Culture, last accessed November 21, 2018, <https://www.stat.kg/ru/statistics/obrazovanie/>.

<sup>6</sup> Kozhobaeva, "Stoit li ucheba."

Figures 2 and 3. Classrooms in the Cambridge Silk Road International School and Oxford International School



Source: "Gid Kaktus. Chastnye shkoly Bishkeka. Usloviia i tseny," Kaktus Media, May 25, 2018.

Private schools in Bishkek are very heterogeneous, with a diverse mix of prices and services.<sup>7</sup> Many of them have excellent infrastructure and facilities, small class sizes, and better-paid teachers (see Figures 2 and 3 above).

The boom in private schools is occurring in the context of acute shortages and the deteriorating quality of public schools. So far, very little has been done by the state to address the myriad issues facing public schools: the declining quality of education, the shortage of qualified teachers, and the poor maintenance of buildings.<sup>8</sup> Due to high internal migration to the capital city and urban population growth in general, public schools in Bishkek have become extremely overcrowded.<sup>9</sup> According to Chinara Isakova, Bishkek's 97 schools currently have a 76,500-student capacity, but the actual number of students is double that. The number of school students is growing by around 10,000 students per year, mostly concentrated at the elementary level. Evidently, therefore, there is a serious need for more schools in Bishkek—but only two state schools are built per year.<sup>10</sup> It has become common practice for first-graders to start their school year in classes exceeding 40, and in some cases even 50, students<sup>11</sup> (see Figure 4). This problem is mostly observed in Bishkek and Chui region. Due to overcrowding, 1,657

of Kyrgyzstan's 2,262 public schools have two shifts and 159 elementary schools have a flexible schedule.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 4. Overcrowded classes in a public school in a novostroika in the Muras Ordo housing development, Bishkek



Source: "Shkoly Bishkeka. Po chetyre uchenika za partoi," Azattyk, May 24, 2014.

Obviously, in such large classes, students do not get enough attention from teachers. This is compounded by the fact that the average monthly salary of a schoolteacher is 1.3 times lower than the national average, with the result that few people are interested in becoming teachers and existing teachers end up weighed down by ever heavier teaching loads.

<sup>7</sup> Kaktus Media, "Gid Kaktus."

<sup>8</sup> Sanzhar Eraliev, "Skol'noe obrazovanie. Problemy dostigli krainei tochki," *Azattyk*, September 6, 2018, last accessed November 21, 2018, [https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyz\\_education\\_school-problems/29474742.html](https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyz_education_school-problems/29474742.html).

<sup>9</sup> Eric Eversmann, "Dropping Out: School Attendance in the Kyrgyz Republic," *PRAXIS: The Fletcher Journal of Development Studies* XVI (2000).

<sup>10</sup> Eraliev, "Skol'noe obrazovanie."

<sup>11</sup> "Po piatero za partoi. Skol'ko detei uchiatsia v pervom klasse v prestizhnykh shkolakh Bishkeka," *Kaktus Media*, September 10, 2018, last accessed November 21, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> "Schools in Kyrgyzstan 1.5 Times Overcrowded," *24.kg*, September 10, 2018, last accessed December 10, 2018.

Infrastructure is another issue. Having mostly been built in the Soviet period, these schools are now in need of serious renovation (see Figures 5 and 6), yet the annual budget that a public school receives from the Ministry of Education and Science for such purposes is extremely low: 20,000 soms (\$285).<sup>13</sup> Many schools are thus forced to collect money from parents<sup>14</sup> or continue functioning in poor physical conditions. The Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations recently sent an official letter to President Jeenbekov highlighting these issues and warning that the secondary education system could collapse completely in the coming 10-15 year.<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 5 and 6. The deteriorating state of School #44 in Bishkek**



*Source: "Zdanie shkoly 44 v Bishkeke nakhoditsia v avariinom sostoianii," Reporter Akipress, March 26, 2014.*

Yet the outlook for public schools is not altogether bleak. There are a few high-performing "elite" public schools (gymnasiums and lyceums)

that achieve top results on the NST,<sup>16</sup> a national merit-based selection system that tests the knowledge and skills of secondary school graduates applying for government scholarships to local universities.<sup>17</sup> High-performing elite public schools are seen as prestigious and are difficult to get into. Even families that can afford to send their children to private schools may prefer these schools because of their reputations and excellent academic outcomes.

### **Landscape of Secondary Educational Opportunities in Bishkek**

Based on our analysis and publicly available information, we have classified secondary school opportunities into six main categories: three types of private schools (based on tuition costs), two types of public schools, and private tutoring/private learning centers. In this section, we discuss each category and summarize them in a table.

The first category of private schools includes elite international private schools with tuition fees above \$10,000 per year: QSI International, Cambridge Silk Road International, ESCA Bishkek International, and Oxford International. These schools boast international accreditation and international curricula different from the curriculum approved by the Kyrgyz Ministry of Education and Science. All classes are taught in English, primarily by international faculty but also by local faculty with solid English language skills. These schools have excellent infrastructure, facilities, and security, as well as small class sizes. They are licensed by the Ministry of Education and Science, and by taking some additional courses, students can also gain a local high school certificate. However, the primary goal of these schools is to prepare students to apply to colleges abroad; some students have been admitted even to some of the world's top-ranked

<sup>13</sup> Interview with a public school administrator, Bishkek, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Ruben Ruiz Ramas, "Parental Informal Payments in Kyrgyzstani Schools: Analyzing the Strongest and the Weakest Link," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7, no. 2 (2016): 205-219.

<sup>15</sup> "Obrashchenie Bulan Instituta k Presidentu KR Sooronbaju Jeenbekovu," Bulan Institute, September 5, 2018, last accessed November 21, 2018, <http://bulaninstitute.org/ru/obrashenie-presidentu/>.

<sup>16</sup> "Reiting. Top 20 shkol Bishkeka 2018 goda," *Bilim Akipress*, August 24, 2018, last accessed November 21, 2018, <http://bilim.akipress.org/ru/news:1466310>.

<sup>17</sup> Duishon Shamatov, "The Impact of Standardized Testing on University Entrance Issues in Kyrgyzstan," *European Education* 44, no. 1 (2012): 71-92.

universities. These schools can therefore be described as preparing students “for export.” Many of their students do not take part in the National Scholarship Testing (NST) required for admission to local universities:<sup>18</sup> if parents can afford to pay \$10-25,000 for schools in Kyrgyzstan, they can also afford to pay for universities in Europe and the US. It is only obvious that upon graduation from such universities, these students are going to have expanded life and career opportunities. Local students study in these schools alongside the children of expats: their share of local students at Cambridge Silk Road International, ESCA Bishkek International, and Oxford International ranges from 40 percent to 80 percent, but they comprise just 10 percent of the student body of QSI International.<sup>19</sup>

The second category of private schools is those with annual tuition costs between \$3,00 and \$7,000. Schools in this category include Turkish private schools such as the Silk Road International School and Turkish private lyceums that belong to the Sapat International Education Institution. Sapat private lyceums have established a reputation as high-quality schools.<sup>20</sup> They are known for achieving very high results on the NST and in various knowledge-based competitions (Olympiads). The Silk Road International School, for its part, is known for being one of the oldest English-language private schools in this price range, such as Bilimkana-AUCA High School, Bilimkana-European School, and Erudit, being relatively new, have yet to earn reputations that would justify their high tuition costs. With the exception of the Silk Road International School, which teaches in English, the language of instruction of the schools in this category is Russian or Kyrgyz. However, all of them, claim that some subjects are taught in English or that they generally place a heavier emphasis on English. While some of them successfully prepare students to study abroad, they do not have international accreditation. These schools are successful in preparing their graduates to enter the future elite of Kyrgyzstan as part of their larger educational mission. Local students constitute the vast majority of these schools’ student bodies.

The third category contains a longer list of various schools where the cost of education is below \$3,00 per year. These schools are not necessarily known for high-quality teaching or for the high performance of their students. Only occasionally do their names appear among the Gold Certificate winners on NST. Yet they still attract students, as they offer better facilities, better security, and smaller class sizes than state schools, as well as a student-friendly environment. Sending children to private schools, including those in this category, is very convenient for parents who can afford the tuition: children are safe, they are fed and cared for all day, and they come home having completed their homework. Extra services such as transportation to and from school and some extracurricular activities can be arranged for an additional fee. Unlike in the first two categories, where some of the co-owners or top management are foreign citizens, the owners of these private schools are mostly locals. Some schools—like Ilim, Kelechek, Zvezdochka, and Evrika—are better known than others; they have been in the education market longer and have an established clientele. The average tuition cost is around \$2,500 per year. The Bilimkana school chain, which was established only a few years ago but is quickly becoming popular, also belongs to this category. We also include some lesser-known or smaller private schools with relatively inexpensive tuition ranging from \$500 to \$800 per year. Some of them are located on university campuses. The price goes down for those schools where the school day is only half a day and where tuition excludes food expenses.

The fourth category is public schools, mostly gymnasiums and lyceums, whose students achieve a high level of academic performance. They can be described as the “top 10,” “top 5,” or “top 3,” depending on who ranks them. These are schools whose students get high NST scores and win various kinds of knowledge-based competitions. However, there is a hierarchy even within this category: three Bishkek schools continuously top the national school rankings for academic performance. On a scale from

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<sup>18</sup> Interviews with administrators of international schools, Bishkek, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> “Admissions—Other International Schools,” Bishkek International School, last accessed November 21, 2018, <http://www.esca.kg/admissions/other-international-schools/>.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with experts, Bishkek, 2018.

0 to 100, School #61's score is 91, School #70's is 88, and School #69's is 76, while the average score for the rest of the schools in the top 20 is only 40.<sup>21</sup> Such schools maintain their reputations by attracting the most qualified teachers and imposing harsh study discipline, heavy study loads, and competitive selection. If students do not perform to the expected standard, they are either expelled or leave voluntarily, unable to cope with the heavy workload. Among the top three, School #61 stands out: since the launch of the NST in 2003, 215 students from this school have received Gold Certificates, meaning that one-third of all Gold Certificate winners nationally have attended this school.<sup>22</sup> These schools are in high demand by parents despite the fact that their classes are overcrowded and children study in two shifts.

Their students have high chances of entering local universities, universities in Russia, and even some foreign universities on the basis of merit.<sup>23</sup> The majority of schools fall into our fifth

category: public schools with average or poor performance. These schools generally lack qualified teachers, produce poor NST results, have two or even three daily shifts, and have poorly maintained facilities. It is surprising that the achievement gap is so wide, considering that all public schools and many private schools follow the same curriculum.

Finally, we look at private tutoring and private learning centers, both as an important secondary education component and as an individual category. Such services are sometimes provided by teachers in schools, but most often they are offered outside the school system, in people's homes or in facilities specifically designated for this purpose. The most popular subjects are English and other foreign languages, but tutors are also increasingly engaged for traditional school subjects such as math or Kyrgyz and Russian languages. Such courses help children catch up if they lag behind in school or else learn something that is not on the curriculum.<sup>24</sup>

**Table 1. Secondary educational opportunities in Bishkek**

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Top elite international private schools:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Tuition – \$10-25,000</li> <li>b. Preparing students “for export”: international accreditation, all subjects taught in English</li> <li>c. International teachers, excellent facilities, security, small class sizes, student-friendly atmosphere</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Higher-fee private schools:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Tuition – \$3-5,000</li> <li>b. Excellent prospects of entering top universities in Kyrgyzstan</li> <li>c. Qualified and decently paid teachers, good facilities, security, small class sizes, student-friendly atmosphere</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. Medium and lower-fee private schools:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Tuition—under \$3,000;</li> <li>b. Financial (not always merit-based) opportunities for entering good universities</li> <li>c. Select teachers, decent facilities, security, small class sizes, student-friendly atmosphere</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. High-performing public schools:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Free; collection of fees from parents for school needs—\$100-200 per year (estimated average)</li> <li>b. Merit-based opportunities to enter good universities</li> <li>c. Select teachers, average facilities, no security, large class sizes, harsh discipline, selective admission</li> </ol> </li> <li>5. Public schools with average and low academic performance:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Free; collection of fees from parents for school needs—\$50-80 a year (estimated average)</li> <li>b. Limited prospects (both merit-based and financial) of entering good universities</li> <li>c. Underpaid teachers with heavy loads, average or poor facilities, no security, large class sizes</li> </ol> </li> <li>6. After-school private tutoring and private learning centers:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. \$2-4 per hour or \$80-150 per month to attend group sessions (3-4 times a week)</li> <li>b. Flexible schedules and payment schemes; targeted choice of subjects</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
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<sup>21</sup> Bilim Akipress, “Reiting”; “Nazvany 20 luchshikh shkol Bishkeka za 2018 god,” *Kaktus Media*, August 24, 2018, last accessed September 2, 2018, [https://kaktus.media/doc/378847\\_nazvany\\_20\\_lychshih\\_shkol\\_bishkeka\\_za\\_2018\\_god.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/378847_nazvany_20_lychshih_shkol_bishkeka_za_2018_god.html).

<sup>22</sup> “Zolotye tsertifikaty ORT,” Lyceum #61, last accessed November 21, 2018, <https://yk61.ru/index.php/dostizheniya-uchenikov/zolotye-sertifikaty-ort>.

<sup>23</sup> “Istoriia litseia,” Lyceum # 61, last accessed December 16, 2018, <https://yk61.ru/index.php/news/k2-item>.

<sup>24</sup> Iveta Silova, “Private Tutoring in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Policy Choices and Implications,” *Journal of Comparative and International Education* 40, no. 3 (2010): 327-344.

They offer flexible hours and a more or less standard set of prices, which differ for individual and group classes. Nowadays, such tutoring practices and private educational centers have become so popular that it is almost impossible to imagine secondary school education without them.

The following table summarizes the main characteristics of all six educational categories, listing their average costs.

### Parents’ Motivations and Strategies for Making School Choices

Having sketched the landscape of educational choices parents in Bishkek have for their children, we turn to explore their motivations and strategies when navigating this landscape. We distinguish between the motivations and strategies for choosing private and public schools.

#### Private Schools

The survey results shown in Figure 7 highlight parents’ most commonly mentioned motivations for choosing private schools. Small class sizes (73 percent) was the leading motivating factor, followed by quality of education and all-day child care, each of which scored 68 percent. Sixty-six

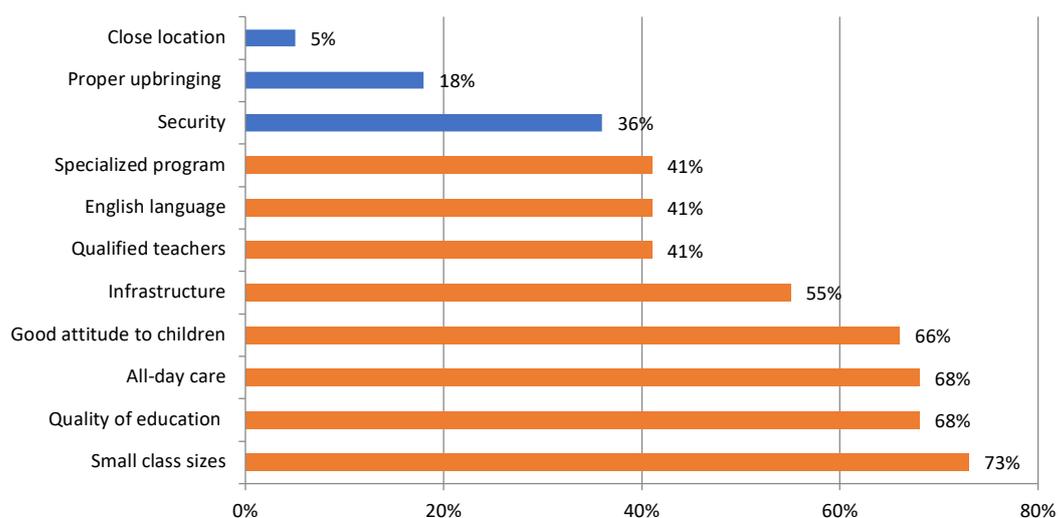
percent of parents were swayed by a perception that private schools had better attitudes toward children. Good infrastructure (55 percent), highly qualified teachers (41 percent), English language education (41 percent), a specialized program (41 percent), and security (36 percent) were also important.

In the following subsections, we unpack these and other motivations by interweaving the survey results with analysis of our interviews with parents, school administrators, and experts.

#### *Small Class Sizes, Better Conditions, and Better Treatment of Children*

One major factor motivating parents to consider private school for their children is the size of classes. In many public schools, classes are extremely overcrowded: several informants indicated that in a 45-minute lesson, the average child receives less than a minute of attention from the teacher. By contrast, classes in private schools are generally small; student numbers range from 10 to 25.<sup>25</sup> In choosing private schools, parents expect closer teacher-student interaction and a more individualized approach. Parents interpret small class sizes as an important factor that contributes to the quality of learning.

**Figure 7. Parents’ reasons for choosing a private school**



<sup>25</sup> Kaktus Media, “Gid Kaktus.”

Some parents were very concerned about their child's health and wellbeing in overcrowded classes. One parent, whose child attends one of the high-performing public schools in Bishkek, expressed a wish to move her daughter to a private school so that she would have better study conditions:

I am satisfied with the quality of education that our school provides and the teachers are very qualified. However, if I had more money, I would transfer my daughter to private school because of the small class sizes and good conditions. There are 47 children in my daughter's classroom which was designed to fit 25. There is a 40 cm gap between the blackboard and the desk in the first row, so the child who has to sit at that desk is the most miserable, because he/she sits too close to the blackboard. In winter, when the heater is on, there is not enough air in the classroom. It's the same on hot summer days. Because of the high number of children, school happens in two shifts. The school cafeteria stops working at 4 pm and the child who is at school until 7 pm often goes hungry (Parent, public school #26).

A few parents, often who had lived abroad or had been exposed to Western-style education, were very critical of the teaching methods and communication style of teachers in public schools. They took a negative view of the top-down and authoritarian style of interacting with students, comparing it to the old Soviet style with its harsh disciplinary methods. For them, private schools offered an escape from the conservative style of teaching in public schools, promising better treatment of children and a more liberal and relaxed learning atmosphere. As one parent explained:

If I were to choose between two evils, I would choose private schools because at least they offer some relief, including better teaching and communication methods (Parent, private school).

### *All-Day Child Care Services*

Most private schools in Bishkek provide all-day child care services. The school day in a private school lasts from 8 am to 5 or 6 pm. Schools provide breakfast, lunch, snacks, and in some cases an early dinner. They also organize after-school activities, such as language courses, sports, music, arts, and other interest-based clubs, on the school premises, as well as reserving time for completing homework. Schools organize transportation to and from school, which can save parents time during rush hour. This approach is convenient for families, particularly in households where both parents work. An expert on education articulates this in the following way:

For some parents, especially of children in elementary school, it is convenient that their child is cared for during the day because they are at work. He eats there, rests, does homework. This takes a certain amount of pressure off parents (Expert, Ministry of Education).

As many public schools in Bishkek are underfunded and overcrowded, they work in two shifts and do not have the means or facilities to organize afterschool activities. This creates a burden on working parents, who traditionally reach out to grandparents or other extended family members for help with childrearing. However, this option is not available to everyone. Many residents of Bishkek come from various parts of the country and leave their elderly parents and extended families behind. Working parents therefore seek alternative help with child rearing, either hiring nannies, relying on local relatives, or choosing private schools.

In Kyrgyzstan, children's safety at school has been a problem for many years. There have been many reported cases of violence among high school children, as well as of school racketeering.<sup>26</sup> Only in very recent years have parents started to collect money to hire security guards or install camera surveillance at public schools. Even then, private schools guarantee children's security far better than public schools, respondents noted:

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<sup>26</sup> "S reketom v shkolakh Kyrgyzstana stalkivaiutsia 51% mal'chikov i 12% devochek-issledovanie—issledovanie NISI," *Bilim Akipress*, October 9, 2017, last accessed November 21, 2018, <http://bilim.akipress.org/ru/news:1409182>

Private schools are more expensive, but you are paying not for education but for security. There are 16 people in the class and you know that no one will hurt your child (Parent, private school).

An education expert echoed this view:

I think if parents could afford it, many would send their children to private schools just to make sure the child is looked after. This is especially important in the case of the security of teenagers, including informational security. Parents do not worry and their children are in a secure environment until they pick them up (Expert, Ministry of Education).

Thus, another motivation driving parents to choose private schools is this “all-day childcare” approach, which helps minimize parents’ daily chores and ensure their children’s safety.

#### *International Private Schools and English as a Means of Entering Universities Abroad*

The cost of a private school rises sharply if it offers a curriculum taught solely in English and has international accreditation. Interviews with school administrators and analysis of graduates’ profiles revealed that these schools are heavily oriented toward preparing children to study abroad. Having native English speakers as teachers, an international curriculum, and college counselors who prepare applications to foreign universities all mean that these students have more opportunities to access the global education system than their peers at other schools. These schools can also organize trips to European and U.S. universities (at parents’ expense) to spark students’ interest in studying abroad.

However, some parents and experts raised questions about the quality of this education for its high cost. One expert said:

As far as I know, in most private schools where the cost is very high, the emphasis is on infrastructure, good conditions, and

English-speaking teachers. But I have reservations regarding the qualifications of teachers at these schools. Look at the results of republican Olympiads and Gold Certificates. Among them you will not find representatives of these elite schools, except for the Kyrgyz-Turkish Lyceums (Expert, education agency).

Interviews with representatives of some of the elite international schools suggest that their students do not achieve high NST results for three reasons. The first is language limitations: NST and local competition are conducted in Russian or Kyrgyz, while these schools’ students study in English. The second is that many local students of international schools do not plan to apply to local universities: by the time the NST comes around, they have often already received admission letters from universities abroad. Third, the children of foreign citizens and expatriates who study in these schools are not interested in taking the NST. Instead, they take international exams such as the SAT, TOEFL, and IELTS, which are required for entrance to universities in the West.

When it comes to private schools with a local curriculum and instruction in Russian, it becomes less clear how successful they are at preparing children for education abroad. Most of them allocate more hours to studying English than public schools and use English as one of their main marketing strategies. Some of them also organize study tours to Europe or the US for an extra fee. An interview with a representative of the Sapat lyceum (Sapat International Education Institution) administration revealed that the chain has big ambitions to send students to foreign universities in the coming years:

This year, out of 750, about 350-400 students went abroad. Fifty went on full scholarships to universities that are included in the world’s top 100. We achieved this goal in just two years. Our plan for next year is to increase this number to 100. They took 25 students to Hong Kong. They have eight universities and five of them are in the top 100. All 25 [students] received scholarships. Tuition costs \$25,000-35,000 (Representative of Sapat International Education Institution).

The same representative of the Sapat school chain was critical of the local system of rating schools based on the NST, pointing to a number of flaws in that approach. He suggested that Kyrgyzstan should shift to thinking more globally and rely on international ratings, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), evaluating schools' performance by the same standards under which foreign universities' students gain admission rather than on the number of Gold Certificates or local Olympiads. The latter, according to him, are local and trivial matters.

#### *Turkish Boarding Schools: Quality and Added Value*

Many Turkish private schools in Kyrgyzstan belong to the Sapat International Education Institution system, which currently has two international schools, 16 lyceums (boarding schools), and four primary schools in the country.<sup>27</sup> Both international schools, two of the boarding schools, and three of the primary schools are located in Bishkek. Sapat private schools are known for their quality, proof of which can be seen in the number of international and local competitions their pupils have won and the number of Gold Certificates that students have received over the years. In addition to quality, other motivations prompted parents to choose these schools: they instill moral values and encourage an upright lifestyle. Students of the Turkish schools are often described as well-bred, hardworking, honest, and self-disciplined.<sup>28</sup> While the curriculum does not contain religious education per se, they try to school children in Islamic ethics within a universal moral framework; values such as respect for parents and the elderly, tolerance, compassion, altruism, brotherhood/sisterhood, etc., are important components of Sapat education. A representative of a Turkish school administration confirmed:

Our philosophy is to provide two things: quality education and proper upbringing. These two things cannot be separated from each other (Representative, Turkish private school).

A parent whose child attends one of the Turkish elite private schools commented:

The reason why I gave my son to the school is English, but the ethics of the school were equally important to me (Parent, private school).

According to this parent, Turkish boarding schools are much more effective at promoting important values than non-boarding Turkish schools because their pupils have less contact with outsiders. Sapat boarding schools are segregated by gender in the upper-middle grades and high school students usually live at school during the week, going home for weekends. Teachers in boarding schools therefore have more control over the behavior of their students. Often, boys and girls are sent to Turkish boarding schools during their teenage years specifically for these reasons. One respondent said that whereas previously parents sent their children to a *moldo* (an Islamic scholar), they now send them to Turkish schools.

A representative of the girls' lyceum shared that boarding schools like his have become popular not just because of education, but also due to social/family circumstances. He explained that girls who live with stepfathers are frequently sent to boarding schools. He also discussed the role of migration. Boarding schools, especially in the south, have become popular among migrant families who live in Russia. Housing prices are too high in Russia to allow the entire family to live properly, and often both parents are labor migrants. It has thus become common practice among migrants in Russia to leave their children behind in Kyrgyzstan with grandparents or other relatives. For these families, private boarding schools have become a good option, giving children education as well as needed care:

Lots of parents work abroad or frequently travel abroad. They need someone who can take care of [their children]. Parents may not always be interested only in the quality of education or school results. So our school,

<sup>27</sup> Sapat International Educational Institution, last accessed November 21, 2018, <http://sebat.edu.kg/about.php?lang=ru>.

<sup>28</sup> Cenet Engin Demir, Ayse Balci, and Fusun Akkok, "The Role of Turkish Schools in the Educational System and Social Transformation of Central Asian Countries: The Case of Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 19, no. 1 (2000): 141-155.

besides education, is also taking care of children and filling this social gap that we have in our society (Representative, Turkish boarding school).

### *Private Schools as Social Currency*

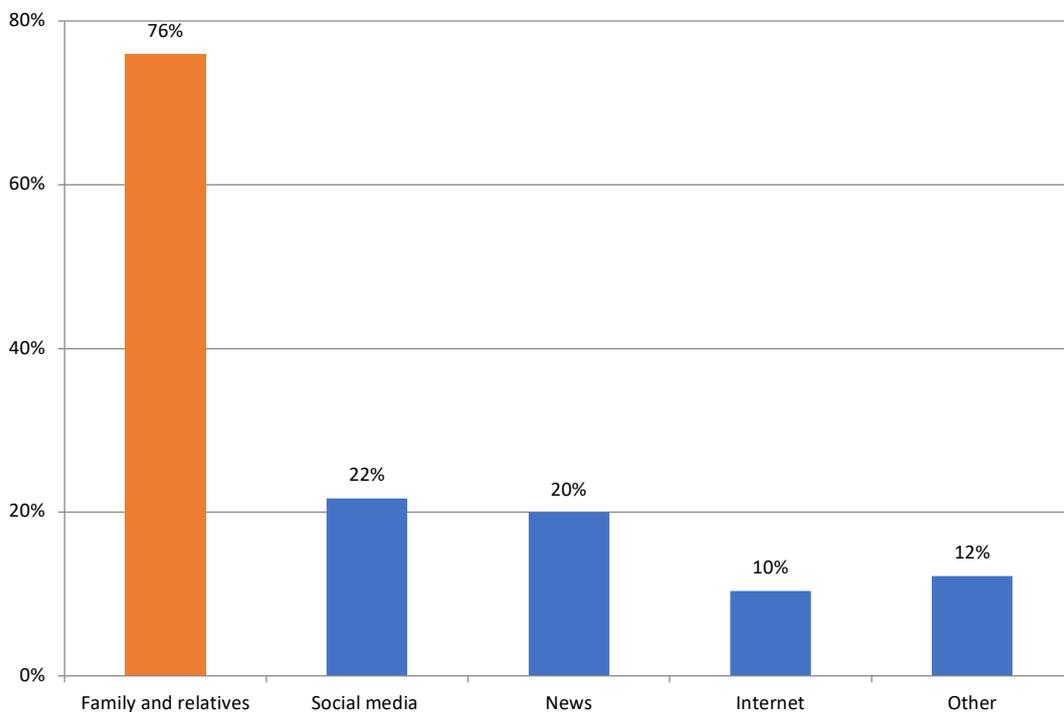
In choosing schools, parents primarily rely on the opinions of their social networks: friends, relatives, or colleagues. According to the survey, 76 percent of all parents surveyed rely on the recommendations or reviews of friends and relatives in finding information about schools (see Figure 8).

Because private schools are relatively new and it is not easy to obtain information about their results and performance, parents normally seek suggestions from people in their social circles. We find that parents are more likely to send their children to a particular private school if other

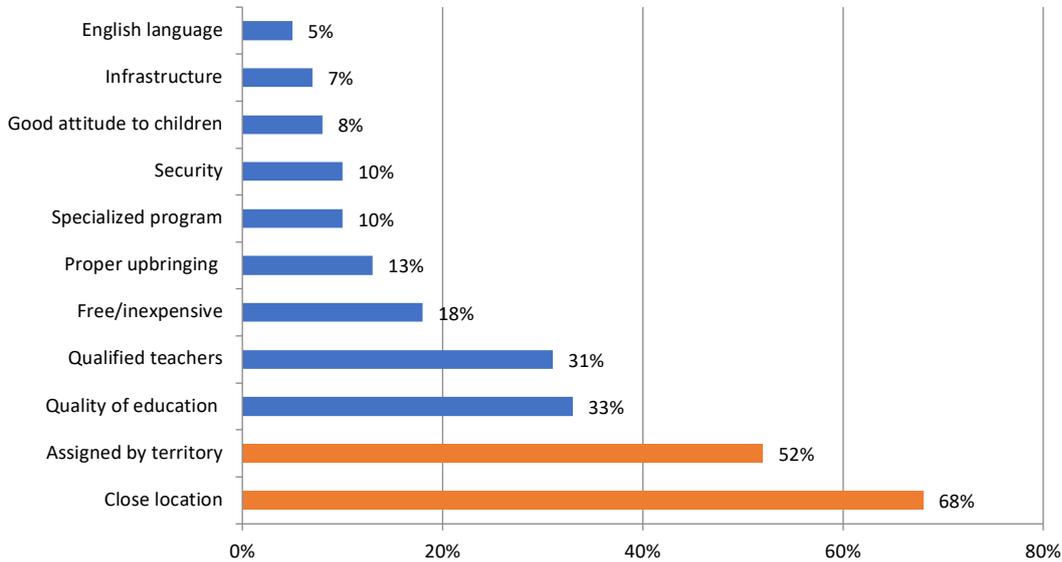
parents in their social circle send their children there and assess their experience positively.

Interestingly, such sharing of their experiences in obtaining private secondary education can also reinforce status competition among parents: if some families send their children to a prestigious school, others also feel social pressure to do so. One parent whose child attends the Silk Road International School told the story of how, when a more expensive branch of the same school was opened, wealthier parents moved their children there, even though, according to her, there was no difference between the curricula of these two schools. Parents send their children to more expensive schools to be “on trend” and “keep up with the Joneses.” We suggest that by sending children to private schools, parents implicitly seek to showcase their social status. In this sense, private schools serve as social currency for parents.

**Figure 8. Sources of information used by parents to choose a school**



**Figure 9. Parents' reasons for choosing a public school**



### Public Schools

When it comes to parents' motivations for choosing public schools, the survey results reveal a completely different picture. The figure below details the most commonly mentioned reasons for choosing a public school. The majority (68 percent) indicated that the proximity of the school was a major motivation, while 52 percent said that their choice was determined for them by the district in which they reside. Only 33 percent indicated that the quality of the education was a motivating factor, and all other factors were significantly less relevant.

Below, we analyze the most significant reasons why parents chose public schools, using both survey and interview results.

#### *School Location*

In line with the survey results, interviews confirmed that the most significant factor in choosing public schools is their proximity. Parents choose public schools because they are located in the neighborhood or close to where parents work. In the Soviet era, Bishkek schools were planned in such a way as to be walking distance from any place of residence. This is still the case in the central parts of

the city and in some micro-districts, while access to schools is more complicated in the new residential areas on the urban periphery. For families that live within walking distance of a public school, it is a very convenient choice.

Parents in Bishkek can send their children to the schools in their district or else try to place children in the schools of their choice in other districts. Our informants who send their children to public schools were divided between those who used neighborhood schools and those who bypassed this system in search of better-quality schools. Among those who chose neighborhood schools, proximity was the single most important factor influencing their decision. When asked about their reasons for choosing their school, one parent said this:

I did not go and check out other schools. This school is located close to us, so I chose it. I don't know how it is different from other schools (Parent, public school # 87).

Sticking to a neighborhood school was also influenced by a lack of the resources associated with attending better ones, which would require extra cost and effort. One parent explained her experience with it in this way:

I have five children; four of them go to school. Before, two of them used to go to a gymnasium. After they finished elementary school, I had to transfer them to School #88 near our place of residence. The reason for this is that we would spend money on transportation and it would also require an adult to take them and bring them back. And that school would require more money for renovation and we would pay more money. So we have transferred them to the neighborhood school. You pay less for school fees here. It is only one stop away. The children walk to school (Parent, public school # 88).

### *Quality of Education*

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, some schools were restructured into lyceums and gymnasiums. These differ from ordinary schools in that they have a more specialized curriculum, extra courses, and a heavier workload. The cost of these extra courses is partly covered by the Ministry of Education. The school principal's ability to raise extra funding from parents and other sponsors helps these schools retain good-quality teachers. This, coupled with selective admission policies, leads to a differentiation in education quality and outcomes between lyceums/gymnasiums and average schools.<sup>29</sup> In Bishkek, some lyceums/gymnasiums are popular and in high demand due to their higher NST scores, which increase students' chances of entering more prestigious local universities.

The search for high-quality education was one of the major factors that influenced parents to choose such high-performing lyceums/gymnasiums. Those who lived in poorer new settlements in Bishkek and those who had no choice but send their children to low-performing neighborhood schools. In choosing a similar type of school, another parent considered a combination of factors. First, she shortlisted the top three schools: schools #70, #61 and #26. She recognized that school #61 was the highest quality of all but considered her children to be better at humanities than at mathematics, and after considering the schools' locations chose school

complained that schools were extremely overcrowded and understaffed, with a very high rate of teacher turnover. Parents who were able to place their children in high-performing public schools mentioned qualified and committed teachers, the school's specialized curriculum, discipline, high NST scores, and the number of competitions won by the students as important factors in their decision. When asked about her motivation, one mother said the following:

First, this school is very strong and my child will get a good education not only in physics and mathematics, but also in all other subjects. My son is good at mathematics and I want him to develop these skills further (Parent, public school # 61).

Because admission to these high-performing schools is competitive, securing a place for a child requires certain skills and commitment from parents, such as early planning, preparation, hiring tutors, etc. One parent shared her experience of how being strategic and preparing well in advance helped her to prepare her children for the high-performing school #61:

I would prepare both my kids at home after they came home from kindergarten. They could read at the age of 4. I taught them math. I researched what schools are good, where they are located, what they teach. I planned ahead, thinking about which school to choose. I developed my own rating by asking parents about the schools their kids attend. I asked questions about which schools were the best. And then based on my personal rating, I decided that my kids should go to school #61. And then we started preparing for admission (Parent, public school # 61).

#26. Although their neighborhood school was also considered not bad, she decided to go with school #26 because it had much higher ratings. Additionally, she found out from her social circles that the principal of school #26 had a good reputation and made sure that the admissions process was transparent and based on merit. She hired private

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<sup>29</sup> Christopher Whitsel, "Parental Choices in the Primary and Secondary School Market in Dushanbe, Tajikistan," *European Education* 46, no. 2 (2016): 53-73.

tutors and successfully prepared her child for the entrance examination.

One common feature of parents who sent their children to high-performing public schools was that parents were themselves educated and interested in their children’s development. They were very resourceful and well-informed about schools in Bishkek, their ratings and performance, using their social and professional networks to find out information. Most importantly, they knew how to get their children into these schools: they actively encouraged and motivated their children to study. Many used the services of private tutors, while others prepared children at home themselves, investing their own time and energy and using their own knowledge and skills.

In an interview, an education expert reminded us that despite the presence of elite international private schools in Bishkek, for many residents, the dream schools remain the “elite” public schools, such as #61, #13, and #6, attendance at which has been seen as a status symbol since Soviet times. He mentioned that until very recently, it was common to have to pay large bribes to be admitted to these public schools. Higher, unofficial parental fees paid to gain

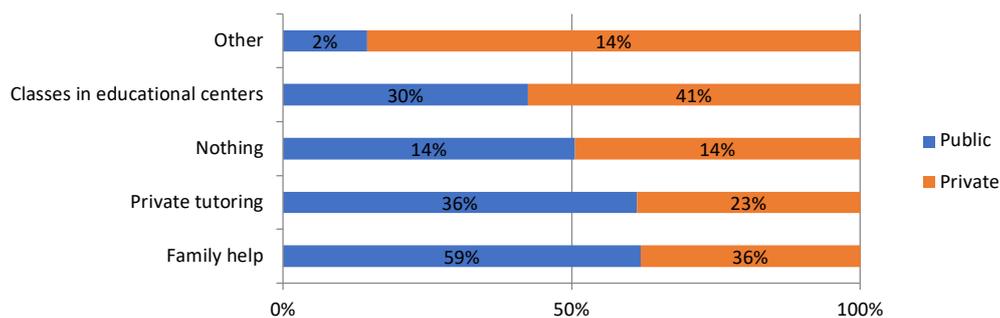
admission to these schools help explain why very poor parents cannot send their children there.<sup>30</sup>

#### *Flexible Afterschool Time*

Attending public schools generally takes only half a day, in contrast to the full day at many private schools. Children are therefore left with ample afterschool time to do homework, tutoring, and various extra-curricular activities. Some parents indicated that that the advantage of a public school is that their child can attend the Shubin music school, which is popular among many urban families in Bishkek. Afterschool time can also be used to attend various interest-based clubs, such as dancing, drawing, sports, chess, etc.

Many use these free hours to fill the gaps in the public education system in certain core subjects by attending private lessons. Private tutoring has become very popular among students of all types of schools, but more so in public schools (36 percent of students) than in private ones (23 percent) (see Figure 10). However, more private school students attended educational centers (41 percent) than did their counterparts in public schools (30 percent). One way to explain this is that students in public

**Figure 10. Strategies for obtaining additional knowledge outside the school curriculum, by type of school**



schools want extra help with core subjects such as math and English, and therefore seek out private tutors, while private school students tend to be enrolled in extracurricular classes for sports, music, arts, etc., which are more often group-based. More

students in public schools received family help with homework (59 percent) than students in private schools (36 percent), as many private schools provide homework support at school.

<sup>30</sup> Author’s interview with an expert.

Survey results showed that math and languages, especially English, are the most popular subjects. One expert described the popularity of the private tutoring business in Bishkek this way:

I know very few schools where kids do not go to private tutors. Even the majority of kids in elite gymnasiums also go to private tutoring. Money flows there (Expert, consultant on education).

However, location and distance are important. Parents who lived on the outskirts of Bishkek complained about the lack of access to good tutoring centers in their area. The majority of private educational centers and places to do extracurricular activities are located in the city center. This also contributes to the popularity of such activities among long-term urban residents compared to newcomers, who overwhelmingly live in new settlements.

While private tutoring is not cheap, it can actually offer cost savings to middle-income families. Some such families find it more strategic to send their child to a high-performing public school and compensate for the missing knowledge through private tutoring. For example, learning English privately is much less costly than attending an international private school. One parent, while convinced that high-performing public schools provide quality education, noted the advantage of private schools when it comes to English. For her, hiring a private tutor was the solution:

I have seen how well children from international schools speak English. As far as I understand, they are no different in terms of other subjects.

Of course, it is not bad, but why would you overpay just for English? I need to hire a good tutor so that my child can compete with them. These schools also give academic writing skills. This is their big advantage; public school children do not have these skills. So this is a big disadvantage of public schools if you want to send your kid abroad. You have to get additional help in this (Parent, public school # 6).

### *Preparing Children for “Real Life”*

Some parents find that public schools allow children to grow up in the authentic social environment of Bishkek and better prepare them for real life. Many parents who chose public schools were critical of the conditions in private schools, considering them too protective and nurturing and noting that children socialize mainly with others from similar social backgrounds. One expert shared the following opinion:

Many parents consider that private schools do not provide kids with the opportunity to become closely familiar with life and make them less adaptable (Expert).

Parents consider that public schools allow children to study with other children from diverse backgrounds and learn to socialize and survive. They see “real life,” take public transportation to school, become more independent and more disciplined, and thus grow up to be more prepared for the difficult life ahead.

### **Discussion: Portrait of Educational Inequality**

In this final section, we try to understand how these choices are shaped by the kinds of resources parents have at their disposal. This requires taking a hard look at the issue of inequality, which we do first by comparing families’ motivations and strategies and then by categorizing families by the different forms of capital they employ in providing education for their children.

### **Factors of Inequality**

The most obvious factor that reflects inequality between public and private school parents is income. Figure 11 confirms the obvious, showing a direct correlation between income and choice of school. We see that parents with higher incomes can afford private schools, while public school users are those who have average incomes or are poor. However, some families with higher-than-average incomes also use public schools.

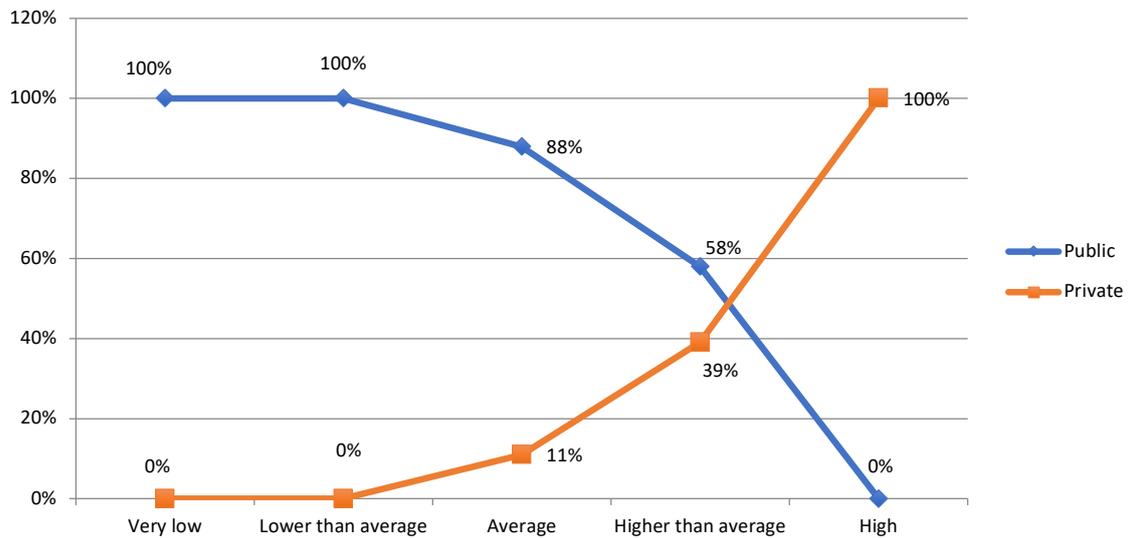
Inequality can also be identified by comparing parents' motivations and strategies. For example, location was the most important factor for parents of children in public schools—69 percent, versus only 5 percent for parents of children in private schools. This suggests that children in private schools are not limited by distance: their parents can take them across the city, usually in their own cars, or they can afford to pay for transportation organized by schools. Mobility is thus connected to income. Money also allows parents of private school children to access privileges: small classes with proper conditions, a good diet, and better treatment of children by teachers and staff. For families whose children attend public schools, these were not mentioned as factors in their choice.

The quality of education in private schools was rated higher (68 percent) than in public schools (33 percent). The comparison of parental satisfaction with their choice of schools shows that parents from private schools were more satisfied—4.29 out of 5, compared to 3.74 for parents of children in public schools. The reasons for dissatisfaction were different for public and private schools. The most common complaints about public

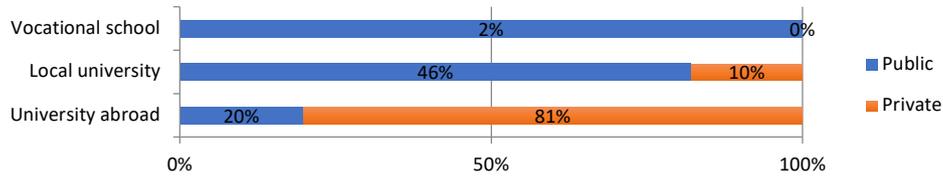
schools included poorly qualified teachers, overcrowded classes, bad treatment of children, a lack of books, and collection of money from parents for various school needs. Complaints in private schools were more elaborate and related to the quality of food, the quality of education not being quite up to expectations, and fear of the experimental character of private schools and their innovative curricula.

One of the most noticeable gaps between the two types of schools is revealed in the future plans that parents envisioned for their children. Figure 12 shows these differences: only 10 percent of parents of private school attendees were interested in local universities, compared to 46 percent of the parents of those attending public schools; 81 percent of parents of private school children indicated that their child would study abroad, compared to 20 percent of parents of public school children. The top destination for obtaining post-secondary education was Europe, followed by the US and Russia.

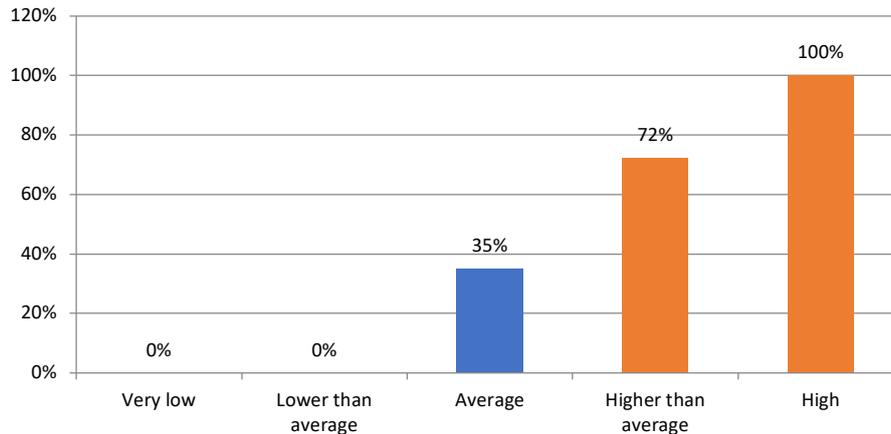
**Figure 11. Choice of private vs. public school, by income**



**Figure 12. Plans for children’s future, by type of school**



**Figure 13. Study abroad plans, by income**



Besides a correlation between future plans and type of school, there is also a very strong positive correlation between future plans and income. This is shown in Figure 13.

Looking at all these figures and comparisons, one could suggest a fairly straightforward correlation here: those who have money have more opportunities both for private education and for education abroad, while those who lack money have fewer. Yet the situation is more complex; looking at educational inequality only from the financial angle does not tell the complete story. In the next section, we incorporate other forms of capital into the discussion.

### Three Forms of Capital and Categorization of Families

In order to see the full picture, we suggest looking at family resources by considering different forms of capital: financial, social, and cultural (human). This approach, pioneered by Bourdieu, has been explored by a number of other scholars. Non-financial forms of capital—social and cultural—are important resources that can contribute to people’s wellbeing.<sup>31</sup>

Social capital usually implies various forms of social relations that people can use to their benefit. In the context of Kyrgyzstan, social relations and networks have always been extremely important;<sup>32</sup> indeed, tribal and family networks are believed to be at the core of Kyrgyz politics.<sup>33</sup> In this research, we found that parents with wider social networks could access more information on educational opportunities. It is through their social

<sup>31</sup> Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life, with an Update a Decade Later* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Kathleen Kuehnast and Nora Dudwick, *Better a Hundred Friends Than a Hundred Rubles? Social Networks in Transition—The Kyrgyz Republic* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2004), last accessed January 23, 2019, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/821201468774540164/Better-a-hundred-friends-than-a-hundred-rubles-Social-networks-in-transition-the-Kyrgyz-Republic>.

<sup>33</sup> Aksana Ismailbekova, *Blood Ties and the Native Son: Poetics of Patronage in Kyrgyzstan* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017).

networks that they sort out which schools are good and find out where to find qualified teachers and tutors. In some cases, having connections to school directors can even secure a discount at a private school or a place for a child in a highly competitive school.

Cultural capital refers to various kinds of knowledge, skills, and information, including familiarity with how institutions work, that result in positive outcomes for upward mobility. It is a question of knowing the “rules of the game.”<sup>34</sup> Parents, even when they do not have much financial capital to invest in an elite private school, are still able to access high-quality education by sending their children to high-performing public schools. Knowing the rules of the game helps them make strategic decisions, such as preparing children ahead of time for admission to a competitive school or university; taking advantage of various extracurricular activities, such as music schools, drawing, choreography, etc.; seeking out additional learning opportunities through private tutors; and being actively engaged in their children’s education, constantly motivating and directing them.

Parents’ education also helps. Many parents who grew up during the Soviet era, when literacy was almost universal and schools and universities offered very high-quality education, possess a very good knowledge of core school subjects. These parents might not have the money to place their children in private schools or the social connections to secure them places in prestigious public schools, yet they are quite well-educated themselves and they devote their own time to studying with children.

Thus, having a wide range of social connections and cultural capital can increase parents’ access to schools and opportunities for obtaining knowledge.<sup>35</sup> When we take into consideration these additional forms of capital, the portrait of educational inequality becomes more complex and nuanced. We see that those who do not have financial, social, or human capital are the ones at risk. Accordingly, we can distinguish several

main categories of families by reference to the resources they have for placing children in schools. It is important to look at these categories as fairly abstract ones and bear in mind that many families belong to more than one category. Yet creating some form of typology helps us visualize the nuances of inequality. We start at the upper end in terms of resources.

### *The Elite*

This category includes representatives of the upper echelons of Kyrgyz politicians: parliamentary deputies, upper-level ministry bureaucrats, representatives of the Presidential Office, and high-ranking professionals working in international organizations. These are people who have at least two (financial and social) or even three (financial, social, and cultural) forms of capital. These families can afford to send their children to international English-language schools or else oblige school principals to accept their children to these schools for a lower fee (or no fee at all). Parents in this category have the widest range of choices for their children. Down the hierarchy of official positions, the range of choices shrinks: lower-ranked officials might still have social and cultural capital, but not necessarily financial capital.

### *The “New Kyrgyz”*

This category includes Kyrgyz businessmen who became wealthy by engaging in cross-border trade, the sewing industry, construction, or other businesses. Many of them came to Bishkek from the regions and built their fortunes by working hard over the course of many years. Such “new Kyrgyz” may not have strong urban cultural capital and may have only a modest education and social background. But they do have money, and depending on how successful their businesses are, they can afford different kinds of private schools, from the cheapest to the most expensive. For representatives of this category, sending children to an expensive private school might be a matter of

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<sup>34</sup> Lareau, “Cultural Knowledge.”

<sup>35</sup> Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*.

social prestige, while placing them in cheaper private schools is a matter of convenience: kids are well looked-after and parents do not have to do homework with them.

#### *Urban Middle Class*

This category includes long-term city residents who themselves grew up in Bishkek or consider themselves urbanites. Members of this group have excellent Russian language skills<sup>36</sup> and urban-style manners. Many of them work as professionals in various fields, including the more or less well-paid positions in international organizations. Some might have small businesses. Even with higher-than-average salaries, their incomes might not be enough to afford private schools. The top choice for such parents is to place their children in the prestigious high-performing public schools. To do so, they make the best of their social, cultural, and human capital. We interviewed parents who had graduated from such schools and whose children now attend the same schools. A feeling of belonging and personal connections with school principals and teachers help them in this. Being well-educated themselves, they can benefit from their human capital by helping children prepare to study in such demanding schools. These are the parents who are most likely to be critical of private

schools, dismissing them as providing a poor quality of education, while justifying their own choice.

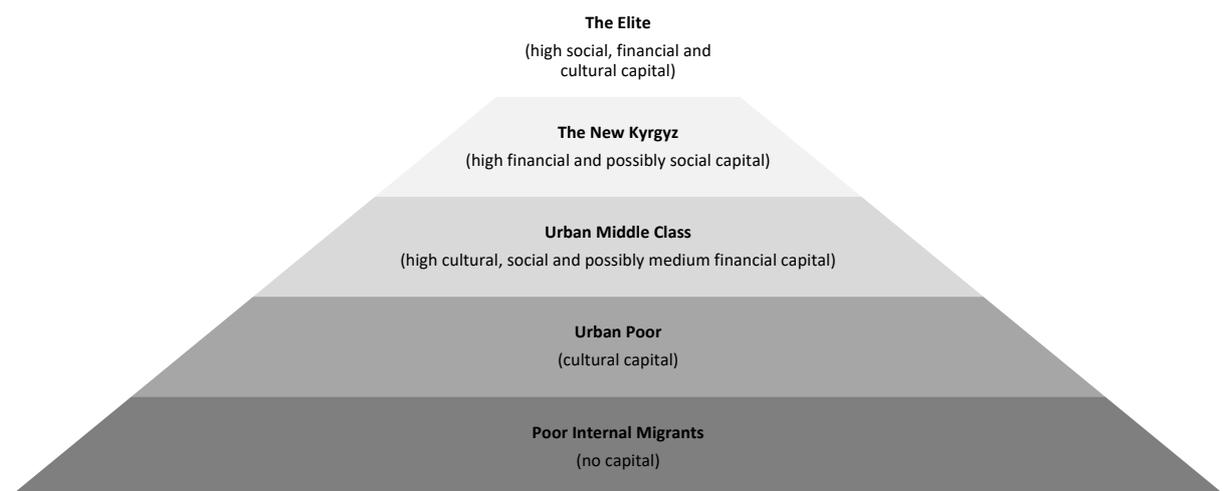
#### *Urban Poor*

This is the category of long-term urban residents in the lower socio-economic strata—those without regular or well-paid jobs. These include low-paid teachers, medical staff (nurses), and other low-paid government workers, whose only source of income is their salary. Unlike the urban middle class, they are not able to generate additional income from small and medium businesses. Having a child attend a high-status public school can place a significant burden on such households, as these schools still collect higher parental contributions than average schools. The low status of their jobs means that they have limited social capital or professional connections. The only form of capital these urban poor might have, then, is their human capital—that is, their own knowledge of subjects. They are more likely to send children to the regular neighborhood schools and contribute to their children’s education by helping them with their homework.

#### *Poor Internal Migrants*

Since Kyrgyzstan’s independence, Bishkek has attracted a large number of internal migrants, who have come to the capital in the search of

**Figure 14. Categorization of families in regard to access to schools**



<sup>36</sup> Natalya Kosmarskaya, “The Russian Language in Kyrgyzstan: Changing Roles and Inspiring Prospects,” *Russian Journal of Communication* 7, no. 2 (2015): 217-222.

income/survival opportunities. These families might not have any qualifications or social connections that would help them in the professional or business realms. They live in the family dormitories in the city center or in the less prestigious *novostroikas* on the outskirts of the city. The only choice they have is to send children to the neighborhood schools. Unfortunately, because many *novostroikas* lack schools, their children have to travel long distances to attend the nearest school. These children are the most unfortunate because their parents do not have money or connections; being from rural areas, their social capital is built around kinship and relatives who live in the villages they came from. Nor do they have much human capital to help their children with homework or advance their educational opportunities.

These are the five categories of Bishkek residents, which summarize the inequality between families in terms of children's access to education by looking at different forms of capital: financial, social, and cultural. What is the relative weight of each category in the overall composition of resource possession? Putting precise numbers on this is beyond the scope of this research, but by looking at average salaries and at the numbers of public and private schools in the city, we suggest that the composition is skewed toward the lower end. We propose that educational inequality in

Bishkek can be understood as a pyramid (see Figure 14).

## Conclusion

Parents' secondary education choices in Bishkek reveal that, as in many parts of the world, private schools serve wealthy and upper middle-income families. Despite some debates around the quality of education in private schools, privileged families in Bishkek opt for private education for a variety of reasons. Some see in private education an opportunity to escape the Soviet-style education system, which they perceive as outdated, while others value private schools for their conveniences. For a select few, private schools provide an easier path to leaving the country and entering global

education, while for others, they provide a mechanism for securing higher status for children (and parents). As most private schools do not have strict and competitive admission policies, the only criterion for accessing such schools is the family's financial status. Thus, private schools sort out student composition according to parents' socio-economic backgrounds. This paves the way for social segregation and inequality.

However, parents with strong social and cultural capital can place their children in the best public schools, which provide an education no worse than that in some private schools. This tells us that inequality in secondary education in Bishkek is layered and depends on how families can utilize their resources. It is those families that lack all three forms of capital whose children are at the highest risk and need serious attention from policymakers. It is disturbing to know that these poor families—who make up the majority of the urban population of Bishkek—are disadvantaged in accessing not only private schools, but also high-quality public schools.

## Recommendations

The secondary education landscape in Bishkek is diverse and fragmented. This research divides secondary schools into five categories: three types of private schools differentiated by price (elite, high, and medium-fee schools) and two types of public schools differentiated by performance (high-performing and low-performing schools). Our research found that while wealthy families chose private schools, it was middle-income urban families who primarily accessed high-performing and competitive public schools. Poor families lack both the financial and non-financial resources to access high-quality schools and mostly attend low-performing neighborhood schools. To address such inequality in secondary education, policymakers should prioritize the needs of low-performing schools and increase poor families' access to quality education.

***To the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic:***

- Establish a program that pairs individual high- and low-performing public schools for mentorship
- Organize workshops for high-performing school principals to share knowledge and skills through training
- Foster a sense of community and collegiality among principals of all schools through a range of activities, such as social gatherings, workshops and social media networks
- Facilitate public-private school cooperation by sharing the best practices of high-performing private schools with low-performing public schools
- Establish incentives for private schools to conduct socially responsible activities and contribute to the improvement of the education system
- Reach out to international organizations and private donors, such as local businessmen, to sponsor scholarships for

children from new settlements to cover expenses such as books, transportation, and meals at high-performing schools.

***To International Organizations and NGOs:***

- Establish community learning centers that offer low-fee or free educational courses and activities in new settlements. Such opportunities can supplement the Ministry of Education's efforts to help low-performing schools and increase their competitiveness with higher-quality schools.
- Provide expert assistance in developing effective mechanisms of monitoring, evaluating and rating school performance. Such mechanisms can help parents and the wider community to access information about school performance and the means of addressing problems in low-performing schools.

# Chapter 7.

## Understanding the Rising NEET Phenomena in Southern Kazakhstan

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Dinara Alimkhanova<sup>1</sup> (2018)

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In Kazakhstan, every fifth citizen belongs to the younger generation. Since young people are a fundamental asset to Kazakhstani society, it is critical for them to be equipped with the expertise and skills necessary to succeed in a competitive global market economy. As the experience of many other countries has shown, youth can quickly turn from an asset to a liability if left without proper education and jobs. This paper examines the worrisome rising number of youth from southern Kazakhstan who are not in employment, education, or training (NEET). In OECD countries, in particular, the NEET category is being used as an indicator of youth marginalization and disengagement.<sup>2</sup> Improving policymakers' understanding of this growing and potentially at-risk youth group can help them elaborate more effective policies on the issue.

The urgency of understanding the rising NEET phenomenon, especially in southern Kazakhstan, is indicated by a number of data points. According to a recent OECD report,<sup>3</sup> although 96 percent of young Kazakhstanis are employed, they are often engaged in low-quality, low-paid, and high-risk jobs. Such low-quality employment is often found in the informal economy, which employed about one-third (28 percent) of young Kazakhstanis in 2016. Another segment of youth is self-employed.

At the same time, the exact number of NEET varies from region to region, with southern oblasts having the highest rates. There is almost no research devoted to the study of NEETs in Kazakhstan<sup>4</sup> and no information is available on their socio-demographic profile (category, age, poverty, time as a NEET, etc.). Thus, current employment data—which measure only formal employment—do not capture the real situation of the youth labor market in Kazakhstan, with the result that the government's numerous initiatives directed toward youth education and employment fail to reach a sizable number of young people.

In this paper, I first provide basic information on youth employment in Kazakhstan and explain the NEET phenomenon. I then give an overview of NEET youth in southern Kazakhstan. Next, I review factors that may be contributing to the rising number of such social group. Finally, bringing together extant research and new data, I offer policy recommendations for addressing the NEET phenomenon in the region.

### The History of the NEET Phenomenon

The NEET phenomenon first emerged in the studies of British scholars in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Their research explored the correlation between being in neither

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<sup>2</sup> Marco Ranzani and Furio Camillo Rosati, "The NEET Trap: A Dynamic Analysis for Mexico," 2012. See also Ummuhan Bardak, Martiño Rubal Maseda, and Francesca Rosso, "Young People Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET): An Overview in ETF Partner Countries," European Training Foundation, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Social Exclusion Unit, "Bridging the Gap: New Opportunities for 16-18 Year Olds Not in Education, Training or Employment," London: Social Exclusion Unit 1 (1999).

<sup>4</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Building Inclusive Labour Markets in Kazakhstan: A Focus on Youth, Older Workers and People with Disabilities," 2017.

<sup>5</sup> The first and only study is D.E. Ashimkhanova et al., "Guidelines for Working with Youth in the NEET Category," 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Social Exclusion Unit, "Bridging the Gap: New Opportunities for 16-18 Year Olds Not in Education, Training or Employment," London: Social Exclusion Unit 1 (1999).

education nor employment as a youth and different issues, such as unemployment and poor health, in adulthood. The study found that when young people who had been out of education and employment for a period of at least six months became adults, they were more frequently unemployed or working part-time, more likely to become parents young, and/or often had physical/mental health problems.<sup>6</sup> Based on these studies, in 2001 the British government introduced a new NEET indicator to its studies of the youth labor market. The ultimate aim was for these new statistical data to eventually reduce the number of youth aged 16 to 18 who were not in education or employment.<sup>7</sup> The European labor market followed Britain in adopting NEET to supplement the youth unemployment rate indicator.<sup>8</sup> Botric & Tomic stress that it is highly important to keep the youth labor market vibrant, as this directly affects the sustainable GDP rate.<sup>9</sup>

Internationally, the description of the youth labor market is limited to two major indicators: employment and unemployment rates among youth. Bacher et al. contend, however, that youth unemployment is too narrow to capture the vulnerable group of youth because it underestimates the extent of the problem among young adults.<sup>10</sup> Kovrova et al. also argue that NEET-focused data give a more comprehensive view of the segment of the youth population that has given up looking for work or is unwilling to join the labor market.<sup>11</sup> In performing analysis using the NEET indicator, it is important for scholars and experts to consider three age sub-groups within NEET: 15-19, 20-24, and 25-29. Each subgroup has its own reasons for falling into the NEET category. The first sub-group often

consists of school dropouts, while the second group is made up of young people who experience difficulties entering the labor market or further education. In the last sub-group, young people leaving education often find that their skills are not needed in the labor market, resulting in their inability to find employment at the same time as they may no longer have the resources to engage in further training.<sup>12</sup>

It is also important to note that the NEET phenomenon in Japan has a unique face. NEET in Japan emerged as the number of job-switchers and part-time workers began to grow, reaching nearly 2 million people in 2002.<sup>13</sup> In his study, Teo estimates that there are thousands of youths and adults “finding themselves” in their own virtual caves (so-called *hikikomori*).<sup>14</sup> He offers the example of a 19-year-old Japanese man who lives with his middle-class parents in a two-bedroom urban apartment. For the last two years he has hardly ever left his room, spending 23 hours a day behind its closed door. He eats food prepared by his mother who leaves trays outside his bedroom. He sleeps all day, then awakes in the evening to spend his time surfing the internet, chatting on online bulletin boards, reading manga (comic books), and playing video games.<sup>15</sup>

These individuals go uncounted in conventional labor force measurements. Teo further explains that the high number of NEETs in Japan is associated with students’ low motivation to study or with lack of resources to pay for education. At the same time, an alarming increase in mental health diagnoses—including depression, anxiety, or schizophrenia<sup>16</sup>—among youth may be making it

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Lisa Russell, Robin Simmons, and Ron Thompson, “Conceptualising the Lives of NEET Young People: Structuration Theory and ‘Disengagement,’” *Education, Knowledge and Economy* 5, no. 3 (2011): 89-106.

<sup>8</sup> Johann Bacher, Dennis Tamesberger, Heinz Leitgöb, and Thomas Lankmayer, “Not in Education, Employment or Training: Causes, Characteristics of NEET-Affected Youth and Exit Strategies in Austria,” Institut für Sozial- und Wirtschaftswissenschaften, Linz, Austria, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Valerija Botrić and Iva Tomić. “EU-Mediterranean Youths in the Crisis: Substitution vs. Income Effect,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 21, no. 5 (2018)

<sup>10</sup> Bacher et al., “Not in Education, Employment or Training.”

<sup>11</sup> World Bank, UNICEF, and ILO, “NEET Youth Dynamics in Indonesia and Brazil: A Cohort Analysis,” Understanding Children’s Work Programme, Rome, March 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Bardak, Rubal Maseda, and Rosso, “Young People Not in Employment.”

<sup>13</sup> Tuukka Toivonen, “The Emergence of Youth Independence Support Policy in Japan: How ‘NEET’ and the Connexions Service were Transferred into the Japanese Context” (paper prepared for the 81<sup>st</sup> convention of the Japan Sociological Society, November 23-24, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Alan Robert Teo and Albert C. Gaw. “Hikikomori, A Japanese Culture-Bound Syndrome of Social Withdrawal? A Proposal for DSM-V,” *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 198, no. 6 (2010): 444.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

difficult for young Japanese to enter the workforce or higher education. Thus, the case of Japan illustrates that micro-level socio-cultural patterns and macro-level factors such as the economy and access to education all contribute to the NEET phenomenon.

In a comparative context, Kazakhstan has a lower NEET rate than its neighbors and OECD countries (see Figure 1). In OECD countries, a high NEET rate is strongly correlated with low educational attainment: in 2016, the vast majority (85 percent) of all NEETs had no tertiary education. That being said, in seven OECD countries (Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Japan, and Slovenia), over half of NEETs were between 25 and 29 years of age, indicating difficulties not so much in accessing higher education as in transitioning from school to work, often due to a lack of work experience and low qualifications.<sup>17</sup>

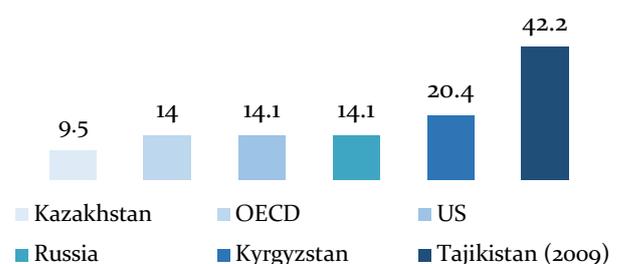
### Theorizing the NEET Phenomenon

A high NEET rate may have a number of negative short-term as well as long-term consequences for a society. When young people struggle to find permanent employment, it puts them at a higher risk of poverty and lower levels of well-being.<sup>18</sup> Scarpetta et al.<sup>19</sup> find that “left behinds” have poorer health and are more likely to engage in criminal activity. This segment of the population also tends to have lower levels of trust in socio-political institutions and the government.<sup>20</sup>

Today, most countries accept the International Labor Organization’s (ILO) definition of and methodology on NEET. According to the ILO,<sup>21</sup> the NEET rate consists of the percentage of the population of a given age group (15-29 or 15-24) and

gender who are neither employed nor involved in further education or training. The data are normally calculated through the ILO’s Labor Force Survey (LFS), a standard household-based survey of work-related statistics, as the percentage of young people who (i) are not employed; and (ii) have not received any education or training in the four weeks prior to the survey.<sup>22</sup> As the survey aims to capture the situation of the entire labor force, it also gathers information on the labor market situation among youth and their participation in education or training programs. Most existing NEET studies use LFS data. Generally, a NEET group falls into two major subcategories: unemployed youth and inactive youth.<sup>23</sup> Unemployed young people include those who are without work but currently seeking employment, whereas inactive youth may include voluntary NEETs, family carers, or individuals with disabilities. Driouchi & Harkat have found that urban youth and young females have a particular propensity to leave the education system and labor market.<sup>24</sup> Internationally, young people are considered NEETs whether or not they receive unemployment benefits, social assistance, or family benefits, but different countries have different methodologies for calculating how many NEETs they have.<sup>25</sup>

**Figure 1. NEET rate in Kazakhstan & the world, 2016**



<sup>17</sup> Stéphane Carcillo, Rodrigo Fernandez, Sebastian Königs, and Andreea Minea, “NEET Youth in the Aftermath of the Crisis: Challenges and Policies,” OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers, 2015. DOI: 10.1787/5js6363503f6-en

<sup>18</sup> Anna Zudina, “What Makes Youth Become NEET? The Evidence from Russian LFS,” Higher School of Economics Research Paper No. WP BRP 177/EC/2017, October 28, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Stefano Scarpetta, Anne Sonnet, and Thomas Manfredi, “Rising Youth Unemployment During the Crisis: How to Prevent Negative Long-Term Consequences on a Generation?” OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers 106, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “Off to a Good Start? Jobs for Youth,” OECD Publishing, 2010. DOI

<sup>21</sup> Sara Elder, “What Does NEETs Mean and Why is the Concept So Easily Misinterpreted?” ILO Technical Brief 1 (2015).

<sup>22</sup> The NEET indicator differs slightly from the ILO’s data collection in Japan. It does not include young women who are engaged in housework nor individuals with disabilities. NEET also refers to individuals aged 15 to 34 rather than 15-24 or 15-29.

<sup>23</sup> Bardak, Rubal Maseda, and Rosso, “Young People Not in Employment.”

<sup>24</sup> Ahmed Driouchi and Tahar Harkat, “Youth Inclusion Policies and NEETs’ Targeting Requirements in Arab Countries,” *MPRA Paper* 80622 (2017).

<sup>25</sup> Carcillo, Fernandez, Königs, and Minea, “NEET Youth in the Aftermath.”

<sup>26</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “Youth Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) Indicator, 2018,” <https://data.oecd.org/youthinac/youth-not-in-employment-education-or-training-neet.htm>, accessed April 24, 2018; ILO statistical database,

## Youth Labor Force and NEET in (Southern) Kazakhstan: Key Facts

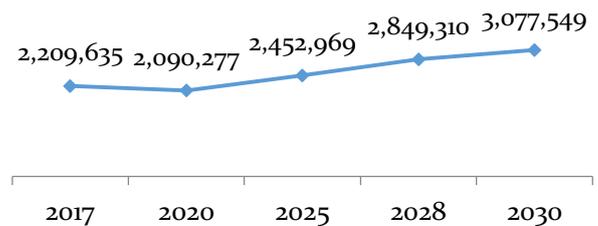
### Youth Labor Force Outlook in Kazakhstan

In 2017, young people—those between the ages of 14 and 29—constituted almost one-fourth of the total population of Kazakhstan (22 percent, or nearly 4 million). Figure 2 shows that by 2030, the number of young Kazakhstanis aged 16-24 is expected to increase by 30 percent.<sup>27</sup>

About 57 percent of Kazakhstani young adults reside in cities and more than half are men (50.4 percent). Over one-third (35 percent) were in education and more than half (55 percent) were active labor force participants in 2016.<sup>28</sup> According to the labor force statistics from that year, 96 percent of all youth were employed, while the remaining 4 percent were

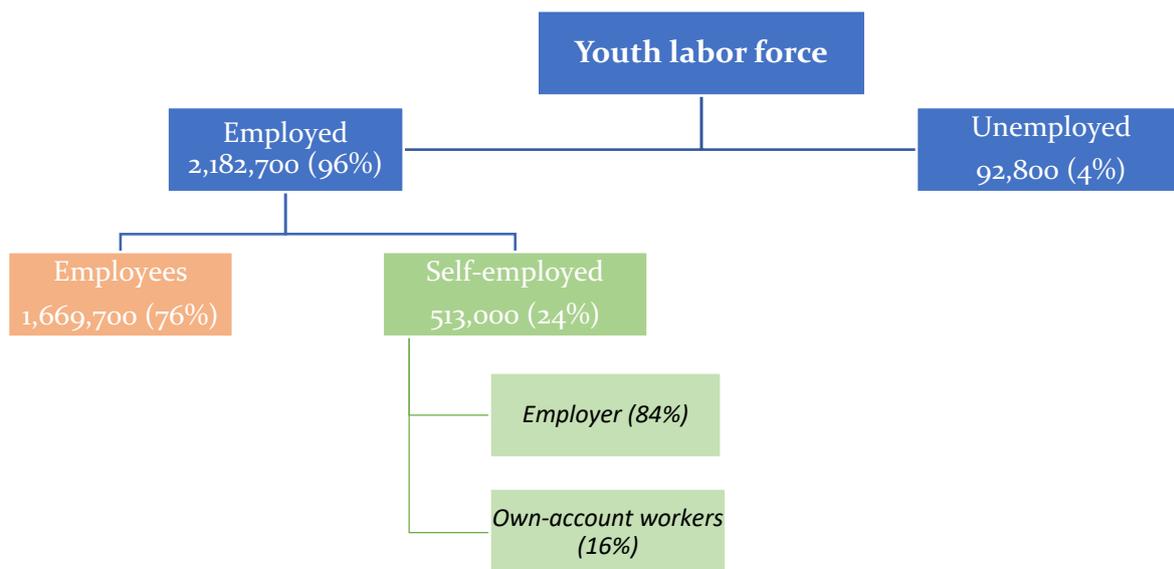
unemployed, a common dynamic in the youth labor market in recent years.<sup>29</sup> However, scholars debate the degree to which these figures reflect the reality of youth employment.

Figure 2. The projected number of youth (16-24) in the Republic of Kazakhstan by 2030 (number of people)



Source: Ministry of the National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Figure 3. Youth labor force in Kazakhstan, 2016



Source: Constructed by the author on the basis of data from the Statistics Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan

[http://www.ilo.org/ilostat/faces/oracle/webcenter/portalapp/pagehierarchy/Page3.jspx?MBI\\_ID=20&\\_adf.ctrl-state=12rhv46kx3\\_54&\\_afLoop=453077140267259&\\_afWindowMode=0&\\_afWindowId=12rhv46kx3\\_51#](http://www.ilo.org/ilostat/faces/oracle/webcenter/portalapp/pagehierarchy/Page3.jspx?MBI_ID=20&_adf.ctrl-state=12rhv46kx3_54&_afLoop=453077140267259&_afWindowMode=0&_afWindowId=12rhv46kx3_51#), accessed April 24, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Ministry of the National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Demograficheskii prognoz Respubliki Kazakhstan: osnovnye trendy, vyzovy, prakticheskie rekomendatsii," 2014. Currently available only for youth aged 16-24.

<sup>28</sup> The youth labor force is the sum of the number of employed and unemployed young people in the country.

<sup>29</sup> "Labor Force Indicators," Statistics Office of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2016.

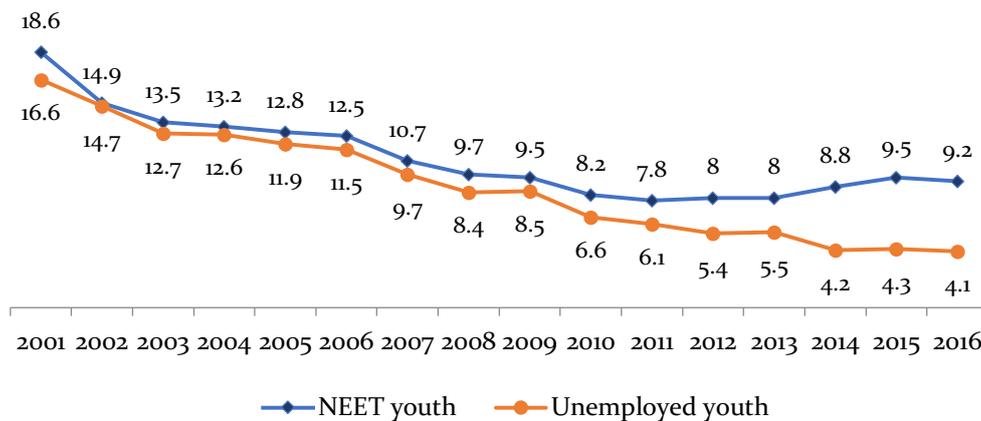
[http://stat.gov.kz/faces/wcnav\\_externalId/homeNumbersLabor?\\_afLoop=8037117224105725#%40%3F\\_afLoop%3D8037117224105725%26\\_a\\_df.ctrl-state%3Dac1r4i7yf\\_42](http://stat.gov.kz/faces/wcnav_externalId/homeNumbersLabor?_afLoop=8037117224105725#%40%3F_afLoop%3D8037117224105725%26_a_df.ctrl-state%3Dac1r4i7yf_42).

Some argue that the high level of youth-employment is an illusion because many young people work in the informal economy or are self-employed.<sup>30</sup> Figure 3 offers a more detailed picture of employed youth, breaking that category down into employees and self-employed workers.

Employees<sup>31</sup> (also known as salaried workers) are workers who hold a (written or oral) job contract and are paid for their employment status.<sup>32</sup>

Self-employed<sup>33</sup> young people are those who run their own businesses: either “employers,” who manage their own enterprise and have one or more full-time employees, or “own-account workers,”<sup>34</sup> who work for themselves and do not hire any full-time employees to work for them.<sup>35</sup> In 2016, 16 percent of Kazakhstan’s young people (more than 80,000) were categorized as own-account workers.

Figure 4. The proportion of NEETs in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2001-2016, %



Source: The Statistics Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan

This classification implies that these individuals “have a tenuous hold on employment, and the line between employment and unemployment is often thin.”<sup>36</sup> A high proportion of own-account workers is frequently correlated with a large number of people from low-income families, from rural areas, or working in the informal sector, all of whom can be considered vulnerable in terms of their employment.<sup>37</sup>

In addition, because some employees hold a job contract based on an oral agreement and the

businesses of some self-employed young people are not registered, about one-third (385,680, or 28 percent) of young Kazakhstanis<sup>38</sup> worked informally in 2017. This means that they lacked the protection of labor contracts, had lower wages, and experienced poor working conditions.<sup>39</sup> The OECD study suggests that young people often find themselves taking on unstable work in the informal economy due to their low skills.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>30</sup> “Neformal'naiia zaniatost' molodezhi v monogorodakh,” Analiticheskaia gruppa “Kipr,” 2018, <http://agkipr.kz/archives/1054>, accessed May 16, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Russian: *naemnye rabotniki*.

<sup>32</sup> International Labour Organization, *Key Indicators of the Labour Market, Ninth edition* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2016).

<sup>33</sup> Russian: *Samostoiatel'no zaniatyie*.

<sup>34</sup> Russian: *Neproduktivno samozaniatyie*.

<sup>35</sup> “Ekonomicheskaia aktivnost' naseleniia Kazakhstana,” Statistics Office of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> ILO, *Key Indicators of the Labour Market*.

<sup>37</sup> International Labour Organization, “Transitioning from the Informal to the Formal Economy,” Report V (1), International Labour Conference, 103<sup>rd</sup> Session, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Aged 15-29.

<sup>39</sup> ILO, *Key Indicators of the Labour Market*.

<sup>40</sup> OECD, “Building Inclusive Labour Markets in Kazakhstan.”

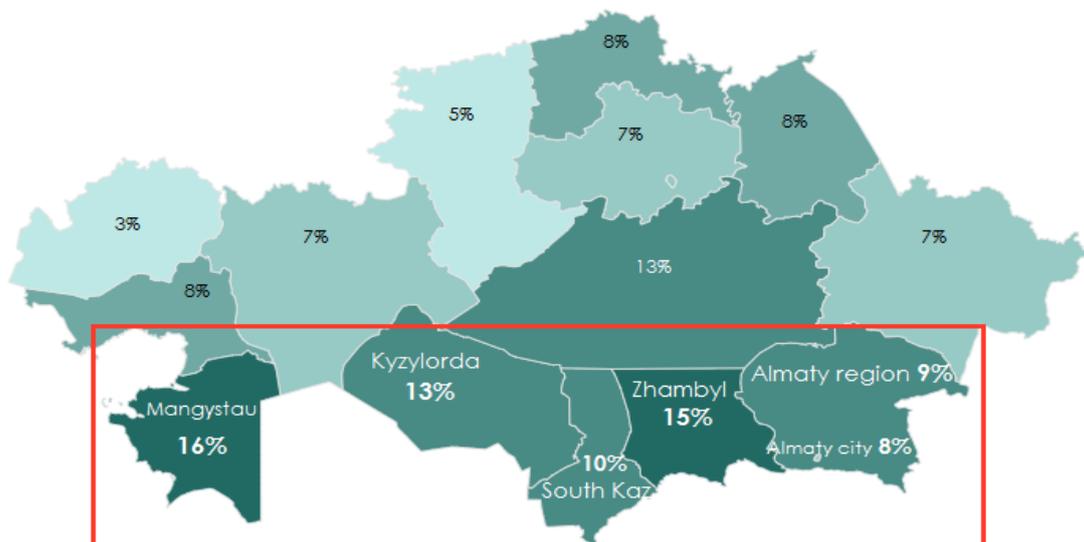
### NEET Youth in Kazakhstan

In Kazakhstan, the organization that collects NEET data for the Labor Force Survey is the Statistics Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan. NEET data are available from 2001 to 2017, but no empirical research has been conducted since that time. As of 2016, approximately 357,000 Kazakhstani youth (9.2 percent) were found to be neither employed nor enrolled in any educational institution and thus were classified as NEET.

The proportion of NEETs gradually declined between 2001 and 2011, a decrease that can be

explained by a reduction in youth unemployment, which is a major contributor to NEET (see Figure 4). Since 2012, however, the share of NEETs has been growing. More young Kazakhstanis have begun to withdraw from education and the labor market. This shows that, in addition to the unemployment situation, several factors have combined to drive youth to drop out of education or work. One explanation based on the OECD's findings is that the informal sector played an illusionary role for some socio-demographic groups.<sup>41</sup> In other words, informal jobs allowed some people to be considered "employed," when in fact they were neither self-employed nor hired by someone else (see the

**Figure 5. Share of NEET youth in Kazakhstan, 2016, %**



Source: The Statistics Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan

previous section for more details). A number of other studies<sup>42</sup> indicate that this tendency is a global one: NEET growth began in the aftermath of the financial crisis and has not stabilized. Many young people still face the challenge of a skills mismatch: they lack the competencies that would make them attractive to employers.<sup>43</sup>

### NEET Youth in Southern Kazakhstan

Although the proportion of NEETs varies across the country, Southern regions tend to have the highest numbers of NEETs. Officially, Southern Kazakhstan includes the Almaty, Zhambyl, South

<sup>41</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Multi-Dimensional Review of Kazakhstan* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2016).

<sup>42</sup> Carcillo, Fernandez, Königs, and Minea, "NEET Youth in the Aftermath"; Sher Verick, "Who is Hit Hardest during a Financial Crisis? The Vulnerability of Young Men and Women to Unemployment in an Economic Downturn," in Iyanatul Islam and Sher Verick, eds., *From the Great Recession to Labour Market Recovery: Issues, Evidence and Policy Options* (Basingstoke: ILO/Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Misbah Tanveer Choudhry, Enrico Marelli, and Marcello Signorelli, "Youth Unemployment Rate and Impact of Financial Crises," *International Journal of Manpower* 33, no. 1 (2012): 76-95.

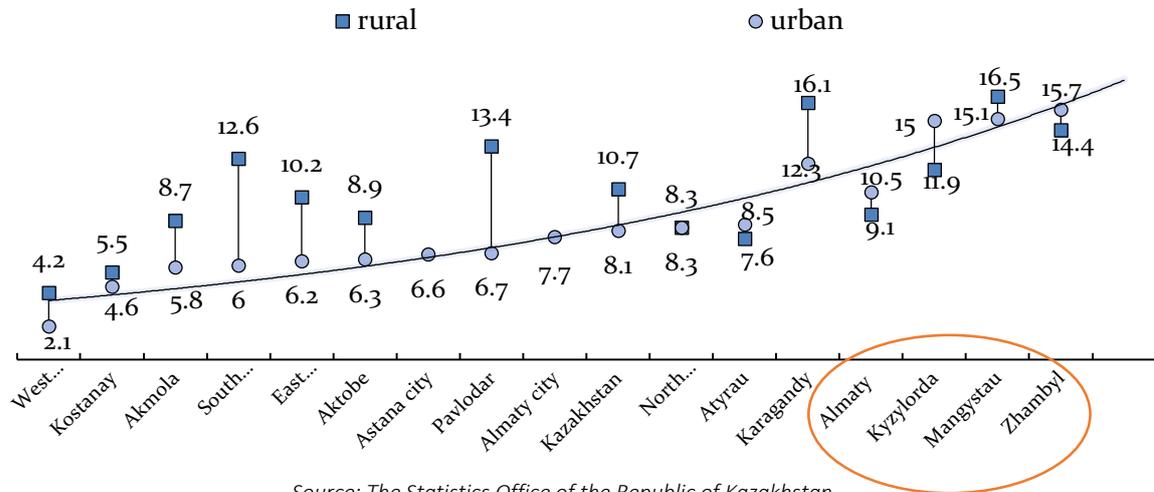
<sup>43</sup> Massimiliano Mascherini, Lidia Salvatore, Anja Meierkord, and Jean-Marie Jungblut, *NEETs: Young People Not in Employment, Education or Training: Characteristics, Costs and Policy Responses in Europe* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2012).

Kazakhstan, and Kyzylorda regions,<sup>44</sup> as well as Almaty city (see Figure 5). Although Mangystau oblast belongs administratively to West Kazakhstan, I decided to include this oblast alongside the southern regions, since it has the highest proportion of NEETs and shares common cultural, social, and demographic features with the other southern oblasts. I also considered including Karaganda oblast in the study due to its high NEET rate, but the region's geographical

location (Central Kazakhstan) and diverse socio-economic characteristics make it too different from southern Kazakhstan.

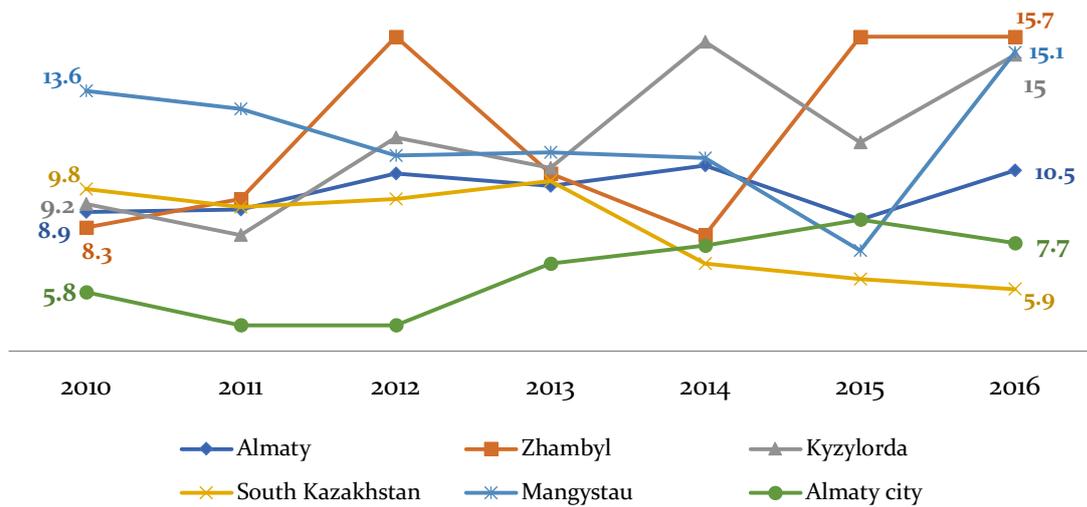
From the location perspective, urban areas of the country's southern regions show slightly higher rates of NEETs than rural areas. This may be explained by the fact that youths seek better jobs or educational opportunities in the cities and remain there even when neither is forthcoming.<sup>45</sup>

Figure 6. Share of NEET youth in urban versus rural settlements, 2016, %



Source: The Statistics Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Figure 6. Urban NEET rate in Southern regions, 2010-2016, %



Source: The Statistics Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan

<sup>44</sup> Kazakh: *oblysy*; Russian: *oblast*.

<sup>45</sup> Paschal B. Mihyo and Truphena E. Mukuna, eds., *Urban Youth Unemployment in Eastern and Southern Africa: Features, Challenges, Consequences and Cut-Back Strategies* (Ethiopia: Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA), 2015).

Only in South Kazakhstan oblast and Mangystau oblast are there more rural NEETs than urban ones.

Generally, both urban and rural areas in southern regions have high proportions of NEETs, ranging from 6 percent in South Kazakhstan oblast to 16.5 percent in Mangystau oblast (see Figure 6). The main explanation for this tendency may be the widespread informal and/or self-employment economy present in the region (see the next section).

### Discussion: Factors Contributing to NEET Growth in Urban Areas of Southern Kazakhstan

In this paper I contend that several economic and social factors have contributed to the increase in the numbers of NEETs in southern urban areas since the fluctuations of 2010-2016 (see Figure 7).

#### *Economic Factors*

##### **Shadow Economy**

The shadow economy can contribute to a low employment rate among youth. As Kulekeyev notes, informal and shadow employment—meaning jobs that are not registered by the statistical and tax authorities—characterize the modern labor market in Kazakhstan.<sup>46</sup> An econometric study by Medina & Schneider found that the shadow economy in its various forms accounts for 40 percent of the country's GDP.<sup>47</sup> According to Abdih, informality is so

prevalent in Kazakhstan because administrative regulation and taxation overburden businesses that attempt to operate “by the book”<sup>48</sup> and even officially registered enterprises may conceal their income for the purpose of evading taxes.<sup>49</sup> The ILO study found that most of the shadow economic activity in the country is concentrated in southern regions.<sup>50</sup>

According to labor statistics, nearly one-third of young Kazakhstanis (385,680, or 28 percent) were engaged in informal employment in 2017.<sup>51</sup> The majority of informal workers are found in southern regions—especially Zhambyl oblast (31 percent), Almaty oblast (18.3 percent), Kyzylorda oblast (14 percent), and Almaty city (11 percent)<sup>52</sup>—but no youth-specific data are available. However, given that more than half (51 percent) of young people reside in southern regions, they are disproportionately likely to become “informal workers.” According to the ILO study,<sup>53</sup> the informal economy tends to absorb most of the growth in the labor force, especially in countries facing continuous urbanization.<sup>54</sup> As Kazakhstan urbanizes, this tendency is likewise becoming a common feature of its labor market.<sup>55</sup>

Southern regions also had a higher share of self-employed youth in 2016: 53 percent in Zhambyl; 43 percent in South Kazakhstan; 42 percent in Kyzylorda; and 19 percent in Almaty.<sup>56</sup> Self-employment is highly correlated with work in the informal sector: being a formally self-employed individual entails both paying taxes and business reporting, requiring the individual to stay on top of

<sup>46</sup> Zh. A. Kulekeyev, “Poblemy rynka truda i zaniatosti v Kazakhstane,” Applied Economics Research Centre, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Leandro Medina and Friedrich Schneider, “Shadow Economies around the World: New Results for 158 Countries over 1991-2015,” CESifo Working Paper Series No. 6430 (2017).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> ILO, *Key Indicators of the Labour Market*.

<sup>50</sup> G.T. Alimbekova, A.A. Shabdenova, and Nilim Baruah, “Employment of Migrant Workers in the Informal Economy in Kazakhstan: A Study of Southern Kazakhstan,” ILO Subregional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 2009;

<sup>51</sup> “Labor Force Indicators,” Statistics Office of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2017, [http://stat.gov.kz/faces/publicationsPage/publicationsOper/homeNumbersLabor?\\_afLoop=11759568120107139#%40%3F\\_afLoop%3D11759568120107139%26\\_adf.ctrl-state%3Dbjq80dwwv\\_4](http://stat.gov.kz/faces/publicationsPage/publicationsOper/homeNumbersLabor?_afLoop=11759568120107139#%40%3F_afLoop%3D11759568120107139%26_adf.ctrl-state%3Dbjq80dwwv_4).

<sup>52</sup> Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, “Sovremennoe sostoianie rynka truda v Kazakhstane,” 2017;

Statistics Office of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Labor Force Indicators—2017.”

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Berikbol Dukekeyev, “Ethnic Return Migration in Kazakhstan: Shifting State Dynamics, Changing Media Discourses,” *Central Asia Program Paper* 183 (2017).

<sup>56</sup> Statistics Office of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Labor Force Indicators—2017.”

constant changes to regulations,<sup>57</sup> and it is therefore easier for many self-employed business people to stay in the informal sector. Being self-employed and operating an unregistered business means that these workers make a limited contribution to the local economy, since they do not pay taxes and tend to offer only temporary or part-time work to employees.<sup>58</sup>

Alzhanova et al. found that self-employment is increasingly prevalent in monotowns. With the degradation of the industries that once dominated these cities and the consequent erosion of good jobs, young people set out on their own.<sup>59</sup> This can lead to social exclusion for young self-employed adults, who find themselves facing mistrust, indifference, and a loss of security.<sup>60</sup> Southern monotowns account for just under one-third of the total (22 of 68),<sup>61</sup> and youth in these towns may contribute to the total number of NEETs in Kazakhstan.

All in all, the prevalence of informal work and self-employment in the south of the country suggest that Kazakhstan's urban youth may be struggling to secure their position in the formal labor market. These two indicators may be considered contributing factors to the rise in the number of NEETs in the regions under study.

### NEET Versus Youth Unemployment in Urban Areas

This section presents a correlational analysis of urban NEET with urban youth unemployment rates. The youth unemployment rate is the most widely-used labor market indicator in relation to young people. As previously mentioned, unemployed

young people constitute the main sub-group within the NEET category.<sup>62</sup>

The southern regions are characterized not only, as discussed in the previous section, by a high number of self-employed and informally-employed youth, but also by a high number of unemployed youth. Generally, these regions have a higher youth unemployment rate in urban areas than in rural ones (see Appendix 2). Correlational analysis of urban NEETs and urban unemployed youth found a positive relationship between these two variables in Almaty, South Kazakhstan, and Mangystau oblasts, as well as Almaty city (see Appendix 3)—that is, the majority of NEETs in these regions are unemployed. By contrast, in Zhambyl and Kyzylorda oblasts, the increase in the number of urban NEETs is not driven by youth unemployment.

Youth unemployment is a serious problem in many countries worldwide. Accordingly, it ranks high on local political agendas.<sup>63</sup> The main issue—in Kazakhstan as elsewhere—is that there is a mismatch between the skills young people have and the employment opportunities available.<sup>64</sup> According to a recent OECD report,<sup>65</sup> 65 percent of Kazakhstani employers are not satisfied with the quality of young graduates. This makes it difficult for young people to transition from education to employment, and frequently leads to them being excluded from the labor market.

### Transition of Unqualified School Graduates to the Labor Market

Whereas in many countries the NEET phenomenon is closely associated with abandoning education,<sup>66</sup> secondary school dropout rates are negligible in

<sup>57</sup> Aiman Zhussupova, "Fenomen samozaniatosti v Kazakhstane kak otrazhenie spetsifiki sotsial'no-ekonomicheskogo razvitiia," Institut mirovoi ekonomiki i politiki pri Fonde Pervogo Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan—Lidera natsii, 2013.

<sup>58</sup> OECD, "Multi-Dimensional Review of Kazakhstan."

<sup>59</sup> A monotown (Rus.: *monogorod*) is a city/town whose economy is dominated by a single industry or company.

<sup>60</sup> Nurzhan Sh. Al'zhanova and Raisa D. Nurzhaubayeva, "Problemy neformal'noi zaniatosti naseleniia monogorodov Kazakhstana v usloviakh globalizatsii," Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan, 2015.

<sup>61</sup> "Perechen' malykh i monogorodov Respubliki Kazakhstan," damu.kz, <https://damu.kz/dorozhnaya-karta-biznesa-2020/subsidirovaniye-proektov-msb-v-ramkakh-edinoy-programmy-dkb-2020/perechen-malykh-i-monogorodov-respubliki-kazakhstan.php>, accessed April 14, 2018.

<sup>62</sup> ILO, *Key Indicators of the Labour Market*.

<sup>63</sup> Carcillo, Fernandez, Königs, and Minea, "NEET Youth in the Aftermath."

<sup>64</sup> Bardak, Rubal Maseda, and Rosso, "Young People Not in Employment."

<sup>65</sup> OECD, "Building Inclusive Labour Markets in Kazakhstan."

<sup>66</sup> A. Dyson and G. Squires, eds., "Early School Leaving and Learners with Disabilities and/or Special Educational Needs: A Review of the Research Evidence Focusing on Europe," European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, Odense, Denmark, 2016.

Kazakhstan. However, a large number of school leavers move directly to the labor market without training or job qualifications, especially in the south of the country.

The transition from compulsory schooling to higher education or employment is an important move for all young adults. According to Bensmen, when this transition is achieved successfully, young

people have better prospects of long-term employment and economic security; they are also more likely to be lifelong learners.<sup>67</sup> In 2016, more than 17,000 high school graduates—14,000 of whom resided in southern regions—did not continue their education in universities or vocational schools.<sup>68</sup>

**Table 1. Proportion of school graduates who moved to the labor market without any qualifications, 2015-2017, %**

<b>Region</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>
South Kazakhstan	34	30	26
Zhambyl	20	19	16
Almaty	25	21	18
Kyzylorda	12	11	7
Almaty city	14	12	5
Mangystau	17	16	11

*Source: National Education Database*

The majority (75 percent) of those in southern regions moved into the labor market, where they worked without any qualifications. The remaining 25 percent became unemployed or did not enter the labor market due to other social factors (such as disabilities). Despite the fact that the number of unqualified youth entering the labor market has been decreasing in recent years, it remains high (see Table 1).

Youths who choose to take time out before entering formal higher education or employment usually struggle to either return to education or find work.<sup>69</sup> This may contribute to the increase in the number of NEETs in southern regions.

The Kazakhstani government has attempted to give youth in southern regions more opportunities to earn qualifications, as well as meet the demand for labor in other regions. One such attempt was the “Serpin” program, intended to provide educational opportunities for school graduates from the southern regions (Almaty, South Kazakhstan, Zhambyl, Kyzylorda, and Mangystau) in regions that are facing labor shortages (North Kazakhstan, East Kazakhstan, Kostanay, Petropavl, and Pavlodar).

However, the available data on the Kostanay and Karaganda regions show that the share of southern graduates willing to study in other oblasts is decreasing (see Table 2). Issues such as language (southern youth are Kazakh-speaking and face difficulties in education and work in Russian-speaking northern regions), health (moving from the warm south to cold north causes allergies and severe cold), and other living conditions create obstacles to the success and further development of the program.<sup>70</sup>

### **Social Factors**

Youth who remain NEETs tend to come from more disadvantaged families and have low levels of educational attainment. They are, in many cases, inactive. In this section, I consider several social factors that may affect the increase in the number of NEETs in southern regions: the urban migration trend, the resettlement of ethnic repatriates, and gender issues.

<sup>67</sup> J. Bensman, “Effective Programs for NEET Young People: A Case Study Evaluation,” *Social Work Review* 18, no. 3 (2006).

<sup>68</sup> “Employment Information of High School Graduates (After Grade 11),” National Education Database, 2016.

<sup>69</sup> “Census on Youths NEET: Report on Findings,” European Social Fund ESF-3.231, 2015.

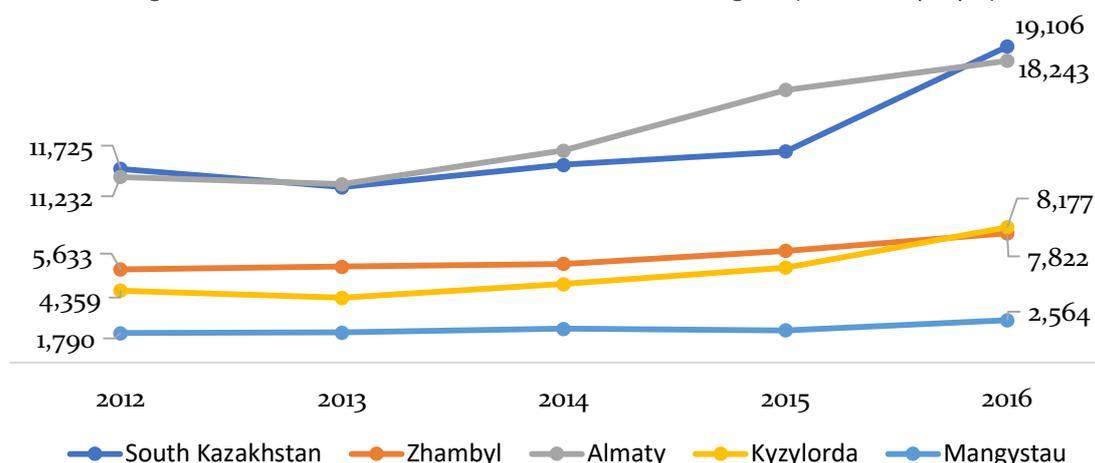
<sup>70</sup> Based on the results of focus groups conducted by the author in Kostanay and Karaganda regions in May 2017.

Table 2. Student enrollment under “Serpin” program in Karaganda and Kostanay regions (number of people)

	2014	2015	2016	2017
Karaganda	170	175	50	cancelled
Kostanay	100	150	50	25

Source: Education Departments of Karaganda and Kostanay regions

Figure 7. Youth outflow from rural districts in southern regions (number of people)



Source: The Statistics Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan

## Urban Migration

One of the main factors influencing the growth in the number of urban NEETs is youth migration from rural districts to cities.<sup>71</sup> This tendency is visible in southern regions, where youths, for a variety of different reasons, tend to leave villages and settle in cities (see Figure 8).

One of the main drivers of youth outflow is poor access to proper education in rural areas. Indeed, the vast majority (87 percent) of vocational schools are located in cities.<sup>72</sup> Almost half of Kazakhstan’s universities (59 of 125) are also located in southern cities.<sup>73</sup> Thus, school graduates in search of further education have little choice but to move to larger cities. Accordingly, Makhmutova’s study finds that 57.4 percent of youth who have

settled in Almaty city originally came for education.<sup>74</sup> They have stayed for 5-10 years (i.e. even after completing their studies), considering that they have better employment prospects and better access to social services in the city. These employment prospects appeal even to young people without higher education: Makhmutova found that more than half (54 percent) of young migrants to Almaty city came simply because they did not have jobs in their previous locations.<sup>75</sup>

A European Training Foundation study found that a high NEET rate is associated with low educational attainment in developing countries like Armenia, Jordan, and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>76</sup> For their part, the majority of Kazakhstani NEETs have general secondary education or less.<sup>77</sup> This reinforces that having higher education often eases young people’s

<sup>71</sup> Meruyert Makhmutova, “Vnutrenniaia migratsiia molodezhi v Kazakhstane: na primere g. Almaty,” 2013.

<sup>72</sup> “Education Indicators: Number of Vocational Schools,” Statistics Office of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2016, <https://taldau.stat.gov.kz/ru/Search/SearchByKeyWord>.

<sup>73</sup> “Education Indicators: Number of Higher Education Institutions,” Statistics Office of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2016, <https://taldau.stat.gov.kz/ru/Search/SearchByKeyWord>.

<sup>74</sup> Makhmutova, “Vnutrenniaia migratsiia molodezhi.”

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Bardak, Rubal Maseda, and Rosso, “Young People Not in Employment.”

<sup>77</sup> OECD, “Building Inclusive Labour Markets in Kazakhstan.” No region-specific information is available.

transition to the labor market. According to the only study of NEET youth in Kazakhstan, these individuals have no knowledge of education or employment programs provided by the government.<sup>78</sup> Nor do they know about employment and youth resource centers in their regions which could help them find education or employment. Indeed, a study conducted in Mangystau region found that only 17 percent of all unemployed people had registered as jobseekers, allowing the employment department to connect them with jobs.<sup>79</sup> This lack of knowledge persists despite the fact that 88 percent of young people are active users of the Internet and social platforms (VKontakte, WhatsApp, etc.),<sup>80</sup> implying that information about education and employment opportunities for young people is not widely distributed online and remains unclear.

In addition, these young people often lack soft and hard skills.<sup>81</sup> They do not know how to search for jobs, put together a CV, network, or impress an interviewer at a job interview. Nor are they typically proficient in multiple languages, meaning that they can communicate in only one of Kazakh or Russian.<sup>82</sup> Evidently, there is much that should be done to support these vulnerable young people. However, it is currently unclear which measures would have the highest return on investment in terms of helping NEETs integrate into society.

### Resettlement of Ethnic Repatriates

An ILO study suggests that international migration is another factor that supports the flourishing of the informal sector.<sup>83</sup> There is no reliable data on labor migration to Kazakhstan, since much of it is irregular or not registered by official statistics. Nevertheless,

it is clear that ethnic Kazakhs represent a major flow of labor migration. Since Kazakhstan gained its independence in 1991, about one million ethnic Kazakhs have returned, primarily from neighboring countries: 61.5 percent from Uzbekistan, 12 percent from Mongolia, 11.6 percent from China, 7.3 percent from Turkmenistan, 3.9 percent from the Russian Federation, and the remaining 3.7 percent from other countries. Today, repatriates (known as “Oralmans” in Kazakh) constitute 5.5 percent of the total population and around 10 percent of ethnic Kazakhs.<sup>84</sup> The resettlement of Oralmans was carried out unevenly, without taking into account the socio-economic needs of the regions, and was predetermined by their country of origin. The greatest number of Oralmans settled in the Almaty (33 percent), South Kazakhstan (24.3 percent), Mangystau (14.8 percent), and Zhambyl (7.4 percent) oblasts, with the remaining 20.5 percent in other regions.

The vast majority (80 percent) of these ethnic repatriates thus settled in the country’s southern regions. People of working age make up 55.6 percent of them, and many of them belong to the younger generation.<sup>85</sup> Data on their education attainment show that only about one-third of them had higher (8.8 percent) or vocational education (20.5 percent) qualifications; 60.9 percent arrived with general secondary education, while 9.8 had attained no education level.<sup>86</sup> Ramos finds that a high NEET rate is associated with a high level of migration into the local labor market.<sup>87</sup> The fact that a high number of ethnic repatriates with very low educational attainment have settled in the southern oblasts may have contributed to the increasing numbers of NEETs in these regions.

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<sup>78</sup> Ashimkhanova et al., “Guidelines for Working with Youth.”

<sup>79</sup> “Zhastar zhetstikteri” Foundation and United Nations Development Program, “Issledovanie rynka truda v Mangystauskoi oblasti: podgotovka rekomendatsii po balansirovaniu spros i predlozhenii,” 2015.

<sup>80</sup> Tolganay Umbetaliyeva, Botagoz Rakisheva, and Peer Teschendorf, “Youth in Central Asia: Kazakhstan. Based on a Sociological Survey,” Friedrich Ebert Foundation Kazakhstan, 2016; results of focus groups conducted by the author in Kostanay and Karaganda regions in May 2017.

<sup>81</sup> Based on the results of focus groups conducted by the author in Kostanay and Karaganda regions in May 2017.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Alimbekova, Shabdenova, and Baruah, “Employment of Migrant Workers in the Informal Economy.”

<sup>84</sup> “Informatsiia po etnicheskoi migratsii na 16 avgusta, 2016 goda,” Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Republic of Kazakhstan, <http://www.enbek.gov.kz/ru/node/338787>, accessed April 6, 2018.

<sup>85</sup> No data available on age distribution of *Oralmans*.

<sup>86</sup> Ministry of the National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Demograficheskii prognoz Respubliki Kazakhstan.”

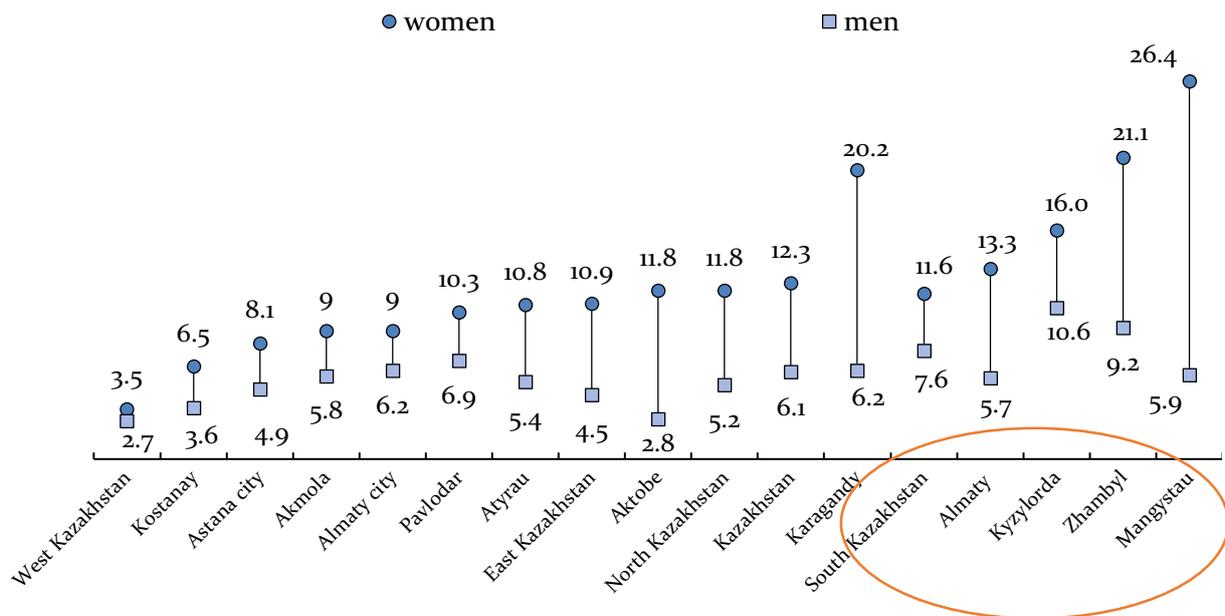
<sup>87</sup> Raul Ramos, “Migration Aspirations among NEETs in Selected MENA Countries,” Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA) 11146 (2017).

## Gender

There is a global trend that far more young women are NEETs than young men; females are much more likely to be absent from education and the labor

force. This is often due to cultural expectations that women will remain at home to undertake domestic responsibilities after leaving education. In some countries, there are three or four times more female NEETs than male ones.<sup>88</sup>

Figure 8. The share of NEET Women and NEET Men in Kazakhstan, 2016, %



Source: The Statistics Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan

A similar tendency can be observed in Kazakhstan. Figure 9 shows the gender gap among NEET youth, demonstrating that women are two to four times more likely to be NEETs than men in southern regions, with the exception of South Kazakhstan. The most concerning picture is in Mangystau region, where one in every four women is neither in employment nor in education.

The difference in the labor market status of males and females is explained by typical gender roles steering women towards taking care of a household, children or other relatives. A low mean age of women at the time of birth of their first child means that women are engaged in caretaking early and thus are unable to enter the workforce. This is

particularly true because the burden of care is more heavily on the woman in developing countries than in the developed world.<sup>89</sup> Many of these women might be interested in taking on freelance or part-time work,<sup>90</sup> yet statistics suggest that the share of part-time workers decreased by 45 percent between 2012 and 2016,<sup>91</sup> implying that there are not enough of these jobs available for all the women who might want one.

To date, relatively little attention has been paid to young women who are NEET all over the world.<sup>92</sup> In order to better target integration policies, it is highly important to study the profile of NEET women and their needs in the labor market.

<sup>88</sup> Bardak, Rubal Maseda, and Rosso, "Young People Not in Employment."

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Based on the results of focus groups conducted by the author in Kostanay and Karaganda regions in May 2017.

<sup>91</sup> Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, "Sovremennoe sostoyanie rynka truda v Kazakhstane."

<sup>92</sup> Carolina V. Zuccotti and Jacqueline O'Reilly, "Ethnicity, Gender and Household Effects on Becoming NEET: An Intersectional Analysis," *Work, Employment and Society* (2018).

### **Recommendations to the Government for Reducing the Proportion of NEETs in Southern Regions**

To reduce the number of young people neither working nor studying at national level, the government should:

- Conduct large-scale research to determine the profile of NEETs. No data is currently available on NEET categories (disabled, voluntary NEET, family carers, etc.), age groups, socio-economic backgrounds, education levels, etc. Alternatively, analog indicators may be added to the existing statistical surveys (eg. Labor Force Survey)
- Promote reconciliation between formal work and private and family life for women through part-time work, parental leave, online remote work, etc.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of existing formal short-term and informal education programs.

Effective programs should be accredited in a way that will allow young people to use them as a springboard for further education or career progression.

To reduce the number of young people neither working nor studying at regional level, the government should:

- Better advertise employment and education or training opportunities via social media, sharing all available opportunities online. Local employment and education departments, in particular, should strengthen information-sharing;
- Encourage local non-governmental organizations to assist in improving NEETs' hard and soft skills. Such efforts should be monitored to observe their outcomes and determine whether they are worth pursuing.

## Appendix 1

### Share of urban and rural NEETs in Kazakhstan, %

Region	2010		2011		2012		2013		2014		2015		2016	
	urban	rural												
Kazakhstan	8.7	7.6	8.2	7	8.5	7.4	8.7	7.2	8.2	9.4	8.1	9.0	8.1	10.7
Akmola	8.1	7.0	6.6	7.0	7.7	5.2	7.6	6.1	4.3	5.5	5.6	6.3	5.8	8.7
Aktobe	2.7	3.7	2.5	4.7	3.4	2.4	4.3	3.8	9.5	5.6	6.4	7.8	6.3	8.9
Almaty	8.9	8.0	9.0	9.1	10.4	9.0	9.9	9.7	10.7	9.4	8.6	6.7	10.5	9.1
Atyrau	12.4	7.9	9.4	4.4	7.5	5.6	7.7	3.9	5.8	8.0	7.6	8.2	8.5	7.6
West Kazakhstan	11.9	7.8	8.9	6.1	6.8	4.9	5.3	3.7	3.5	4.7	2.7	4.2	2.1	4.2
Zhambyl	8.3	6.6	9.4	8.3	15.7	7.1	10.4	7.4	8.0	14.0	15.7	12.3	15.7	14.4
Karagandy	10.8	8.1	9.8	5.8	9.7	8.1	7.2	5.3	12.8	12.6	12.7	12.9	12.3	16.1
Kostanay	9.8	6.5	8.7	6.3	6.7	6.0	6.9	3.2	4.8	6.0	5.2	6.9	4.6	5.5
Kyzylorda	9.2	9.6	8.0	7.6	11.8	9.1	10.6	11.2	15.5	14.1	11.6	10.4	15.0	11.9
Mangystau	13.6	12.9	12.9	12.1	11.1	22.9	11.2	14.6	11.0	21.3	7.4	16.2	15.1	16.5
South Kazakhstan	9.8	6.6	9.1	6.2	9.4	5.7	10.1	4.2	6.9	8.7	6.3	11.0	5.9	12.6
Pavlodar	8.0	2.5	8.5	2.3	7.7	2.6	7.1	3.7	6.2	2.4	5.2	3.9	6.7	13.4
North Kazakhstan	8.0	6.7	10.9	6.3	10.9	7.5	8.7	10.9	9.6	7.0	8.7	5.1	8.3	8.3
East Kazakhstan	7.1	13.5	8.2	12.1	5.6	10.7	6.3	11.7	7.3	8.7	7.4	9.4	6.2	10.2
Astana city	11.9	-	11.6	-	14.7	-	17.0	-	7.9	-	6.8	-	6.6	-
Almaty city	5.8	-	4.5	-	4.5	-	6.9	-	7.6	-	8.6	-	7.7	-

Source: The Statistics Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan

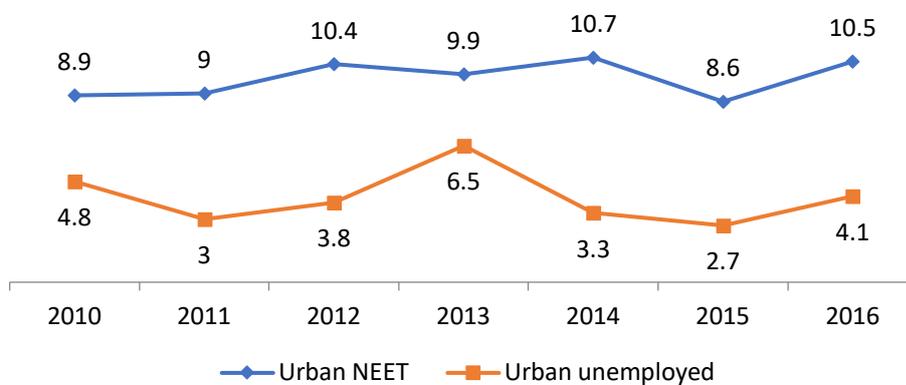
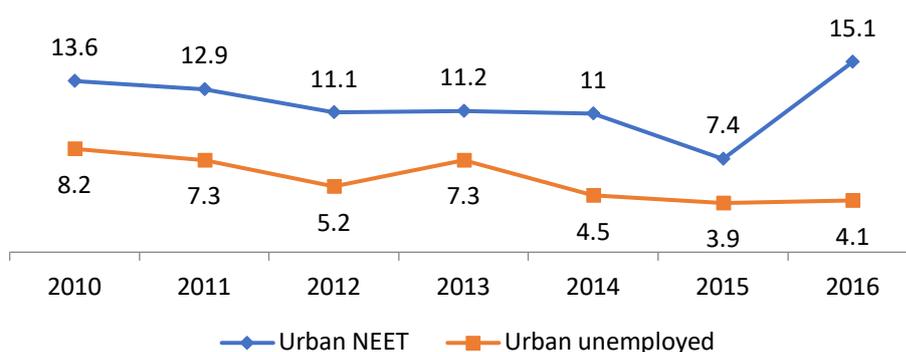
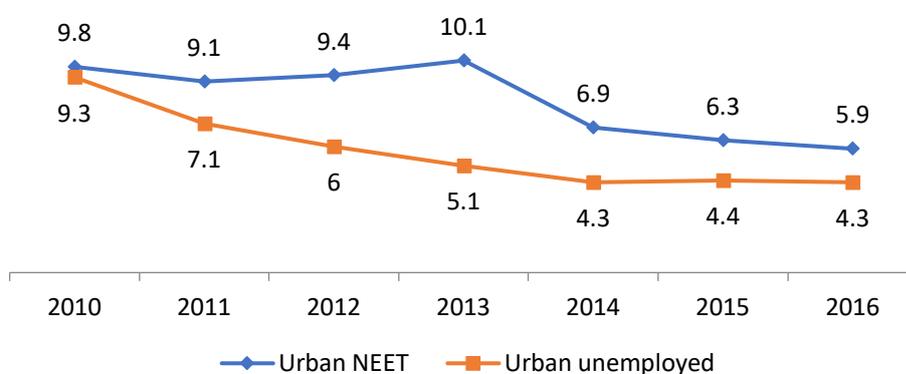
Appendix 2

Youth unemployment rate in urban versus rural settlements in Kazakhstan, %

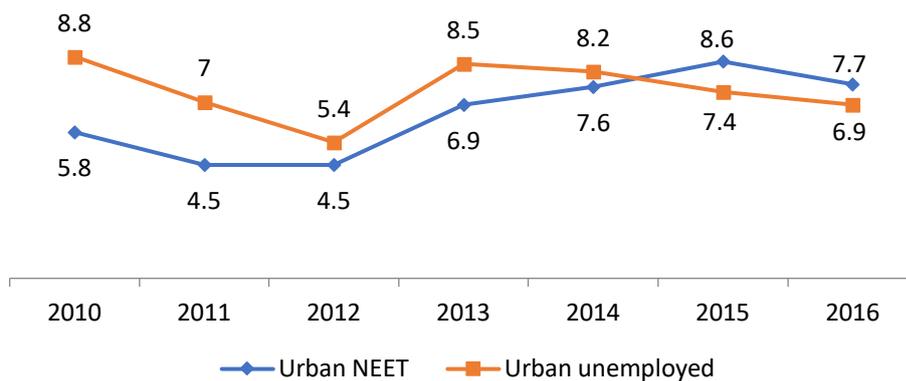
Region	2011			2012			2013			2014			2015			2016		
	Total	Urban	Rural															
Kazakhstan	6.1	6.8	5.3	5.4	6.1	4.5	5.5	6.2	4.7	4.2	5.0	3.4	4.3	4.8	3.7	4.1	4.6	3.5
Akmola	5.4	6.2	4.8	5.2	5.9	4.6	5.2	7.0	3.6	3.0	3.0	2.9	3.0	2.4	3.7	3.3	3.2	3.3
Aktobe	4.8	3.9	5.8	4.7	5.2	4.0	3.2	4.1	1.4	3.1	4.1	1.5	3.1	3.1	3.1	2.9	3.1	2.6
Almaty	3.8	3.0	4.0	3.7	3.8	3.7	6.5	6.5	6.5	3.1	3.3	3.1	2.5	2.7	2.4	3.1	4.1	2.8
Atyrau	4.5	6.3	3.2	3.5	4.1	2.9	3.5	5.3	1.6	3.2	2.3	3.9	2.4	2.3	2.5	2.2	3.2	1.4
West Kazakhstan	5.2	3.7	6.1	6.1	7.2	5.5	4.8	4.7	4.8	4.3	3.9	4.5	4.1	3.8	4.3	4.0	3.8	4.1
Zhambyl	6.5	5.6	7.0	7.9	12.0	6.0	7.4	11.0	5.6	5.2	5.4	5.1	4.9	4.7	5.0	4.3	4.3	4.2
Karagandy	6.3	6.1	6.9	5.1	5.3	4.3	4.4	4.1	5.4	4.3	4.6	3.3	5.0	5.1	4.3	5.1	5.2	4.8
Kostanay	7.5	9.0	6.3	6.0	6.0	5.9	3.5	4.9	2.4	3.6	3.6	3.7	3.2	3.0	3.4	3.2	3.5	3.0
Kyzylorda	6.6	6.2	6.9	6.5	6.2	6.7	6.7	6.8	6.7	5.1	4.1	5.6	4.6	4.1	4.8	4.8	5.0	4.7
Mangystau	7.5	7.3	7.7	4.6	5.2	3.7	7.5	7.3	7.6	5.6	4.5	7.0	4.2	3.9	4.5	4.4	4.1	4.7
South Kazakhstan	5.3	7.1	4.4	4.9	6.0	4.2	3.4	5.1	2.5	2.7	4.3	2.0	4.2	4.4	4.1	3.9	4.3	3.7
Pavlodar	6.8	9.8	1.8	5.2	7.2	2.0	6.0	7.2	3.9	2.7	3.3	1.6	3.2	3.7	2.4	3.0	3.4	2.3
North Kazakhstan	7.3	8.3	6.8	6.5	7.1	6.1	7.6	6.0	9.1	3.8	2.7	4.5	2.9	1.8	3.9	3.0	2.6	3.4
East Kazakhstan	7.3	7.8	6.6	6.0	6.8	4.6	6.3	6.6	5.8	4.4	4.5	4.3	4.3	3.8	5.2	3.1	2.4	4.4
Astana city	8.5	8.5	-	6.8	6.8	-	4.9	4.9	-	6.3	6.3	-	5.8	5.8	-	4.8	4.8	-
Almaty city	7.0	7.0	-	5.4	5.4	-	8.5	8.5	-	8.2	8.2	-	7.4	7.4	-	6.9	6.9	-

Source: The Statistics Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan

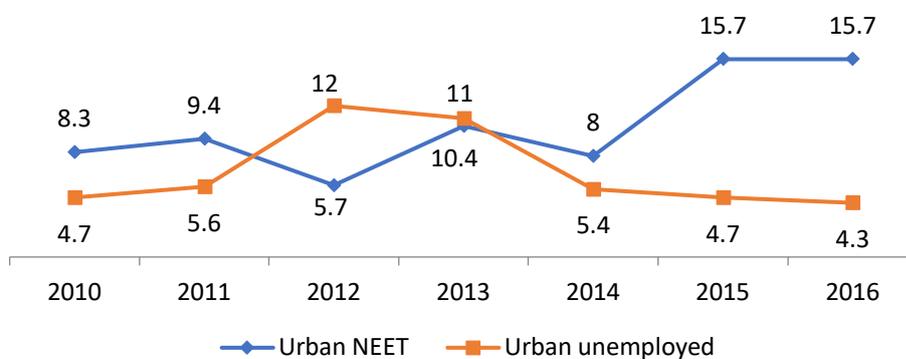
## Correlation of variables: urban NEET and urban youth unemployment, 2010-2016, %

Almaty oblast,  $r=0.2$ Mangystau oblast,  $r=0.4$ South Kazakhstan oblast,  $r=0.7$ 

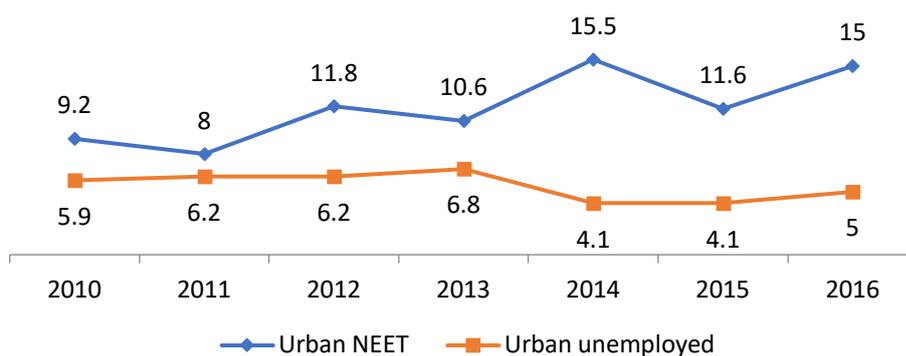
Almaty city,  $r = 0.4$



Zhambyl oblast,  $r = -0.5$



Kyzylorda oblast,  $r = -0.7$



Source: The Statistics Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan

## PART III.

# FACING GLOBALIZATION: TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP TRANSFORMATIONS

## Chapter 8. Women of Uzbekistan: Empowered on Paper, Inferior on the Ground

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Nozima Davletova<sup>1</sup> (2019)

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On April 24, 2019, the Women’s Committee of Uzbekistan presented a draft law on equal rights for men and women. The discussions on the draft revealed a considerable gap between the state gender policy, which has women’s empowerment as a declared objective, and the current state of affairs in Uzbek society. Although state gender policy has been making gradual progress, it has been running up against traditional ways of life, which appear to be stronger than official declarations. Public discourse on women and women’s social role is one of the key indicators of the growing re-traditionalization (and Islamization) that is under way.

Uzbek society has witnessed dramatic changes over the past three decades. The country’s move to a market economy in the 1990s saw the deterioration of social welfare programs and a decline in subsidies for families.<sup>2</sup> As a result, “the burden of nurturing activities [...] shifted increasingly away from the state and into the household.”<sup>3</sup> This, combined with a decline in GDP and a shrinking public sector, caused the reemergence of a traditional division of labor between men and women.<sup>4</sup> These systemic changes have resulted in the “feminization of

poverty.”<sup>5</sup> The explicitly patriarchal nation-building discourse of President Islam Karimov, combined with the appeal of Islamic values to the broad mass of the population, only accelerated the reduction of women’s role to that of wife and mother.

The present paper aims to study the legal, economic, and cultural dimensions of this reality in order to identify the discrepancies between them. It suggests that the legal system’s approach to women reflects public narratives on women, placing them in an inferior position in the social hierarchy. In many cases, women are unable to legally own property; they also have limited access to education and social capital. Traditional values, which have permeated all spheres of life, combined with the ineffective gender policy of the state, which demands moral purity of women while condemning them to social inferiority, compel women to face socio-economic hardships and deny them recognition for their contributions to society.

### Uzbek Femininity within the Dominant Masculinity

An understanding of Uzbek femininity is incomplete without a thorough analysis of the Uzbek masculinity that was constructed by the first

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<sup>2</sup> Pierella Paci, “Gender in Transition,” The World Bank, Eastern Europe and Central Asia Region, May 21, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Globally, there is a growing perception that poverty is being feminized—that is, that an increasing proportion of the world’s poor are female. The idea is that the costs of transition have not been distributed evenly among the population and that women are more likely to fall into poverty than men. See Valentine M. Moghadam, “The ‘Feminization of Poverty’ and Women’s Human Rights,” *SHS Papers in Women’s Studies/Gender Research 2* (July 2005), [http://www.cpahq.org/cpahq/cpadocs/Feminization\\_of\\_Poverty.pdf](http://www.cpahq.org/cpahq/cpadocs/Feminization_of_Poverty.pdf); Sylke V. Schnepf, “The Feminization of Poverty in Transition Countries: Evidence from Subjective Data,” working paper, 2004.

president of the independent country, Islam Karimov. Nick Megoran deconstructs the Andijan discourse produced by the first president as follows: “Hegemonic Uzbek masculinity (which might be termed ‘dutiful son-husband-father’) envisions men as first dutiful sons and then heads of families and providers for their own wives and children.”<sup>6</sup> In this hierarchy, the ideal woman is represented as a passive recipient of the man’s dominance and provision of a livelihood. Meanwhile, the precedence of the duty of son over the duty of husband puts younger women in a lower position in the social hierarchy. It is believed that they should earn their social status during marriage by demonstrating obedience, patience, and commitment.

In these narratives of masculinity, men are praised for their autonomy, which contrasts with women’s supposed desire for stronger attachment.<sup>7</sup> They are also expected to cut ties more easily than women. But this perception of male autonomy does not prevent women from sometimes being considered responsible for the behavior of their husbands, with the result that women who seek divorces are usually denied them.

Not only men but also women are bearers and translators of these patriarchal views. Most of the criticism of the draft law on equality and the elimination of all forms of gender discrimination,<sup>8</sup> which is currently under discussion, has for instance come from women. Their main argument against the law is that it makes women absolutely equal to men, a concept that they perceive as absurd. Following Bourdieu, we might say that masculine dominance in the form of symbolic violence has “led the dominated to take the point of view of the dominant on the dominant and on themselves.”<sup>9</sup>

Bourdieu’s theory about the subconscious transmission of masculine dominance habitus from body to body through sexual division of labor helps illuminate the operation of the Uzbek legal system when it comes to women’s rights. The more

women’s rights are abused, the more the government attempts to fix the emerging problems with ambivalent instruments, among them the Council of Mothers-in-Law and an additional quota of university places for males who have completed their military service. The new draft law on domestic violence is another example of a paradoxical approach: it does not propose criminalizing domestic violence even though doing so would be a logical step toward preventing it.

At the international level, Uzbekistan has a rather advanced position on women’s rights. It has signed on to all the major conventions: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Political Rights of Women, Maternity Protection Convention, etc. The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan professes that men and women have equal rights, while presidential decrees have guaranteed women equal political, social, and economic rights. The amendment to the Law “On the elections to the Oliy Majlis” sets a quota for gender representation, requiring that at least 30 percent of all candidates nominated by political parties should be women. The Decree “On additional measures to support the work of the Women’s Committee of Uzbekistan” (2004) should have empowered the organization to protect the rights of women.

The last Decree was replaced by the Decree “On measures to completely improve activities in the field of supporting women and strengthening the institution of the family,” signed by President Mirziyoyev in April 2018. The latter has taken a strong stance on improving the social and economic status of women. He is believed to raise key problems related to perceptions of women in national culture in his official addresses. In June, Mirziyoyev ordered the establishment of a committee on inequality under the aegis of the Senate of the Republic of Uzbekistan.<sup>10</sup> On June 20,

<sup>6</sup> Nick Megoran, “Framing Andijan, Narrating the Nation: Islam Karimov’s Account of the Events of 13 May 2005,” *Central Asian Survey* 27, no. 1 (2008): 15-31.

<sup>7</sup> Suzanne Keller, *Beyond the Ruling Class: Strategic Elites in Modern Society* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On the Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women,” ID-3220, accessed July 3, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 42.

<sup>10</sup> “V Senate poiavitsia Komitet po voprosam zhenshchin i gendernogo ravenstva,” *Gazeta.uz*, June 22, 2019, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2019/06/22/women/>.

Tanzila Narbaeva, a former Head of the Women's Committee, was appointed Head of the Senate.

The entrepreneurial rights of women are formally protected by the Laws "On the guarantees of business activity" and "On family entrepreneurship," as well as by the late President Karimov's decree "On the measures of further complete improvement of the business environment and providing broader freedom to business." As of 2018, more than 8,500 women were serving as consultants on religious education, spirituality, and enlightenment in mahallas (town councils).<sup>11</sup> The head of the mahalla is always a man (*oqsoqol*—an old wise man), but the main job, "preserving national values" (*milliy qadriyatlarini saqlash*), which often entails public shaming of women, is done by active local women. Those women mainly serve as guardians of national values and impart the notion of a "proper woman" to other females. (This notion will be elaborated on and further conceptualized below.)

The legal/formal dimension of women's rights protection has never been in complete accord with the real conditions of Uzbekistan's female citizens. As Ginn argues, "Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have traded the rights of women to achieve a placebo of development. Two of the largest violations of women's rights that have manifested because of the government's direct actions are domestic abuse and sex trafficking."<sup>12</sup> Uzbekistan, like other states in the region, has deployed a discourse of equality partly due to inertia (as it is a legacy of the Soviet period) and partly to enable it to engage with the international discourse of the developed countries, for which gender equality is among the top priorities.

In this paper, I argue that there is a significant discrepancy between the state gender program and realities on the ground. Current

efforts to improve women's status in the society risk facing insurmountable challenges in a context of re-traditionalization and the dominance of Islamic values. Meanwhile, the state discourse on the equality of men and women is inconsistent and explicitly ambivalent. The effectiveness of secular laws is usually discredited by informal directives and restrictive actions by local government bodies. In a recent interview, the current Head of the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan, Elmira Basitkhanova, criticized female pop stars for wearing revealing outfits and proposed to create a council of "old and powerful women" to guard the chastity of other women and thereby prevent early pregnancy and prostitution. She also believes in public shaming of women as a means of stopping violence against them.<sup>13</sup> Some progressive social media activists have openly condemned Basitkhanova's views on women's issues, claiming that they can worsen the social status of females and raise the level of social pressure they face.

### State Discourse on Traditions: Controlling a Woman's Body

In Uzbekistan, the period of "reinvention of traditions" accelerated with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which brought about a whole host of socio-economic, cultural, and value transformations. Meanwhile, the nation-building discourse produced by President Karimov, which sought the revival of glorious traditions and history, was rooted in a strict cultural code that involved male dominance over women and the responsibility of "proper women" for the purity of the nation.<sup>14</sup>

Fertility is one of the dimensions in which the state's attempt at control may be out of line with traditional views. In demotic discourse,

<sup>11</sup> OHCHR, "Informatsiia natsional'nogo tsentra Respubliki Uzbekistan po pravam cheloveka na Voprosnik UVKPCh OON v kontekste vypolneniia Respublikoi Uzbekistan Rezoliutsii SPCh OON 35/10 'Aktivizatsiia usilii v tseliakh iskoreneniia nasiliia v otnoshenii zhenshchin: vovlechenie muzhchin i mal'chikov v preduprezhdenie i presechenie nasiliia v otnoshenii vsex zhenshchin i devochek,'" accessed July 3, 2019. In 1993, the Uzbek government reorganized mahalla councils as bearers of "Uzbek nationhood" and "morality," effectively reproducing Soviet-style state domination over the society. Mahalla councils are formal structures run by committees (headed by chairs called *oqsoqols*) and regulated by the government. See "Mahalla (Uzbeks)," *Revolvy.com*, accessed July 3, 2019, <https://www.revolvy.com/page/Mahalla-%28Uzbeks%29>.

<sup>12</sup> Megan A. Ginn, "A Comparative Study: Women's Rights in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan" (BA thesis, University of Central Florida, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> "Eksklyuzivnoe interv'iu s predsedatelem Komiteta zhenshchin El'miroi Basitkhanovoi," July 14, 2019, <https://repost.uz/basitkhanova>.

<sup>14</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis, "Gender and Nation," in *Women, Ethnicity, and Nationalism*, ed. Rick Wilford and Robert L. Miller (London: Routledge, 2004), 23-35.

women are seen predominantly as mothers—preferably mothers of sons.<sup>15</sup> It is still widely believed that the status and power of a family, and of women in particular, depends on whether or not they have a son.<sup>16</sup> In the patriarchal system of values, men are considered to be a family's main breadwinners. Thus, sons are viewed as desired children for parents as they get older, particularly in a context where elderly people increasingly lack the protection of the state. Accordingly, the main objective of a marriage is to have as many children as possible in order to have a son. (According to the UN Factsheet, "son preference is stronger in countries where patriarchy and patriliney are more firmly rooted."<sup>17</sup> Pregnancies in these countries may be subject to sex-selective abortion, and Uzbekistan is no exception.) It is likely that the tense and sometimes tyrannical nature of relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law is due to a power struggle over men.

The public healthcare system in Uzbekistan, which regulates every birth,<sup>18</sup> is the main conduit of the state's population policy. According to discussions on a female Facebook group, local polyclinics require that immediately after giving birth to a baby a woman acquire contraceptives and sign an agreement to use them regularly—or, preferably, have an IUD fitted.<sup>19</sup> The Open Democracy Foundations found that "health professionals frequently reported that medical clinics, and in some cases even individual doctors, received unwritten directives regarding IUD insertion quotas."<sup>20</sup> In some cases, gynecologists

inserted hormonal spirals without prior permission from young mothers.

The opposition between the state policy of either overt or covert birth control, on the one hand, and the cultural prioritization of a woman's reproductive functions, on the other, put additional pressure on women. The state has reduced its support for mothers, including by cutting paid maternity leave from two years to 126 days, of which post-natal maternal leave can be no more than 70 days. The birth payment for this period is the responsibility of the organization that registers the maternity leave.<sup>21</sup> Under the law, any relative who is responsible for taking care of the newborn, including the father and grandparents, can register for a monthly allowance in the first two years (up to two fixed minimum wages).<sup>22</sup> However, in reality the allowance is given only to low-income families and is registered by the mahalla.

The overall specific importance is placed on whether a family has a son or not, resulting in repeated births until a son is born, the state has long been unable to provide economic incentives to reduce the birthrate. This has remained true even though, since the socialist system left a legacy of decent healthcare for infants, there was no longer a question of bringing many children into the world in the hope that some of them would survive. As Figure 1 shows, the infant mortality rate declined in the period from 2006 to 2015 even as the birth rate remained stable at 1.7 percent annually. There is a low correlation (~0.2) between infant (under 5) mortality<sup>23</sup> and population growth.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In many societies, the family lineage is carried on by male children. The preservation of the family name is guaranteed through the sons. With the exception of a few countries, such as Ethiopia, a girl takes her husband's family name, dropping that of her parents. The fear of losing a name prompts families to wish to have a son. Moreover, in many communities in Asia and Africa, sons perform burial rites for parents. Parents with no male child cannot expect to have an appropriate burial that will "secure their peace in the next world." See Women's UN Report Network, "Fact Sheet No. 23, Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children," OCHCR, accessed July 3, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> S. Correa and R. Petchesky, "Exposing the Numbers Game: Feminists Challenge the Population Control Establishment," *Ms.* 5, no. 2 (1994).

<sup>17</sup> Women's UN Report Network, "Fact Sheet No. 23."

<sup>18</sup> Pregnant women must register at public polyclinics according to their living address and provide their pregnancy history.

<sup>19</sup> The discussion can be found on the "Ya-MAMA!" Facebook page:

[https://www.facebook.com/groups/224305077630604/search/?query=заставляют%20спираль&era=SEARCH\\_BOX](https://www.facebook.com/groups/224305077630604/search/?query=заставляют%20спираль&era=SEARCH_BOX).

<sup>20</sup> Natalia Antelava, "Forced Sterilization of Women in Uzbekistan," Open Society Foundations Policy Report, December 2013.

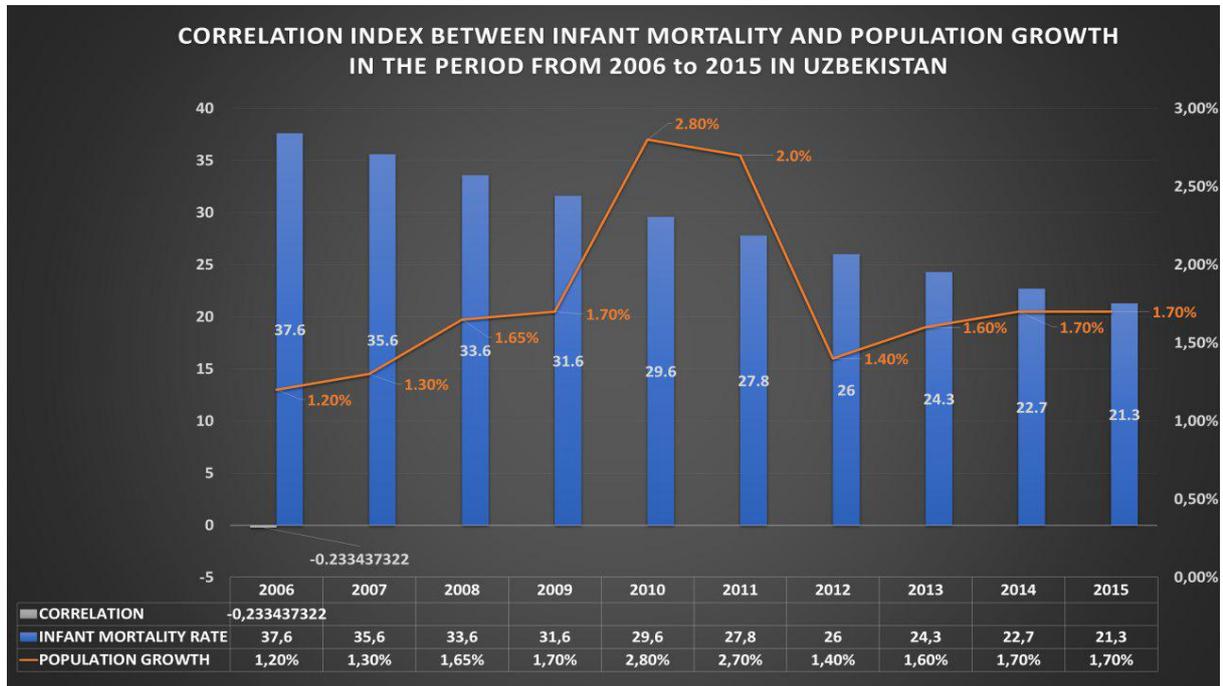
<sup>21</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "On the Forecast of the Main Macroeconomic Indicators and Parameters of the State Budget of the Republic of Uzbekistan for 2018," accessed July 3, 2019, <http://lex.uz/docs/3480354>.

<sup>22</sup> "Dekretnyi otpusk": nestandartnye situatsii," *Norma.uz*, November 30, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Statista, "Uzbekistan: Infant Mortality Rate from 2007 to 2017 (in Deaths per 1,000 Live Births)," 2019, accessed July 3, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Trading Economics, "Uzbekistan—Population Growth (Annual %)," accessed July 3, 2019.

Figure 1. Correlation index between infant mortality and population growth in Uzbekistan, 2006-2015



Source: World Development Indicators, "Population Growth Rate, Uzbekistan," accessed July 19, 2019, Statista, "Uzbekistan: Infant Mortality Rate from 2007 to 2017 (in Deaths per 1,000 Live Births)," accessed July 18, 2019.

Not only do women face competing pressures from society and the state about their reproductive function, but they are also pressured by both society and state to be the bearers of national values (*milliy qadriyatlar*). For the state, this is part of the national identity narrative, while for society it is part of the Islamic code. Women are expected to maintain the purity of the nation and preserve cultural and religious traditions. Following Hobsbawm and Ranger, the reinvention of tradition contributes to legitimizing the control over and subjugation of women.<sup>25</sup>

The traditional values discourse surrounding women permeates all spheres, chief among them the economic sphere. Although the law encourages women's involvement in entrepreneurial activity, society—including women themselves—believes that women should not try to earn more than their husbands nor proceed past a certain point in their career development. Usually, women are expected to earn money to help

maintain their households but not to pursue or achieve career promotion for their efforts.

### Too Many Discrepancies: Women's Legal Status vs. Realities on the Ground

#### *Women's Status under the Law*

Formally, women's equality in almost all spheres of life—politics, social security, and economic activity—is protected under the law. However, Uzbekistan remains in low positions on the various indexes of women's empowerment.<sup>26</sup> This is due to the overall underdevelopment of the political culture surrounding the protection of women's rights. The members of law enforcement bodies and other institutions called upon to protect women's rights and prevent violence against them usually hold traditional values. Therefore, formal laws never supersede the informal habitus of a traditional vision of women. Although Uzbekistan

<sup>25</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> World Bank Group, "Women, Business, and the Law 2019: A Decade of Reform," <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/31327/WBL2019.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>.

has signed a range of international documents against all kinds of discrimination, girls' access to education and their involvement in economic life remains low.

Article 46 of the Constitution of Uzbekistan recognizes the equality of men and women. It reflects The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Under the current quota system, women must hold 30 percent of the seats in local representative bodies and the Oliy Majlis (parliament). However, the reality falls far short of the quota: women hold 17 percent of seats in the Oliy Majlis and 15 percent of those in the Legislative Chamber.<sup>27</sup> This proportion has not changed since 2014.

The Decree "On measures to enhance the role of women in state and public construction of the Republic of Uzbekistan," signed in March 1995, introduced the post of a deputy prime minister in charge of women's issues. This post is filled by the head of the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan (WCU). The organization is responsible for ensuring equality between women and men and for improving the role of women in social and political life. The WCU is a government-organized non-governmental organization (GONGO) and is a continuation of the state gender policy. The organization's code, like all the other normative acts, sets out the WCU's mission to guard the "cultural and intellectual growth of women and youth" and "teach them the national and religious traditions, and the ways to follow them."<sup>28</sup>

Theoretically, women's freedom of movement and ability to choose their residence and occupation is enshrined in law. However, women under 35 have long been obliged to get special permission from their local municipal body (mahalla) to apply for an overseas sticker to go abroad. This was supposedly part of Uzbekistan's efforts to prevent human trafficking. Significantly, however, a U.S. Embassy report on human

trafficking in Uzbekistan found that "the government did not conduct efforts to reduce the *demand* for commercial sex acts. Uzbek women and children were subjected to sex trafficking in the Middle East, Eurasia, and Asia, and also internally in brothels, clubs, and private residences."<sup>29</sup> In 2018, the rule was annulled for those who live in the capital, Tashkent. The Family Code prescribes equality between married couples in terms of property ownership. That being said, legal nuances—combined with traditional views—usually leave women with no right to real estate after a divorce. Claims to ownership of living space and other property during or after marriage are perceived as shameful and are often condemned by relatives and the community. This presents an obstacle for a woman who seeks a divorce from an abusive husband.

In 2017, the Women's Committee declared the creation a new Council of Mothers-in-Law. The main task of the institute is "to hold friendly talks with young people starting a new family on the following topics—'happy family,' 'firm family,' 'prosperous family,' 'exemplary family'—and prepare them for a family life and share their experience."<sup>30</sup> The informal institution of the mother-in-law has become an internalized instrument of oppression against women by women in a patriarchal society. Despite benign intentions, the formalization of the institution of the mother-in-law appears to be schizophrenic, since the key oppressive mechanisms against daughters-in-law (*kelin*) have not been addressed and may even be reinforced.

According to a survey conducted within the framework of ACTED projects in Uzbekistan by the NGO "Oydin Nur," 2.5 percent of respondents said that conflicts leading to physical violence were caused, among other reasons, by the inability of elder relatives to understand young people; another 2.5 percent stated that mothers-in-law

<sup>27</sup> Asian Development Bank, "Uzbekistan Country Gender Assessment Update," 2018, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/479841/uzbekistan-country-gender-assessment-update.pdf>, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Women's Committee of Uzbekistan, "Uzbekiston khotin-kizlar kumitasi ustavi," January 25, 2013, <http://wcu.uz/uploads/docs/6836db0aa3de74c344f4ee10def61ab3.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan, "2018 Trafficking in Persons Report: Uzbekistan," accessed July 3, 2019, <https://uz.usembassy.gov/2018-trafficking-in-persons-report-uzbekistan/>.

<sup>30</sup> "Profilaktikoi razvodov zaimetsia 'Sovet svekrovei,'" *Nuz.uz*, July 25, 2017, <https://nuz.uz/obschestvo/24866-profilaktikoy-razvodov-zaymetsiya-sovet-svekrovey.html>.

were jealous of their sons' relationships with their wives.<sup>31</sup>

Article 2 of the Family Code says that women and men have equal rights in families. However, the reality for women is far from equality. The unspoken rule in mahallas is that divorce rates should be brought down—and women have become instruments for imposing this rule. According to unofficial data, in the majority of cases, the mahalla declines to give its permission for an individual to file for divorce. The divorce procedure is part of communal life, not a personal decision, and is informally administered by the mahalla. Civil Registry Offices or courts do not accept applications for divorce unless the petitioners bring a document from the mahalla approving the divorce and affirming that the couple has undergone a conciliatory commission at the municipal body. This is in spite of the fact that, according to lawyer Lenara Hikmatova,<sup>32</sup> the court has no legal mandate to refuse to accept an application, nor does the mahalla have any authority to withhold its consent. Another incompatibility between law and practice is that in the event that a couple fails to reconcile, the court should appoint a reconciliatory term of up to 6 months.<sup>33</sup> In practice, couples get the term from the mahalla, as they are not able to apply directly to the court for a divorce. Such terms may be appointed several times.

The gender aspect of discrimination is that women are often shamed publicly during these reconciliation sessions and are forced to remain in the marriage, sometimes at the expense of their physical and mental health, and even their lives. Physical violence committed against a female spouse is not usually considered to be a valid reason for divorce; members of reconciliatory commissions apply victim-blaming techniques to

deprive abused wives of divorces. Meanwhile, the official number of divorces was 32,000 in 2017 and continues to grow.<sup>34</sup>

Another manifestation of the dominance of patriarchal values is informal polygamy. There are no official statistics on polygamy, since it is an offense under Uzbek law for a man to have a second wife. According to unofficial data, however, the number of illegal *nikah* marriages (Islamic religious marriage, which allows polygamy for men) reaches into the hundreds of thousands.<sup>35</sup> Economic hardship, lack of education among women, insufficient social protection, and general prejudices against divorced women, especially those with children, push women to seek a *nikah* marriage. It is widely believed that it is much better to have to “share a man” than to live alone or—even worse—return to one’s parents’ house. The social outcome of this situation is that neither the second wife nor her children are protected by law.

President Mirziyoyev has spoken out strongly against polygamy and berated those imams who hold rites of *nikah* that are not officially registered at Civil Registry Offices.<sup>36</sup> However, no official regulation has yet been adopted to punish imams for breaking the secular law. Moreover, it is hard to provide legal proof that the ritual has been conducted. (Unofficial sources say that informal warnings have been made.)

All the government’s efforts to improve the conditions of women focus on socializing them into a system of values that puts them in an inferior position. The wide-ranging social programs and reforms targeting women prescribe the need to “strengthen families through structural reforms in the WCU and the Oila (Family) Centers.”<sup>37</sup> This means that women are inevitably seen as part of the broader entity, which is superior to their individual interests and aspirations. However,

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<sup>31</sup> S. Gulyamova, “Otchet o provedennom issledovanii po voprosam gendernogo ravenstva i nasiliia v otnoshenii zhenshchin,” 2018, p. 23. Received from an unofficial source.

<sup>32</sup> “Rastozhenie braka v sude: neobkhodimye dokumenty,” *Norma.uz*, June 30, 2017, [https://www.norma.uz/nashi\\_obzori/rastorjenie\\_braka\\_v\\_sude\\_neobkhodimye\\_dokumenty](https://www.norma.uz/nashi_obzori/rastorjenie_braka_v_sude_neobkhodimye_dokumenty).

<sup>33</sup> Article 40 of the Family Code of Uzbekistan.

<sup>34</sup> “Chislo razvodov uvelichilos’ na 8% v 2017 godu,” *Gazeta.uz*, January 19, 2018, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2018/01/19/marriage/>.

<sup>35</sup> “Polygamy Crackdown Leads to Fierce Debate,” *BBC*, July 17, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-40570635>.

<sup>36</sup> Maksim Yeniseyev, “Uzbekistan Acts Against Illegal Marriages,” *Central Asia News*, July 7, 2017, [http://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2017/07/07/feature-02](http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2017/07/07/feature-02).

<sup>37</sup> Asian Development Bank, “Uzbekistan Country Gender Assessment Update,” 27.

women are in charge of—and objectivized by—moral purity and national values. Therefore, the legal system legitimizes the demeaning narrative on women within the discourse on national values.

### ***Women in Education***

According to the Global Gender Gap Index and the Gender Equity Index, Uzbekistan is close to gender equality in education and health.<sup>38</sup> This relative balance is due to the Soviet past, when higher education was affordable and the gender balance was better than at present. Compulsory primary and secondary education kept the overall level of education equally high for men and women. Uzbekistan has continued this practice, with the result that girls' participation in primary and secondary education hovers around 92-93 percent<sup>39</sup>—almost equal to that of boys.

While gender parity is nearly achieved in preschools through vocational colleges, thereafter, the share of women declines drastically: "In academic lyceums, there are only 78 women for every 100 men enrolled, and only 61 women for 100 men in higher education institutions and finally, in research positions, for every 100 men, only 53 women are enrolled."<sup>40</sup>

In 2016, Uzbekistan ranked 105<sup>th</sup> out of 185 countries on the Human Development Index and was categorized as a high human development country. In the Gender Inequality Index that same year, Uzbekistan was rated 57<sup>th</sup> out of 188 countries, mainly due to high levels of higher education and labor force participation among women. In 2014, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) included Uzbekistan in its Social Institutions and Gender Index, ranking it 52<sup>nd</sup> out of 86 non-OECD countries

and giving it an overall score of 0.1475 (putting it in the "medium" category).<sup>41</sup>

Yet, according to international organizations' reports, the share of women in tertiary education continues to decline,<sup>42</sup> reflecting "a lack of funding, high tuition costs and an outdated societal expectation that young women take on traditional, household roles after secondary school."<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, the prevalence of traditional views means that girls are less often allowed to seek out better educational opportunities far from home, much less go abroad. The patriarchal vision, in which a daughter lives with her parents until she leaves for her husband's home and does not become a breadwinner, causes families to invest more heavily in boys' education. From 2007 to 2017, the number of women enrolled in tertiary education fell to between 60 and 69 percent that of men.<sup>44</sup>

A 2016 World Bank study (based on data from the State Committee on Statistics) reported that women's participation in higher education showed little progress according to areas of study: they comprised 56 percent of the total in education and culture, 40 percent in healthcare and physical training; 23 percent in agriculture; 20 percent in economics and law; and less than 15 percent in communication, construction, and transportation.<sup>45</sup>

As a result, women are overrepresented in low-paid sectors such as education, healthcare, and social services. In 2006–2013, just 4.5 percent of female tertiary students were studying engineering, manufacturing, and construction, compared to 27.2 percent of men.<sup>46</sup> According to the Education Sector Plan 2019–2023 under the Global Partnership for Education, the share of female teachers is much higher in secondary education (at almost 71 percent) than in secondary

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>39</sup> The Borgen Project, "Girls' Education in Uzbekistan," accessed July 3, 2019, <https://borgenproject.org/girls-education-in-uzbekistan/>.

<sup>40</sup> Asian Development Bank, "Uzbekistan Country Gender Assessment Update," 55.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>42</sup> TrendEconomy, "Sootnoshenie zhenshchin i muzhchin v sisteme vysshego obrazovaniia (%) (%) v Uzbekistane v 2017 godu—Vsemirnyi Bank," 2018, [http://data.trendeconomy.ru/dataviewer/wb/wbd/wdi?ref\\_area=UZB&series=SE\\_ENR\\_TERT\\_FM\\_ZS](http://data.trendeconomy.ru/dataviewer/wb/wbd/wdi?ref_area=UZB&series=SE_ENR_TERT_FM_ZS).

<sup>43</sup> The Borgen Project, "Girls' Education in Uzbekistan."

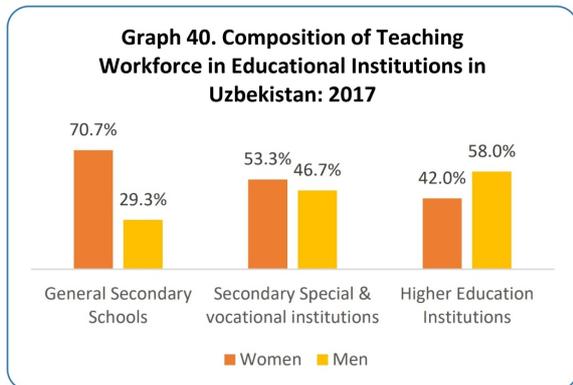
<sup>44</sup> TrendEconomy, "Sootnoshenie zhenshchin i muzhchin."

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>46</sup> Asian Development Bank, "Uzbekistan Country Gender Assessment Update," 235.

special and vocational education (53.3 percent) or higher education (42 percent)<sup>47</sup>—see Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Gender composition of teaching workforce in educational institutions in Uzbekistan, 2017**



Source: Global Partnership, “Education Sector Plan (ESP) of Uzbekistan, 2019-2023.”

Another barrier to girls’ access to higher education is the preference given to men who have performed military service. Those who have completed their mandatory army service receive an additional 50 points on entrance exams. This puts women, who have no legal right to serve in the army, at a structural disadvantage when it comes to competing for places. Recently, the president proposed that graduates of the president’s military school—all of whom are men—be exempted from taking entrance exams.<sup>48</sup>

Uzbekistan often performs rather well on human development indexes compared to developing countries. However, recent raw data collected by social media activists show that a group of rural women—the majority of whom were victims of domestic violence—had, on average, received education only through the ninth grade.<sup>49</sup> The superficial way in which the state statistics committee collects statistics makes it almost impossible to know the real state of affairs in

education, literacy, and employment, leading to further problems in the labor market.

### Women on the Job Market

Women in Uzbekistan, although empowered in legal documents and exalted in public discourse, remain vulnerable in terms of economic and social protection. Although they represent one of the largest driving forces behind economic growth, they suffer from inequality in workplaces and—particularly in rural households—a lack of infrastructure (transportation, logistics, gas, electricity, etc.) and utilities.

According to data collected by international organizations (ILO, World Bank), around 48 percent of Uzbekistan’s women were economically active in the period from 2012 to 2017, compared to 76 percent of men.<sup>50</sup> The figure for women is lower than that in developed countries and even than that in other transitional economies—in Kazakhstan, for instance, an average of 65 percent of women were economically active during the same period. In 2016, the employment rate among women was just 22.3 percent in rural areas and 34.5 percent in cities, according to the EBRD, while for men the figures were three and two times higher, respectively.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, the ADB report, which was initially presented by the State Committee of Statistics and the Women’s Committee of Uzbekistan, found that women comprised 45.7 percent of workers in the formal sector, with men making up 54.3 percent.<sup>52</sup> (The slight differences between the numbers given by different international organizations are likely attributable to their differing methodologies.)

There is also a considerable disparity between the sectors in which men and women are represented. Traditionally, girls choose their profession in accordance with the demands of the marriage market. It is widely believed that

<sup>47</sup> Global Partnership, “Education Sector Plan (ESP) of Uzbekistan, 2019-2023,” <https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/2019-04-gpe-esp-uzbekistan.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2019/05/06/schools/>.

<sup>49</sup> This point was made by activist Irina Matvienko in a Facebook post: <https://www.facebook.com/matvienko.irina/posts/2191953064197632>

<sup>50</sup> “Economically active” is defined as either employed or actively hunting for a job.

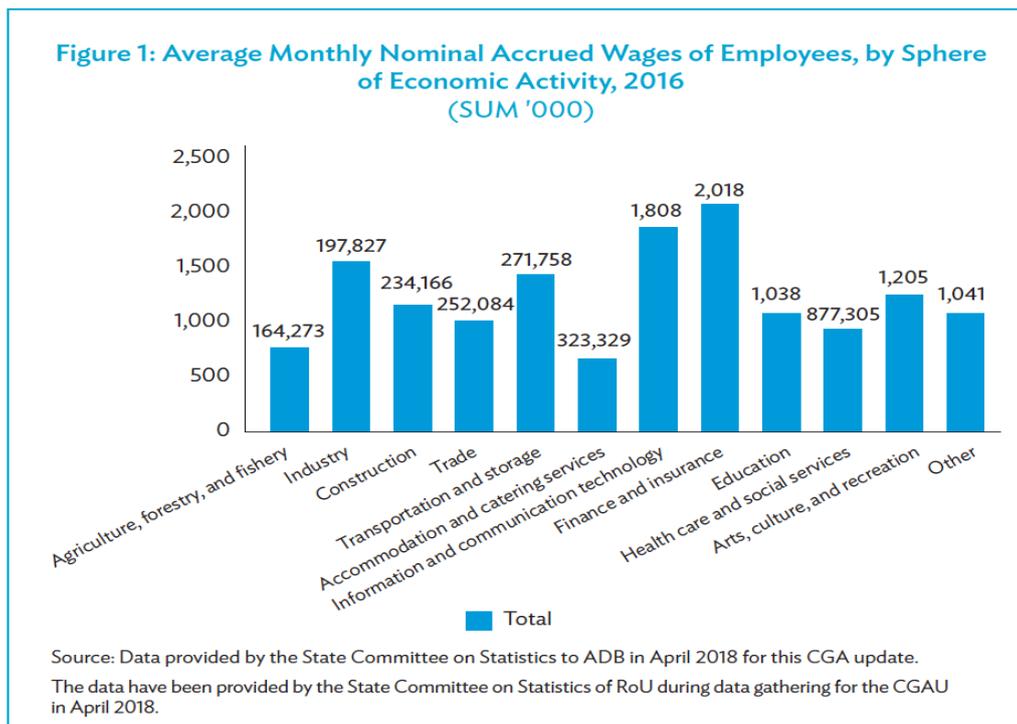
<sup>51</sup> UNDP Uzbekistan, “Neustoichivaia zaniatost’ v Uzbekistane: sostoianie, problemy i puti ikh resheniia,” Tashkent, 2018, [https://www.undp.org/content/dam/uzbekistan/docs/un\\_uzb\\_employment\\_in\\_uzbekistan\\_report.pdf](https://www.undp.org/content/dam/uzbekistan/docs/un_uzb_employment_in_uzbekistan_report.pdf), 52.

<sup>52</sup> Asian Development Bank, “Uzbekistan Country Gender Assessment Update,” 11.

nurse/physician and teacher are the most favorable professions for a future wife, as these are the jobs that parents look for when arranging marriages. Healthcare, arts, and education are traditionally dominated by women; they are also the worst-paid fields. By contrast, jobs in the best-paid fields—

construction, transport, finance, industry, and communication—are occupied mostly by men. In all sectors, the overwhelming majority of managerial positions is held by men.<sup>53</sup> Figure 3 shows the average monthly wages in various sectors.

Figure 3. Average monthly nominal wages of employees by sphere of economic activity, 2016



Source: ADB, Asian Development Bank, "Uzbekistan Country Gender Assessment Update," 2018.

Women may also engage in cottage industries to earn additional income for the family. According to the ADB Gender Assessment Report 2018, "Women, who work in the fields and also fulfil routine household activities, engage in home production to sell products and generate income (e.g., downy shawls from the wool of angora goats, dairy products, sewing, baking), while men are responsible for providing transport and helping women to sell products. Despite the considerable share of women in home-based production, they do not always manage the process, nor do they make their own decisions."<sup>54</sup>

### Women in Business

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are a leading national employer in Uzbekistan. By the first half of 2017, 42.3 percent of the management roles in these enterprises were held by women. Women are traditionally represented mostly in small business; services account for 34 percent of women-led enterprises, trade for 16 percent, non-food production for 16 percent, food production for 9 percent, agriculture for 5 percent, and other fields for 21 percent.<sup>55</sup> A state program encourages women to start their own enterprises by offering

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., xvi.

microfinance loans and credits targeting women and young people. This has increased the representation of women in micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), while their access to larger businesses remains restricted due to the prevailing traditional mindset. Low self-esteem among women, time poverty, and a lack of appropriate knowledge and skills are cited as other reasons why women are reluctant to start businesses.<sup>56</sup>

A lack of appropriate knowledge and lack of access to knowledge are common problems for a significant part of the population of the country; this problem is compounded for the female population by additional stereotypes and artificial restrictions.

### **Women and Property Ownership**

Even if, formally, women have equal rights to property, inheritance, and entrepreneurship, the public discourse puts them under the protection and custody of men, which usually restricts them from gaining full access to the equal opportunities guaranteed by the state. Another problem is that women have no access to information and/or lack sufficient self-confidence to take action.<sup>57</sup>

Among the female entrepreneurs who participated in the ADB survey, 57 percent were 40–50 years old, 22 percent were 20–30 years old, and 21 percent were 30–40 years old. The statistics demonstrate the thought patterns that are dominant among women and the expectations that society has for them.<sup>58</sup> Usually, women start an effective business after they reach a certain age, divorce, have raised their children, or inherit property from their parents, husbands, or other relatives. It is noteworthy that a very small percentage of women own real estate. Female-

owned real estate accounted for instance for 29.4 percent (424,783) of all registered real estate transactions outside the city of Tashkent in 2016. However, the value of property registered to women is considerably lower, accounting for only 22.3 percent of the total value of property registered with the national real property registry and cadastre system.<sup>59</sup>

### **Women in Informal Employment**

At the end of 2018, the Ministry of Labor of Uzbekistan announced a new methodology for calculating the unemployment rate, which showed unemployment at 9.3 percent. However, this rate only looks at formal employment, even though a considerable proportion (59.8 percent) of the economically active population of both genders is involved in the informal economy. Of these, 1.6 million people are employed in temporary one-off or seasonal work, while 2.6 million are labor migrants abroad.<sup>60</sup> According to a recent report by the Minister of Labor, Sherzod Kudbiev, more than 620,000 economically active females cannot find jobs, more than one million are involved in seasonal and non-permanent work, and another two million are working without registration.<sup>61</sup> The overwhelming majority of these women are rural.

Women in rural areas bear the bulk of the responsibility for maintaining households, which is one of the key factors in their social underrepresentation and low incomes compared to men, according to a World Bank Group report from 2017. In some rural areas, women's work opportunities are impeded by poor household conditions such as a lack of infrastructure, water, gas, and electricity. Women have more limited prospects for developing their farming activities, as they cannot travel long distances and communicate

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Asian Development Bank, "Uzbekistan Country Gender Assessment Update," 62.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 35; United Nations Development Program and Japan International Cooperation Agency Chamber of Commerce and Industry, "The Portrait of Business Women of Uzbekistan: The Survey Conducted under Business Forum of Uzbekistan Project. Phase 2," Tashkent, 2017, [http://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2017/07/07/feature-02](http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2017/07/07/feature-02).

<sup>59</sup> Objects in the real estate register in 2011-2016 had a total value of 8.7 billion soms. Of this, only 1.9 billion soms' worth was registered in the names of women. Data provided by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry to the ADB in September/October 2017—see p. 59 of Asian Development Bank, "Uzbekistan Country Gender Assessment Update."

<sup>60</sup> "Uroven bezrobotitsy sostavil 9,3%," *Gazeta.uz*, October 4, 2018, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2018/10/04/employment/>.

<sup>61</sup> "Zhenskaya dolya i rol': chego ne khvataet Uzbekistanu dlya gendernogo ravenstva," *Sputnik News*, July 11, 2018,

<https://uz.sputniknews.ru/analytics/20181107/9900246/Zhenskaya-dolya-i-rol-chto-ne-khvataet-Uzbekistanu-dlya-gendernogo-ravenstva.html>.

with men from outside their families.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, by working in private gardens (*tomorqa*), women are able to earn money and provide their family members with fresh food. It is worth noting that these activities are usually not considered to be a contribution to the family budget and are taken for granted.<sup>63</sup> The available income-generating activities do not upgrade the social status of women in families.

Often, women are paid less than men for daily work—10-20,000 soms per day compared to up to 30,000 soms for men—but the situation is different in cotton-picking. According to data provided by the report, up to 90 percent of pickers in some regions are women.<sup>64</sup> They are seen as more motivated since they have fewer opportunities to earn income in other fields.

According to unofficial data, the number of female *mardiker* (those who do day work, one of the most underpaid and low-qualification jobs) is huge and continues to grow. *Mardiker* markets are developing in regions and cities across the country. Men and women of different ages wait for customers to pick them up for various jobs at their homes or farms, or sometimes for municipal jobs paid by official bodies, including seasonal cotton pickups. Depending on the region, a day laborer will make between 25,000 soms (\$4) and 100,000 soms (\$12) per working day. Customers trust female workers more than male workers, as they usually do not fall into cheating and do the same job as male workers no matter the physical burden<sup>65</sup>—even though it is technically illegal to hire female workers for heavy labor that may be detrimental to their health.<sup>66</sup> In many cases, female workers are subject to sexual harassment and other violations of their rights by their employers, making them the

most vulnerable stratum of the workforce.<sup>67</sup> In some cases, they are even deprived of payment since the employment is illegal and not registered.

Prostitution is another consequence of socio-economic instability and gender inequality in Uzbekistan. There are no official statistics for prostitution, but unofficial figures range from 22,000 to 32,000 people or even more. The market for sex work is growing rapidly, especially in big cities, even as female sex workers are stigmatized and publicly shamed, represented as deviants who are out of touch with traditional values.<sup>68</sup> Prostitution is a criminal offense: as of 2019, the fine has been raised from 3 minimum wages to 7 for the first offense, and from 7 to 10 for a repeat violation.<sup>69</sup>

The situation on the ground cannot be understood from the data provided by official agencies and international organizations. In spite of the fact that the government is engaging in various strategies to tackle gender issues (without calling it a “gender” problem), the results are limited since the problems are addressed within the popular traditional discourse of female inferiority. As a result, many programs by the state and international organizations alike appear to be counterproductive, contributing to the gender imbalance rather than redressing it.

### Unpopular Women’s Empowerment in Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan

President Mirziyoyev has become the first political leader in Uzbekistan to speak openly about the deplorable state of women in Uzbek society. He has discussed tense relations between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, addressed the problem of

<sup>62</sup> World Bank Group, “Diagnosticheskoe issledovanie bar’erov, sderzhivaiushchikh povyshenie dokhodov maloobespechennykh sel’skikh zhenshchin v Uzbekistane,” 2017, accessed July 18, 2019, <http://documents.vseirnyjbank.org/curated/ru/182931504199462465/Диagnostическое-исследование-барьеров-сдерживающих-повышение-доходов-малообеспеченных-сельских-женщин>, 18.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>65</sup> “Uzbekistan: Mnogochislennost’ zhenshchin-mardikerov otrazhaet situatsiiu s bezrobotitsei v strane,” *EurasiaNet*, January 13, 2017, <https://russian.eurasianet.org/node/63781>.

<sup>66</sup> Labor Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan, <http://lex.uz/docs/145261#146843>.

<sup>67</sup> “Prava zhenshchin v Uzbekistane: Rabsila = rabskaia sila,” *Deutsche Welle*, December 11, 2002, <https://www.dw.com/ru/права-женщин-в-узбекистане-рабсила-рабская-сила/a-710671>.

<sup>68</sup> The State Internal Affairs Department of Uzbekistan reported the raids on brothels on TV and social media, showing female sex-workers’ faces openly.

<sup>69</sup> “V Uzbekistane uzhestochili nakazanie za prostitutsiiu,” *UZdaily*, December 14, 2018, <https://www.uzdaily.uz/articles-id-40747.htm>.

divorces, and initiated a number of laws and social projects. Activists for women's rights have been able to relaunch their social projects and operate relatively freely.

In April, the minimum age of marriage for women was raised from 17 to 18, making it the same as that for men. According to the head of the WCU, the legal norm reflects realities on the ground: today's young people are not eager to marry too early. Outside the capital city, however, girls as young as 16 can be pushed into arranged *nikah* marriages that lack official registration.

The president's February 2018 Decree "On measures to fundamentally improve activities in the field of supporting women and strengthening the institution of the family" focuses on preserving traditional family values and improving the conditions for women in difficult situations. The bulk of the responsibility for implementing the decree falls on the WCU.<sup>70</sup> The law is similar to the one from 2004 but more focused on existing problems.

As a GONGO, the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan is an active conduit of the gender policy of the state, and it has been encouraged to become an active protector of women's rights, initiating numerous draft laws and projects. The WCU has initiated a draft law that would equalize rights and opportunities for women and men. The key paragraphs include equal opportunities in workplaces, including at decision-making levels. The draft introduces the term "indirect discrimination" and states that "household work cannot be considered a basis for gender discrimination as it is carried out by both men and women." For the first time, a draft law on women's issues includes the point: "Behavior based on rituals, traditions and culture that contradict the requirements of the law of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the norms of international law are not allowed."<sup>71</sup>

Discussions on the draft law ended on May 8. The reaction to the draft law among social media

users was mostly negative. The majority of comments on news posts by various online newspapers expressed fear of women becoming equal to men in duties. Both female and male commenters said that they would not like the rights of the two sexes to become absolutely equal. In some cases, the argumentation contrasted the evil "Other"—Western liberal feminist values, which contradict national ones—with the benign "Self." Increasing equality is widely believed to be toxic for the future of the society.

In 2018, the WCU initiated another draft law, this time on domestic violence,<sup>72</sup> which is not criminalized in Uzbekistan. The document defines the following terms: victim of domestic violence, asocial behavior, domestic psychological violence, domestic economic violence, domestic physical violence, and domestic sexual violence. It also proposes that victims of domestic violence should be allowed to get a restraining order against their attackers. The draft law focuses predominantly on the prevention of domestic violence, not entrenching domestic violence in the criminal code.

### ***Survey on Domestic Violence***

The ruling of the President "On measures to improve the social rehabilitation and adaptation system, and also prevention of family and domestic violence" from July 2018 mentions the need to collect statistics on domestic violence. These do not exist, since bringing a domestic violence claim runs counter to the traditional values that discourage taking a family quarrel outside the home. The majority of social institutions and law-enforcement bodies take the traditional approach, backed up by the absence of a legal basis criminalizing any kind of domestic violence.

In the absence of such statistics, I conducted a small-scale anonymous survey to determine how reported domestic violence is addressed by those bodies that are responsible for preventing it. The survey was conducted on the Facebook social-project page NeMolchi.uz (Do Not

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<sup>70</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Measures to Fundamentally Improve Activities in the Field of Supporting Women and Strengthening the Institution of the Family," accessed July 3, 2019, <http://lex.uz/docs/3546745>.

<sup>71</sup> Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On the Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women."

<sup>72</sup> Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On the Prevention of Domestic Violence," ID-658, accessed July 3, 2019, <https://regulation.gov.uz/ru/document/658>.

Be Silent), an independent information project against domestic violence that accepts anonymous stories from readers and has around 10,000 followers.<sup>73</sup> The survey spread among those who have been victims of domestic violence. It collected 87 responses to its questions about reporting domestic violence and the responses of law enforcement organs and mahallas. Most of the respondents were from Tashkent and Tashkent region.<sup>74</sup> The survey included six questions on whether women experienced domestic violence; whether they reported it; if not, why not; if so, what measures were taken by the law enforcement bodies; and what the overall reactions to the domestic violence were.

Sixty percent of respondents never reported domestic violence. The main reasons for this were: lack of trust in the system, lack of knowledge, fear of condemnation and shaming, fear of a perpetrator, etc. Those who did report it faced either ignorance or/and victim-blaming while reporting/suing the abuser. Women reported having been told, “We get used to beaten wives, it’s normal” or “You have to stay quiet so as not to get beaten,” or having district policemen tell their husbands, “You shouldn’t have left bruises when you beat her.” In some cases, the abusers were forced to pay an administrative fine to the state budget—but the fines are usually an additional burden on the family budget, which may discourage women from reporting violence. Just four percent of cases resulted in legal prosecution of the abuser. Usually, law enforcement officers use the phrase “no body, no case” to describe the absence of a legal basis for prosecuting an abuser.

In a 1,000-respondent survey, UReport looked at public opinion on domestic violence.<sup>75</sup> Eighty-three percent indicated that the problem of domestic violence is real, while another part responded that the problem is not openly discussed. Among the latter group, 52 percent of respondents were female. Forty-eight percent have

witnessed violence, while 52 percent have never encountered it. According to the answers, 60 percent do not know where to report domestic violence if they witness it or become victims thereof. To the question on whether one should tolerate domestic violence for the sake of preserving the family, 54 percent responded that it depends on the situation, while 34 percent think that one “definitely should not.”

### ***Growing Feminist Activism on Social Media***

The issue of domestic violence is almost exclusively discussed on social media. The NeMolchi.uz<sup>76</sup> project, started by activist Irina Matvienko, has become one of the first platforms on which it is possible to speak openly about domestic violence, LGBTQ+ issues, poor social protection of women and children, and advocating for equal rights and opportunities. Faina Yagafarova<sup>77</sup> is another individual activist; she writes daily on Facebook about issues facing women and how to fight against domestic violence within the existing legal system, as well as participating in social projects and meetings promoted by the WCU. Activism on social media, in particular on Facebook, is starting to substitute for underdeveloped civil society activism.

The overall tendency of the governmental organs toward increasing openness, combined with concerns about Uzbekistan’s public image and the feminist movement on social media, has pushed the WCU to develop some accountability. The organization has begun to address some individual cases of despair and violence among women and has developed a system for aiding those who are in need of urgent help. To date, 136 shelters<sup>78</sup> have been opened across the country and a helpline has been launched. However, the objective structural problems—such as a lack of communication, lack of infrastructure, and public administration issues—as well as subjective problems like the population’s

<sup>73</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/nemolchi.uz/?\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=%2Cd%2CP-R&eid=ARDWvnanRkqWp7iQ6QVgXr\\_qxutF7U\\_tky7mizQYj99WBeSFwtT9Cofh32rohk1Xl8K0-QH9OuTuMUn](https://www.facebook.com/nemolchi.uz/?__tn__=%2Cd%2CP-R&eid=ARDWvnanRkqWp7iQ6QVgXr_qxutF7U_tky7mizQYj99WBeSFwtT9Cofh32rohk1Xl8K0-QH9OuTuMUn)

<sup>74</sup> Survey conducted by the author.

<sup>75</sup> “Voprosy bytovogo nasiliia v Uzbekistane,” *UReport*, January 24, 2019, <https://uzbekistan.ureport.in/story/292/>.

<sup>76</sup> NeMolchi.uz’s Facebook page is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/nemolchi.uz/>.

<sup>77</sup> Faina Yagafarova’s Facebook page is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/fernanda.manchini>.

<sup>78</sup> Women’s Committee of Uzbekistan, “Markaz faolijati,” accessed July 3, 2019, <http://wcu.uz/uz/menu/markaz-faolijati>.

traditional views continue to impede women's development.

To learn about the intangibles of the state gender policy, I conducted open-ended interviews with 11 social media activists who considered themselves feminists.

Respondents universally agreed that the main problem that prompts women to approach them is domestic violence. This is followed by inequality at work and home, objectification, and lack of social protection in difficult situations. Women are left without property after divorces, they usually lack legal knowledge on social protection, and they have no clue whom to approach in the event of disability for them and their children. The system of social protection is underdeveloped, while the environment of violence is normalized.

In response to the question "What are the main reactions to your publications and social media posts?" respondents cited reactions related to victim-blaming. They indicated that society is reluctant to speak openly about the problem, which is interpreted differently by different people, and that gender equality is considered an alien concept.

According to the activists, the roots of discrimination against women are the following (in order of decreasing importance):

- Strictly patriarchal values and traditions;
- Non-compliance with laws; and
- Imperfect legal system.

Asked "What should the state do to combat discrimination against women?" respondents recommended the following policy moves:

- Change the narratives related to women in the society, diversify the female image, and not reduce the role of women to maternity and marriage;
- Criminalize domestic violence;
- Recognize the real problems and start to talk about them openly; and
- Develop gender sensitivity and involve women in political decision-making following CEDAW recommendations.

One of the activists called for a more sustainable program for empowering women, explaining that in her opinion, the major steps taken in the recent period are closely connected to the upcoming submission of a report to CEDAW and a desire to improve the international image of the country.

According to my respondents, the most popular image of an Uzbek woman is someone who is submissive and tender, obedient and wise, a mother and good wife. According to a survey conducted by the NGO "Oydin Nur," 18 percent of self-government leaders consider that domestic violence is caused mainly by the sharp tongue of women, 26 percent stated that husbands consider their wives to be lazy and bad housekeepers, and 5.6 percent said it happens because women are disobedient.<sup>79</sup> Financial reasons are also among the key factors causing conflicts and violence. In some areas, husbands' alcohol addiction is the main reason that they commit violence against women (up to 90 percent in some mahallas in the Samarkand region).<sup>80</sup>

The question about what type of women usually become victims of domestic violence was answered similarly by self-government leaders in different mahallas: around 20 percent think uneducated, illiterate, spiritually underdeveloped women; 13.8 percent frivolous women; 13.8 percent modest, naïve, hardworking women; and 5.5 percent women who are sick and/or have mental or physical disabilities. Meanwhile, 33.3 percent consider that scoundrelmongers and gossips usually become the objects of violence. Around 3-5 percent stated that the reason for violence can be financial inferiority and a woman's poor social and economic background.

According to a report by Jamilya Vafaeva for ACTED, in some surveyed areas, physical violence toward women is habitual and has become a part of men culture. In addition, to men, the term "discrimination against women" means mainly physical violence, the survey found. Other types of violence, such as violent jokes or a ban on visiting parents, were not mentioned, demonstrating that

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<sup>79</sup> Gulyamova, "Otchet o provedennom issledovanii," 36.

<sup>80</sup> Jamilya Vafaeva, "Otchet o provedennom issledovanii po voprosam gendernogo ravenstva i nasiliia v otnoshenii zhenshchin," 2019, p. 6. Received from an unofficial source.

they are seen as part of the cultural reality in those areas.<sup>81</sup>

## Conclusion

This analysis of three dimensions of women's participation and representation—legal, economic, and cultural—showed a dramatic discrepancy between the government's stated objective of women's empowerment and the real situation on the ground. The women of Uzbekistan are empowered on paper but de facto put in an inferior position in the labor market, education, business, social relations, and public discourse. The legal basis of gender equality proves to be controversial and difficult to follow due to explicit contradictions between laws. Moreover, informal habits, which reflect traditional perceptions of women and their social roles, are much more powerful among citizens than legal regulations.

The growing re-traditionalization of Uzbek society, along with decreased trust in the economic system, have led not only to the feminization of poverty, but also to the feminization of public pressure. Women bear the main responsibility for preserving national values and family values, and have been put in charge of the moral purity of the nation.

The Soviet-era discourse on equal rights has been borrowed by independent Uzbekistan and has been left on paper for box-checking purposes and to improve the overall international image of the state. Meanwhile, the demotic discourse can be described as explicitly patriarchal and intolerant of all types of women's empowerment.

The repressive policies of the Karimov era, a poor level of upward mobility, and the deteriorating quality of secular education brought about retrogression to traditionalism among the broad mass of the population. The re-traditionalizing discourse clothes its arguments in particular interpretations of Islam and puts women in so-called traditional roles. This results in the neglecting of concrete social and economic problems and shifts the focus of attention to the issues of chastity, spirituality, and national values.

The Uzbek government is trying to improve its international image by declaring its commitment to universal rights and values, which inevitably include the equality of women and men. An institutional system of gender equality has not yet been established and creating new government bodies and committees is likely to be insufficient, as intangible factors of cultural resistance are still strong. The ongoing massive changes in the legal system should be accompanied by a comprehensive reformation of social life and cultural habits. As such, I propose the following recommendations to supplement the ongoing reforms on gender balance, creating equal opportunities and preventing violence against and among women.

## Recommendations

1. Design a nationwide publicity campaign using TV commercials, videos, and billboards that would show family relationships involving educated working women. The campaign should promote egalitarian relationships within the family.
2. Hold interactive trainings for law enforcement officers with an emphasis on role-playing to stimulate empathy outside of the context of their family setting. The aim should be to develop officers' conflict resolution skills and foster an attitude of zero-tolerance vis-à-vis domestic violence.
3. Introduce NGOs that can provide mediation for families. The approach of the professionals should be impartial and they should have deep knowledge of Islamic theology. The main focus should be not on preserving a family, but on preventing violence and figuring out possible solutions for both sides.
4. Create a Domestic Violence Resource Network. The Network should embrace victims of domestic violence, law enforcement agencies, health organizations, and influential individuals and provide the organizations with up-to-date information, methods, and research

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 18.

## Chapter 9.

# Unveiling Girls' Madrasahs in Kyrgyzstan

Aichurek Kurmanbekova<sup>1</sup> (2019)



"Aisha Siddika" women's madrasah. Jalal Abad city, Kyrgyzstan, January

Kyrgyzstan is a secular state with 80 percent of its population identifying as Muslim. In recent decades, Kyrgyzstanis have shown a growing interest in Islam, religious education, and the study of the Quran. The number of children studying in religious schools continues to increase every year. In 2013, the number of madrasahs in Kyrgyzstan reached 67—including 10 higher educational institutions—comprising a combined total of over 4,000 students. Today, according to the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA), there are 121 registered religious educational institutions, including 110 madrasahs—almost twice the number that existed in 2013. However, according to a report from the Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations, “not all madrasahs are state registered, and the actual number of students in these Muslim schools is likely much higher.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite the growth of religious schools in Kyrgyzstan, Islamic educational institutions

face numerous issues: a shortage of trained *mudaris* (madrasa teachers); a lack of sustainable financial support; curricula that lack secular and vocational classes; an inadequate material base and shortage of teaching and methodological materials; and, most importantly, the lack of an official state license, meaning students do not get a recognized degree upon graduation. These shortcomings lead to isolation and an inability of madrasah students and graduates to integrate into the society.

By 2019, girls made up one third of all students studying in Kyrgyz madrasahs. Girls are more vulnerable and limited in their decisions and future opportunities than boys who study in madrasahs. Women in observant families are more often subject to pressure, constraints, and discrimination from their relatives or guardians.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Noah Tucker claims that “...women are among the prominent ranks of jihadists who have left the country to join the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq. Around 300 IS fighters are from Kyrgyzstan, including women and children... women and children are subject to subservient roles in Kyrgyzstan, making them susceptible to radicalization.”<sup>4</sup> Salima Sharipova, head of the “Mother Umay” party, asks, “What can you expect from a woman who is uneducated and does not have a voice and rights in the family?” She continues, “Many Kyrgyz women are suffering from high unemployment and isolation,

<sup>1</sup> Aichurek Kurmanbekova graduated from the Kyrgyz Russian Slavic University with a BA in Political Science (2008) and the OSCE Academy with an MA in Politics and Security (2014). She previously worked for the Embassy of Kyrgyzstan in Turkmenistan, local human rights group, the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, as an election observation coordinator, and was a national UNV at the UNDP/UN Peacebuilding Fund, where she served as a specialist on gender-responsive civil society and community engagement in peacebuilding.

<sup>2</sup> “Religious education in Kyrgyzstan: madrasah system in urgent need of reform,” Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations April, 2017, <https://bulaninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Report-on-REUs-in-English.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “Kyrgyzstan Counters Extremism by Educating, Empowering Women,” Muhiddin Zarif and Behzod Muhammadiy, February 29, 2016, accessed November 29, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia/kyrgyzstan-counters-extremism-educating-empowering-women>.

which make them vulnerable to jihadist recruiting.”<sup>5</sup>

For this reason, it is imperative to pay attention to the religious education of girls and to ensure women are well educated and have job opportunities after graduation from religious schools. There has been some basic research on madrasahs in Kyrgyzstan, but very little on girls’ religious schooling. In this paper I ask: Why do girls choose to study in madrasahs? What do they do after graduating from madrasahs? What is the range of perspectives regarding the future of girls’ madrasahs in the country?

This paper is based on qualitative research, using both primary and secondary sources of data for analysis. For primary data, I interviewed gender and Islam experts as well as Kyrgyzstani religious leaders. In addition, I interviewed madrasah teachers, students, and SCRA administrators— a total of 15 individuals altogether. Secondary sources include: a) a literature review of academic papers and reports from International Organizations and local NGOs; b) a study of international and local laws and norms; and c) a desk review of online media and experts’ articles.

### Historical overview of Kyrgyzstan’s religious education

The Prophet Muhammed says, regardless of gender, “the pursuit of knowledge is incumbent on every Muslim.” Thus, “the scholars are the heirs of the prophets,” he explained, implying that learning and studying are crucial for a communal life.<sup>6</sup> Madrasahs have always played a crucial role in the lives of Islamic communities.<sup>7</sup> In addition to providing religious education, they also supported vulnerable members of society.

Their aid included social services, free education, accommodations, and nutrition.

The first known mosque-type of madrasah in the territory of Kyrgyzstan was built in Osh in 1844 by Alymbek Datka, a prominent Kyrgyz politician from Kokand. Many highly educated individuals received their education there. Clergy (*moldo*) taught students poetry, geography, math, and astronomy.<sup>8</sup> During the Russian conquest of Central Asia in the nineteenth century, a number of new madrasahs appeared on the contemporary territory of Kyrgyzstan. These schools taught Arabic writing, the Quran, and Sharia rules.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a new religious educational movement, Jadidism, emerged. Aiming to reform Muslim schools, it advocated for a more secular curriculum and competed with traditional madrasahs.<sup>9</sup> In 1914, the number of Islamic educational institutions in Osh Uyezd reached 88, enrolling 1,176 students. Graduates of madrasahs worked for the Muslim administration or in other madrasahs.<sup>10</sup>

Dramatic changes in Islamic education took place during the Soviet period. New types of Russian primary and secondary schools replaced Muslim educational institutions.<sup>11</sup> In her research on religious education in Kyrgyzstan, Nazira Kurbanova notes, “Although the Soviet Union was largely successful in destroying Islamic learning and the knowledge of Islamic teachings, it did not eliminate the religiosity of the population's self-perception as having an Islam.”<sup>12</sup>

At the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were no Islamic educational institutions in Kyrgyzstan. Kurbanova argues that religious education in the country developed in two phases: 1) from 1993 to 2008, with the emerging

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> A. Afsaruddin, “Muslim Views on Education: Parameters, Purview, and Possibilities,” *Journal of Catholic Legal Studies* 44. (2005): 143-178.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “Kolichestvo medrese ugrozhaet kachestvu obrazovaniia?” *Azattyk*, March 29, 2018, accessed September 18, 2019, <http://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan-religion-bulan-madrasah/29132424.html>.

<sup>9</sup> A.E. Kubatova, “Jadid schools in Kyrgyzstan,” Institute of History and Cultural Heritage of the National Academy of Sciences of the Kyrgyz Republic. 2009.

<sup>10</sup> “Istoriia obrazovaniia,” Ministry of Education and Science of Kyrgyzstan, accessed in November 29, 2019, <https://edu.gov.kg/ru/high-education/istoriya-obrazovaniya/>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> T. Jeremy Gunn, “Shaping an Islamic Identity: Religion, Islamism, and the State in Central Asia,” *Sociology of Religion* 64, no. 3 (2003): 389-410.

and broadening of Islamic educational institutions and networks; and 2) from 2008 until today, consisting of the universal institutionalization of religious educational institutions.<sup>13</sup>

### Religious education related legislation

The Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic states that every child shall have the right to an education. General secondary education shall be compulsory and free of charge, and everyone shall be entitled to receive it from the state educational institutions. The state shall exercise control over the activity of educational institutions.<sup>14</sup> The freedom of religion provided by the Kyrgyz Constitution allows an individual to apply to a religious school only after completing compulsory secondary education.

In accordance with the Law on Education, compulsory education consists of general primary (*nachal'noe obchshee*) for grades 1 to 4 (ages 7-10) and general lower secondary (*osnovnoe obchshee*) for grades 5 to 9 (usually ages 11-15). This is the minimum educational requirement set by the state. The Ministry of Education is responsible for developing curricula, setting national standards and educational policy, developing certification examinations, and awarding degrees.<sup>15</sup> As religious education has been separated from the government, the Ministry of Education has no authority or responsibility to control religious educational institutions, including madrasahs.

The "Concept of State Policy in the Sphere of Religion for 2014-2020," adopted on November 3, 2014, was the first attempt to regulate religious education. The document outlines major directions and principles of state

regulations and determines the need of measures and regulations over religious organizations and associations. It advances official state visions and priorities for optimizing the relation between state and religious institutions, including religious educational institutions.<sup>16</sup>

The draft law on religious education and religious institutions was first presented in 2013. The document aimed to standardize licensing procedures, create minimum standards for religious educational institutions, organize educational activities, fortify the material and technical base of educational establishments, and register foreign educational establishments.<sup>17</sup> "The draft law suggested that all religious educational structures should begin to structure their curricula so that secular disciplines make up approximately 30 to 40 percent of the entire curricula in order to make their diplomas acceptable by the state and provide a broader education for the Islamic intelligentsia."<sup>18</sup> However, the bill is still today under consideration. An SCRA representative pointed out that the draft law has already been sent to the Prime Minister's Office for approval. "Hopefully, it will enter into force after the consideration and approval of Parliament and the President of Kyrgyzstan."<sup>19</sup>

In fact, Kyrgyzstan's democratic legislation has become a foundation for Islamic diversity.<sup>20</sup> The state policy is liberal with respect to religious practices and beliefs. For instance, as the Bulan Institute points out, "the shortcomings in religious education have a negative impact on national security, the radicalization of society, and the spread of ideas of religious extremism."<sup>21</sup> However, "Actions from the state alone are not enough to counter religious extremism," said

<sup>13</sup> Nazira Kurbanova, "Islamic education in Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asia and Caucasus* 15, no. 1 (2014): 90-103.

<sup>14</sup> "Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic," Article 32, December 28, 2016, accessed November 27, 2019, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/202913?cl=ru-ru>.

<sup>15</sup> The Law of the Kyrgyz Republic "On Education", Article 40, July 2019, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/1216?cl=ru-ru>.

<sup>16</sup> "Concept of state policy in the sphere of religion for 2014-2020," November 14, 2014, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/68294>.

<sup>17</sup> "Kanybek Osmonaliev razrabotal zakonoproekt o religioznom obrazovanii v Kyrgyzstane," *Knews*, September 19, 2013, accessed October 17, 2019, <http://knews.kg/2013/09/19/kanyibek-osmonaliev-razrabotal-zakonoproekt-o-religioznom-obrazovanii-v-kyrgyzstane/>.

<sup>18</sup> Kurbanova, "Islamic education in Kyrgyzstan".

<sup>19</sup> Zair Ergeshov, personal interview with the author, September 29, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Gunn, "Shaping an Islamic Identity: Religion, Islamism, and the State in Central Asia".

<sup>21</sup> "Religious education in Kyrgyzstan: madrasah system in urgent need of reform".

Zakir Chotayev, another SCRA representative.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, other than checking for the existence of extremist propaganda, the state does not directly interfere in the general work or the content of the curricula of madrasahs.<sup>23</sup>

In order to open a madrasah, one must register it with the Ministry of Justice—which supervises religious institutions—and then get official approval from the SCRA.<sup>24</sup> Officially, all madrasahs are controlled by the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (SAMK), also called the Muftiyate. Consequently, the Muftiyate has become a "direct connection" between the state and the Muslim community. The state has delegated the SAMK to manage and oversee the activities of religious educational institutions.<sup>25</sup> According to one madrasah director, "Kaziya (the Muftiyate's territorial entities) control our work; they provide us with a curriculum. Sometimes we work with other state agencies and the State Commission on Religious Affairs."<sup>26</sup>

The SCRA facilitates and advocates for the inclusion of secular classes in religious educational institutions. It has also become progressively involved in the regulation of madrasahs since 2014. In cooperation with the Muftiyate, it has been monitoring the curricula of religious schools. The commission monitored approximately 34 madrasahs in 2015, and 74 in 2016. In 2019, the SCRA visited 60 madrasahs. "When we do our monitoring, we look into technical conditions, educational processes, and curricula. We attend classes, test teaching staff, and see their educational background," said Zair Ergeshev, the director of the SCRA.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to its monitoring duties, the

SCRA is expecting to adopt a provision on reforming religious educational institutions, which was recently sent to the Prime Minister's office as well. According to the document, madrasahs will receive the status of "secondary specialized educational institutions" and will be obliged to introduce five secular disciplines: The History of Kyrgyzstan, Man and Society, The History of Religions, Kyrgyz language, and Kyrgyz literature. In addition to this, madrasahs "will have to pass a technical licensing, corresponding to material and technical standards," said Zair Ergeshev.<sup>28</sup>

The topic of state licensing and religious education standards is one of the most discussed issues among Kyrgyz officials, the religious community, and policy experts. In order to grant a state license, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic requires "all educational establishments to have an adequate material and technical base, adequately educated teaching staff, a building that meets all architectural requirements, a developed infrastructure of classrooms, the latest information and computer technologies, and libraries, etc. Each faculty should have at least two Doctors of Science and each chair at least two PhDs among their teachers and lecturers."<sup>29</sup>

As Nazira Kurbanova notes, "many of those who headed Islamic educational establishments knew only too well that they would not live up to these requirements and, therefore, would not be licensed."<sup>30</sup> Mufti R. Egemberdiev argued that, "the law will not only fail to solve the problems, it will even multiply them."<sup>31</sup> He argued that in order to develop "modern madrasahs," the state should provide

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<sup>22</sup> "Kyrgyz schools to combat extremism with religious culture classes," *Karavanserai*, November 10, 2017, accessed November 29, 2019, [http://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2017/10/11/feature-01](http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2017/10/11/feature-01).

<sup>23</sup> "Pochemy kyrgyzstantsy otdaiut svoikh detei v medrese," *Standar*, February 28, 2018, accessed November 29, 2019, <http://stanradar.com/news/full/28605-pochemu-kyrgyzstantsy-otdajut-svoih-detей-v-medrese.html>.

<sup>24</sup> "Religious education in Kyrgyzstan: madrasah system in urgent need of reform".

<sup>25</sup> Noor O'Neill Borbieva. "Empowering Muslim Women: Independent Religious Fellowships in the Kyrgyz Republic," *Slavic Review* 71, no. 2 (2012): 288-307.

<sup>26</sup> A director of a madrasah, personal interview with the author, October 1, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Zair Ergeshev, personal interview with the author, September 29, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Kurbanova, "Islamic education in Kyrgyzstan".

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> "Kolichestvo medrese ugrozhaet kachestvu obrzovaniia?".

financial support to them. Today, the religious schools are self-sustaining and private, therefore, the government cannot provide funding to them.<sup>32</sup> However, the Muftiyate has shown an interest in accelerating the collaborative work between the Ministry of Education and the SCRA in order to improve the quality of education and obtain licenses.

### External Donors

While madrasahs do not receive any financial support from the state, they may get financial support from other actors such as foreign states. Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey have been providing financial support to religious schools “in order to influence the form that Islam would take in the region... Turkey, although officially and formally a secular state, also subsidized religious education as a part of its effort to expand its own influence.”<sup>33</sup> All sorts of Islamic charities have given money and dispatched teachers, and many madrasahs have been set up from Arab funds. In fact, according to a 2018 article about Kyrgyz madrasah funding, “...madrasahs would never say openly about their sources of financing support...”<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that Kyrgyz private entrepreneurs also play important role in funding religious educational institutions.

Another form of “influence” on Islamic schools’ curricula has come from the American Embassy in Kyrgyzstan. Since 2017, the Embassy has sponsored an ongoing vocational training project in various religious schools. The Public Foundation AVEP has been implementing the project in seven regions, covering over 28 madrasahs, including 11 girls’ madrasahs.<sup>35</sup> The vocational trainings consist of additional short-term vocational trainings that include eight types of classes. Women’s madrasahs have cooking, IT, and tailoring classes; men’s madrasahs have

welding, furniture making, bee keeping, electrician training, and mechanic classes. Upon completion of their selected training, students receive a state certificate and job offer.

The initiative’s pilot schools have received highly positive feedback and have left a lasting impact on the graduates: “I was lucky to study in a good madrasah. We had vocational trainings and I picked up cooking trainings. I think this is important for me as a future wife and a mother. Men like those women who can cook well,” said Mahinur from Jalal Abad.<sup>36</sup> One of the interviewed religious leaders has also acknowledged the importance of vocational trainings, particularly for girls. “They don’t get a degree after graduating a madrasah, but at least they have applied skills. Women can use these skills to earn money. I know women who work in restaurants in Russia after graduating piloting schools.”<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, less than a third of schools are covered by the U.S. Embassy project; the remaining two thirds of madrasahs are left out, continuing to lack both secular and vocational classes.

The U.S. support was extended until 2022. But the question of its sustainability should be raised, as neither the state nor religious schools are ready to invest in vocational trainings in Kyrgyzstan.

### Why study in a madrasah?

Today, about 10,000 students receive a religious education in Kyrgyz madrasahs—among them 6,175 boys and 3,761 girls. According to data provided by the SCRA, there are 62 boys’, 25 girls’, and 23 mixed madrasahs in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>38</sup> Despite the issues related to religious education, the number of students continues to grow every year. Below, I discuss three of the fundamental drivers that influence girls’ decision to study in Islamic schools.

<sup>32</sup> “DUMK ne protiv litsenzirovaniia medrese,” *Knews*, March 5, 2013, accessed November 1, 2019, <http://knews.kg/2013/03/05/dumk-ne-protiv-litsenzirovaniya-medrese/>.

<sup>33</sup> Gunn, “Shaping an Islamic Identity: Religion, Islamism, and the State in Central Asia”.

<sup>34</sup> “Kolichestvo medrese ugrozhaet kachestvu obrzovaniia?”.

<sup>35</sup> Narynbek Kydyrgyichov, e-mail message to author, October 9, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Mahinur, personal interview with the author, September 20, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Jamilya, personal interview with the author, September 24, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Zair Ergeshov, WhatsApp message to author, September 29, 2019.

### *Parental influence*

Based on the interviews conducted for this research, it is clear that, in most cases, parents make the decision to enroll their children in a religious school. A study by Search for Common Ground<sup>39</sup> in Kyrgyzstan reported that “students of religious schools feel pressure from parents to obtain religious education.” In the initial stages, girls are subject to more pressure than boys. At the same time, 90 percent of the graduates surveyed said that if they were older, they would have made the same choice and would not want to change anything in their lives.<sup>40</sup>

“Some parents don’t want their children to study in a place that contradicts Islamic beliefs,” says Chybak Azhy, a former Mufti and currently one of the most popular Kyrgyz religious leaders. “Darwinism contradicts Islamic doctrines; mankind is descendant of a monkey – this is wrong! Parents are afraid their children will believe in these teachings and turn away from Islam,” explained the former Muftii, who defends the idea that all schoolbooks should adhere to Islamic theology. Moreover, he believes that gender segregation in education is needed to attract religious families to secular schools.<sup>41</sup>

Parents see the madrasah as the perfect school—not just to get “proper” religious knowledge, but as a protected and secure place isolated from alcohol, drugs, violence, and “bad behavior.” Sometimes migrant workers claim that the madrasah is the best place for their children, as they are under control, are taken good care of, and are isolated from bad influences. “In fact, the parents don’t care if their children become a professor or a millionaire,” said Saliev. “They do not mind if their kids are influenced by stereotypes or ‘false’ dreams.

Parents just are happy to isolate their kinds from alcohol, drugs, violence, and discrimination.”<sup>42</sup>

### *Social trends*

Parents often believe that their daughters will become more religious, obedient, nice, kind, and “perfect brides and future mothers” if they attend an Islamic educational institution.<sup>43</sup> Graduation from a religious school is indeed considered to be the highest criterion for a “perfect bride,” which is the main incentive for girls.<sup>44</sup> In fact, the notion of a “perfect bride” is directly related to the retraditionalization of gender roles.

According to Noor O’Neill Borbieva, since Kyrgyzstan’s 1991 independence, “Kyrgyzstani women have suffered disproportionately from poverty, domestic violence, unemployment, and underrepresentation in government. Brides are expected to defer to their husbands and in-laws on all matters. Their labor and offspring are the property of their husbands’ families. Men are the heads of household and the providers, and women are the homemakers and caregivers.” The religious women are more radical in this view, believing that if they please their spouses, they will go to heaven: “a woman may work only if she can keep up with her domestic responsibilities.”<sup>45</sup>

As explained in UN Women’s recent research in Kyrgyzstan regarding women’s marriage choice: “The position of a ‘daughter-in-law’ (*kelin*) in the husband’s family was generally experienced as one of vulnerability, which was burdened with the need to prove one’s versatility as a ‘good wife.’”<sup>46</sup> Rano Turaeva, studying the *kelin* phenomena, concluded that a “*kelin* comes to the family of her husband and does all the work around the household, including for her

<sup>39</sup> Search for Common Ground is an international non-profit organization with a mission to “mission is to transform how individuals, organizations, and governments deal with conflict - away from adversarial approaches and toward cooperative solutions.”

<sup>40</sup> Search for common ground representative, e-mail message to author, September 25, 2019.

<sup>41</sup> “Kyrgyz Women Call for More Religious Representation,” *IWPR*, February 19, 2018, accessed November 29, 2019, <http://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyz-women-call-more-religious>.

<sup>42</sup> “Pochemy kyrgyzstantsy otdaiut svoikh detei v medrese”.

<sup>43</sup> Gulsana Abytova, personal interview with the author, October 1, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>45</sup> O’Neill Borbieva. “Empowering Muslim Women: Independent Religious Fellowships in the Kyrgyz Republic”.

<sup>46</sup> “Professional and Marriage Choices of Youth in Kyrgyzstan,” UN Women, 2017, [https://www.undp.org/content/dam/unct/kyrgyzstan/docs/Library/Youth%20Research\\_Final%20Report\\_ENG\\_26June2017.pdf](https://www.undp.org/content/dam/unct/kyrgyzstan/docs/Library/Youth%20Research_Final%20Report_ENG_26June2017.pdf).

parents-in-law, their children etc. A *kelin* is supposed to respect all the family members of the household. *Kelins* should obey not only their husbands but also other elderly members of the family.<sup>47</sup> Michaele Commercio argues that “Sympathy for retraditionalization is unfolding in the context of ongoing economic uncertainty that has plagued Kyrgyzstan since the Soviet Union's collapse...”<sup>48</sup>

### *Isolation*

Another factor pushing girls to choose religious schools relates to the inability of secular schools to accept girls' religious clothing and lifestyle. According to a government decree “On the introduction of Unified requirements for school uniforms in educational institutions of the Kyrgyz Republic,” a girl's school uniform consists of the following set of items: a blouse, vest, skirt, trousers, dress, apron, and a jacket made in the classical Kyrgyz style.<sup>49</sup> In accordance with this decree, teachers and school principals request their students to follow the common rules. Several cases of persecution, bullying, and psychological abuse by teachers, school principals, and students against girls wearing Islamic clothing have been recorded in Kyrgyzstan within the last ten years. As an example, in 2018, a girl was denied attendance at her school's art class because she was wearing a scarf.<sup>50</sup> “If you want (to wear) a hijab, study in a madrasah,” claimed the head of the school.<sup>51</sup> This situation often pushes them (and influences the decision of the parents) to quit a secular school in order to enroll in an Islamic institution.

### **Life in and after the madrasah**

The freedom of religion provided in the Kyrgyz Constitution allows an individual to apply to a religious school only after completing compulsory secondary education. However, some madrasahs admit students who have not yet completed their secondary school. There are even reported cases of madrasahs admitting 7- and 8-year-old children: “Once, I saw a class half full of girls aged 10-11...this was in one of the madrasahs in Bishkek. I didn't see as many underaged children in men's madrasahs as in girls' ones. I can say that underaged students usually prevail in Uzbek-speaking madrasahs,” Gulsana Abytova said.<sup>52</sup> In the Osh region, it is especially common for parents to make their children drop out of schools even before the end of secondary school. “Individuals completely devote their lives to religion, and completely forget that kids need to have a secular education first. Therefore, madrasahs should expand the list of secular classes and give more opportunities to students.”<sup>53</sup>

Some girls think about their future more carefully and enroll in a madrasah only after graduating from a secular school. Kalipa for instance practiced distance learning at her secondary school in Aravan so that she would be able to attend a madrasah. She managed to get a school degree and enroll in university afterwards.<sup>54</sup> Aiperi and her friends made an agreement with a local college in Osh that allowed them to attend classes in the morning only and study in a madrasah in the afternoon.<sup>55</sup> But these cases are rare.

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<sup>47</sup> Rano Turaeva, “Kelin in Central Asia,” *ResearchGate*, January 2017, [http://www.researchgate.net/publication/319153305\\_Kelin\\_in\\_Central\\_Asia](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/319153305_Kelin_in_Central_Asia).

<sup>48</sup> Michele E. Commercio, “The politics and economics of ‘retraditionalization’ in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan”. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 5 (2015): 529-556.

<sup>49</sup> “Postanovlenie ‘O vvedenii edinykh trebovaniy k shkol'noi forme v obchsheobrazovatelnykh organizatsiyakh Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki’,” August 12, 2015, accessed November 20, 2019, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/97897>.

<sup>50</sup> Viktor Grigorenko, “V Kyrgyzstane devochku v platke ne puskaiut v shkoly. Eto zakonno?” *Vechernii Bishkek*, October 16, 2018, accessed November 3, 2019, [http://www.vb.kg/doc/374233\\_v\\_kyrgyzstane\\_devochky\\_v\\_platke\\_ne\\_pyskaut\\_v\\_shkoly\\_eto\\_zakonno.html](http://www.vb.kg/doc/374233_v_kyrgyzstane_devochky_v_platke_ne_pyskaut_v_shkoly_eto_zakonno.html).

<sup>51</sup> Tatiana Trik, “Khochesh khijab, uchis' v medrese. Pochemy kyrgyzskie shkoly protiv medrese,” *Kloop.kg*, November 26, 2018, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2018/11/26/hochesh-hidzhab-uchis-v-medrese-pochemu-kyrgyzskie-shkoly-protiv-platkov-i-pochemu-oni-ne-pravy/>.

<sup>52</sup> Gulsana Abytova, personal interview with the author, October 1, 2019.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Kalipa, personal interview with the author, September 26, 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Aiperi, personal interview with the author, September 24, 2019.

Many of the experts interviewed for this paper state that religious education is segregated from the state: neither staff nor students see themselves as part of a secular Kyrgyzstan, and they dream that one day the state will become an Islamic one.<sup>56</sup> One of the interviewed experts mentioned that girls studying in religious schools do not have a feeling of affiliation with the nation-state; the only thing they believe is religion. “Our motherland is Jannat (i.e. eternal reward of Allah),” Gulsana quoted a madrasah student where she did trainings.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, my research suggests that parents who send their daughters to madrasahs often ignore their daughters’ future inability to apply to a university and the likelihood of unemployment. Graduates of religious schools face problems with the recognition of their certificate of graduation. As a result, they have issues with further employment—or, due to the lack of a certificate of completion of school, they cannot continue their studies. “Certificates issued to the children by madrasahs are not recognized.”<sup>58</sup> The Bulan Institute’s research claims that only 5-7 percent of all madrasahs have secular classes in their curriculum.

As girls are usually isolated when studying in madrasahs, they do not know how to integrate into society after their studies. Most graduates of religious educational institutions get married during and after their studies; they do not work, having no choice but to take care of the household and raise children.<sup>59</sup> As told by one student, “Most of my schoolmates are staying at home, some got married and don’t work so far.”<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless, a number of young women understand the importance of secular education. They find ways to enroll in secondary

specialized colleges to get a proper diploma and profession, most often as a tailor or cook. “I insisted my daughter should study in madrasah. However, I also urged her get a secular education, because every woman should know how to make money and be independent,” said Aliya. Her daughter works in Turkey as an interpreter.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, the opinions and decisions of a husband and senior family members play vital roles in the life young women. “I want to become a translator-interpreter one day. .... I don’t want to waste my knowledge, but if my family doesn’t want me to work, I will obey,” admitted Kalipa.<sup>62</sup>

One of my interviewees, Gulina, noted that she would like to become a *mударise*. “I wish that madrasah curricula included more foreign languages, not only Arabic. I want to become an English teacher. I would like to contribute to the transformation of the madrasah educational system.” Gulina wants her children to study in a madrasah. Moreover, she believes that “they (her kids) should enroll in a madrasah even before graduating secondary school—in parallel with a secular school.” As this case demonstrates, some madrasahs accept minors. Similarly, in some cases, there are flexible institutions, such as the madrasahs as Naima and Toiiba in Bishkek, where the children can study at school and attend the madrasah simultaneously.<sup>63</sup>

It should be noted that Mareike Winkelmann, in her research on madrasahs in New Delhi (India), asked the female student respondents what they wanted to do after graduation. The students’ “first response was usually that they wanted to get married, while several expressed a desire to teach either in this madrasa or elsewhere.”<sup>64</sup> In fact, in my research

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<sup>56</sup> Jamilya, personal interview with the author, September 24, 2019.

<sup>57</sup> Gulsana Abytova, personal interview with the author, October 1, 2019.

<sup>58</sup> “Religious education in Kyrgyzstan: madrasah system in urgent need of reform”

<sup>59</sup> Ikbal Mirsaitov, e-mail message to author, September 29, 2019.

<sup>60</sup> Kalipa, personal interview with the author, September 26, 2019.

<sup>61</sup> Aliya, personal interview with the author, September 24, 2019.

<sup>62</sup> Kalipa, personal interview with the author, September 26, 2019.

<sup>63</sup> Gulina, personal interview with the author, September 24, 2019.

<sup>64</sup> Mareike Winkelmann, “‘Inside and Outside’ in a Girls’ Madrasa in New Delhi,” in Farish A. Noor, Yoginder Sikand, Martin van Bruinessen, eds. *The Madrasa in Asia* (Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 105-122.

I found identical answers. Winkelmann concludes that “girls’ madrasas open up a limited range of future trajectories in the professional sector.”<sup>65</sup>

### Future perspectives for religious education in Kyrgyzstan

In 2016, the Kyrgyz government launched the country’s first theology college at the Kyrgyz State University named after Ishenaly Arabaev. “The college furnishes a general education, along with studying the foundations of traditional Islam,” said Akmaral Gaibayeva, an SCRA employee.<sup>66</sup> It is an inclusive, mixed religious college in which both men and women can study. The first cadre of students graduated from the college in 2018. Four girls among them got married, and twenty continued their studies at religious universities. The Theology College has an official license from the Ministry of Education. Thus, the graduates receive a state diploma “that will enable them to continue their studies at any other university in Kyrgyzstan.”<sup>67</sup> The pilot project was financed by the Aiman Foundation for over three years, and since fall 2019, has been under the supervision of the Kyrgyz State University. The theology college students pay a tuition fee (about US\$200 per year), while the Kyrgyz State University has its own allocated funds.<sup>68</sup> “It’s good to have a college that teaches both religious and secular knowledge,” Mufti Toktomushev said. “Young people will emerge who can guide themselves superbly in secular life and have a deep knowledge of religion.”<sup>69</sup>

As a matter of fact, the theological college is the first and the only religious school in Kyrgyzstan that combines a high-quality Islamic educational system with secular components. The SCRA has presented the college as a prototype for all religious educational institutions in Kyrgyzstan. Those religious schools

that do not correspond to the suggested model criteria should be closed, said one SCRA representative.<sup>70</sup>

The Kyrgyz government clearly acknowledges the importance of improving the quality of religious education, including the granting of standardized state licenses. Nazira Kurbanova notes, “State accreditation and licensing will increase their prestige, put them on an equal basis with other educational establishments (either state or municipal), and change their status, which will make them eligible—within certain limits—for state support.”<sup>71</sup>

However, much still needs to be done. The confrontation between religious and secular education should come to an end. The state, its international partners, and religious institutions should cooperate and pull together to ensure that all madrasah applicants have graduated from a secular secondary school. Moreover, female graduates’ employment after graduating from madrasahs should be monitored and encouraged by the government and religious leaders. Young women should be urged to continue education after graduating from a madrasah and have a profession in support of girls’ education. The reform of madrasahs should include the regulation of the whole system of religious education, including the implementation of secular classes and the introduction of vocational trainings so that girls can have a wider range of opportunities after graduation.

### Recommendations

#### *To the Kyrgyz Government*

✓ Adopt a legal framework that regulates access to religious education and religious

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> “Kyrgyz theology college takes stand against radicalism and terrorism,” *Karavanserai*, November 8, 2016, accessed November 2, 2019, [http://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2016/08/11/feature-01](http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2016/08/11/feature-01).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Zair Ergeshov, personal interview with the author, September 29, 2019.

<sup>69</sup> “Kyrgyz theology college takes stand against radicalism and terrorism”.

<sup>70</sup> Zair Ergeshov, personal interview with the author, September 29, 2019.

<sup>71</sup> Kurbanova, “Islamic education in Kyrgyzstan”.

schools' certification, allowing graduates of madrasahs to take a nationwide test (ORT) and receive a diploma after madrasah graduation in accordance with established state standards.

- ✓ Adopt a provision that sets minimum hiring requirements for madrasah staff (i.e. secular and religious education, working experience, etc.) and requires all madrasah staff to attend upgraded trainings, including trainings on empowering women and gender equality.
- ✓ Ensure that all madrasah applicants have graduated from a secular secondary school.
- ✓ Support initiatives that introduce vocational trainings in madrasahs and build the technical skills that female students will need for future employment and/or self-employment opportunities.
- ✓ The National Statistics Committee should collect and make publicly available statistics on the number of madrasahs in Kyrgyzstan, including annual attendance, number of girls and

boys studying in religious schools, as well as statistics on their professional engagement after graduating from madrasahs.

*To Kyrgyzstan's International Partners*

- ✓ Urge the Kyrgyz government in private and public meetings to ensure the regulation of the situation with religious schools, particularly girls' madrasahs, and support the government in its effort to do so, including through financial and technical means.
- ✓ Share best practices that can help guarantee a high quality of secular classes in madrasahs while still corresponding with Islamic values, as well as expanding the diversity of vocational trainings.
- ✓ Continue to expand the U.S. Embassy's initiative in Kyrgyzstan to introduce vocational trainings in madrasahs; ensure its sustainability.
- ✓ Support the Kyrgyz government as it seeks to improve systematic data collection on girls' madrasahs

# Chapter 10.

## Tajik Artists Lead Social Change: The Role of Art in Questioning Traditional Values

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Lola Ulugova<sup>1</sup> (2019)

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*We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.*

Franklin D. Roosevelt

This quote from American president Franklin D. Roosevelt calls for action in education, social development, and support of youth. This same aspiration should be true for the Tajik government: young people are the main agents of social change, economic development and technological progress. The Tajik authorities have introduced several laws to support their policy on youth and culture since the country's independence in 1991, but with mixed results. In the cultural domain, they promote a traditional art that reflects mostly asocial topics, depicting reality without any hint of disobedience or protest—sometimes even praising the current government.

But a recent boom of non-conformist thinking in the artistic field shows that young artists are much more innovative. Using theater, visual arts, photo-video media, and rap and rock music, they address difficult subjects such as eroticism and sexuality and conduct social messaging that borders on protest. At least two prominent names among many others, Marifat Davlatova<sup>2</sup> and Dorob Dorobov (Dorob Yan's),<sup>3</sup> illustrate this trend of artistic unrest and disobedience. In this paper, I ask how Tajik artists reconcile their non-conformist thinking with the

traditional narratives about art promoted by the authorities. I argue that, despite a lack of cultural acceptance from the authorities, non-conformist art is developing and can thrive further. Secondary sources being scarce, this article relies mostly on interviews with local artists, critical analyses of artworks, and my almost 20 year-long professional experience as an art manager and art activist in Tajikistan.

### Youth and Culture in Tajikistan

According to official data, the average Tajik citizen is 25 years old. About 2.7 million people out of more than 8.9 million, or 30% of the population, are between 14 and 30 years of age.<sup>4</sup> Their creative imagination, ideals, powerful energy, and insight are of great importance for ensuring the continuous development of the society in which they live. However, the current rates of illiteracy, unemployment, and poor health conditions among Tajik youth are higher than those of their parents. There has been an unrecorded surge of illiteracy,<sup>5</sup> and the 2018 National Study on Adolescents and Youth in Tajikistan finds that 53.6% of adolescents do not use a computer, and 64% of them do not use internet.<sup>6</sup>

The Tajik government has released several laws on youth and culture. Tajikistan's Youth and

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<sup>1</sup> Lola Ulugova (Lolisanam) has been an art manager in Tajikistan since 2000. She has contributed in writing and producing the nation's first 3-D animation film to promote awareness of environmental issues among children. Also, she has co-produced the documentaries *After the Curtain* covering the intimate stories of a few Tajik women dancers and *Youth for Laws Supremacy* performance depicting her protest against torture and violence. She holds MA from the University of Turin, Italy, and BA Degree in Russian Language and Literature.

<sup>2</sup> Davlatova, Marifat, visual artist's Facebook's page, <https://www.facebook.com/marifat.davlatova>

<sup>3</sup> Dorobov, Dorob, rapper's YouTube channel, [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAq1\\_c\\_w0y4ewLbBUky7krQ](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAq1_c_w0y4ewLbBUky7krQ)

<sup>4</sup> European Commission-Directorate General for development and cooperation – EuropeAid, Tajikistan multi-annual indicative programme 2014-2020 and country strategy paper 2014-2020, pp. 19-20.

<sup>5</sup> International Crisis Group, "Youth in Central Asia: Losing the new generation," Asia Report No. 66, October 2003, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/tajikistan/youth-central-asia-losing-new-generation>

<sup>6</sup> Center for Strategic Research under the President of Tajikistan, Adolescent Baseline Study 2018, (National study on adolescent and youth in Tajikistan), page 4-5, <https://www.unicef.org/tajikistan/reports/adolescents-baseline-study-2018>

Youth Policy law from 2004 defines youth as people aged 14 to 30 and regulates the pillars for their legislative, social, economic, and cultural development. The main implementing body of this law is the Youth Committee under the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan, whose role is to provide integrated services in the field of education, culture, health, and economy and to distribute state grants. In 2016, the government approved the National Program on Youth Social Development of Tajikistan for 2016-2018, which primarily focuses on patriotic education.

The latest edition of the Law on Culture, enacted in 2011, regulates activities in a wide range of artistic genres and directions such as fiction, cinematography, scenic/dancing/musical/fine arts, photo/video art, etc. On paper, this law is based on the basic principles of freedom of creative activities, recognition of pluralism of opinions, and assistance to the development of the creative potential of citizens. The body tasked to implement this law is the Ministry of Culture. A Conception of the Cultural Development of Tajikistan states that the law's implementation depends on a "direct appeal to the national traditions of the country"—an obscure terminology that limits artistic expression and remains blurrily defined. For instance, in August 2017, the state signed amendments to the Law on Observing National Traditions and Rituals, compelling citizens to wear "national clothing" at weddings and funerals.<sup>7</sup>

The authorities stress the importance of keeping Tajik youth inside a framework of restrictive national traditions. They also insist on integrating youth into state performative production as much as possible. For instance, youth are invited to march at parades and festivities such as Independence Day (September 9), Navruz (March 21, spring equinox), and National Unity Day (June 27). Additionally, the state has a grant program for supporting youth. According to anonymous respondents from the officials of the Youth Committee in Dushanbe, the state offers about 10 grants annually (approximately \$1,000 per grant) for organizations that affiliate with

youth issues and 10 additional grants (approximately \$1,000 per grant) for increasing patriotic feelings and attitudes among youth.

### **Traditional Art and the Different Perceptions of "National Traditions"**

Through their cultural policy, the authorities target mostly Tajik-speaking youth, especially rural youth. The Tajik population is approximately 73.6% rural and 26.4% urban.<sup>8</sup> The inequality of opportunities and participation between urban and rural youth is massive, with rural youth largely excluded from the main efforts in development.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, rural Tajiks have little access to even the basic amenities that urban populations normally consume, including central sewage systems, water pipes, central heating, etc. They receive information almost exclusively from the official controlled media and have no access to alternative sources of information, precisely because they possess little to no Russian language skills and have even less knowledge of English. In addition to these hurdles, rural communities often do not have proper access to the internet because of its low speed and unattainably high prices.



*Ivan Lisikov, 1965, "Group of Tajik Intellegentsia", Tajik National Museum, photo-Ulugova's archives.*

There is no data on the perceptions that rural and urban youth have regarding state-backed traditional values. However, considering the results of 14 of the 16 interviews I conducted between June and

<sup>7</sup> Roudik, Peter, Global Legal Monitor, Tajikistan: Law Prescribes Observation of National Traditions, <https://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/tajikistan-law-prescribes-observation-of-national-traditions/>

<sup>8</sup> Sinor, Denis; Smith, David Roger; Imshenetsky, Alexandr Ilyich; Hambly, Gavin R.G.; Allworth, Edward, (Britannica: Tajikistan) <https://www.britannica.com/place/Tajikistan>

<sup>9</sup> UNICEF, Annual report on Tajikistan 2017, pp. 6-8, [https://www.unicef.org/about/annualreport/files/Tajikistan\\_2017\\_COAR.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/about/annualreport/files/Tajikistan_2017_COAR.pdf)

September 2019, it seems that rural, Tajik-speaking youth conform more closely to so-called traditional values than their urban counterparts. Conversely, Tajik youth in urban settings tended to display subversive countercultures that are considered by authorities to be dangerous—either because of their Western borrowings or because they are judged to draw too much inspiration from radical Islam.<sup>10</sup>

A relatively active cultural life can be found only in the capital, Dushanbe, and sometimes in Khujand.<sup>11</sup> Situated in the center of the Sughd province, Khujand is the second-largest city in Tajikistan and is considered to be the business center of Tajikistan because of its close economic ties with neighboring Uzbekistan and historical connection to the Fergana Valley. In these urban areas, young people can access both government-founded and alternative events, such as rock/jazz/fusion parties and festivals. Rural youth outside these centers, in contrast, remain deprived of access to such events.

Tajikistan's state-promoted traditional values focus mostly on respect for traditional hierarchies such as the family's authority, an obvious metaphor for the political order. Tajikistan is indeed both a gerontocratic and patriarchal society, where the parents make choices for their children regarding marriages, education, and the way of living (including customs, traditions, social norms).<sup>12</sup> The traditional authoritarian style of parenting teaches children and adolescents that it is impolite and inappropriate to speak in the immediate vicinity of adults. In her research on this subject, Helene Thibault mentions "controversial legal measures to promote national values" in the Law on Parental Responsibility in the Upbringing and Education of Children, introduced in 2011. The law "patronizes moral recommendations focusing mainly on female clothing and virtue, which have come to embody national values;"

consequently, wearing any non-local clothes—whether it is a hijab, tight jeans, or a short skirt—contradicts and betrays national values."<sup>13</sup>

When Soviet Tajikistan received the status of federal republic in 1929, it started shaping its own arts unions, such as Painters Unions, Literature Unions, and Architecture Unions. Socialistic realism was the official doctrine used to beautify the national traditions and garner support for the new state ideology.<sup>14</sup> The schools of realism and academism promoted strictly controlled versions of each ethnicity's cultural traditions. They spanned all genres of European visual, musical, and performing arts traditions. Pictorial arts in a naturalistic style that conformed to the principles of social realism were encouraged. There was little space for "formalist" arts, and as a result, Tajik arts developed within the state-proclaimed Socialist Realist philosophy and style.<sup>15</sup>

Larisa Dodkhodeva, a Tajik expert in art theory and history, considers the Tajik arts to be asocial from the Soviet times, depicting the beauties of nature and people—mostly women and children—but rarely touching acute social problems. She states that Tajik artists rarely turn to criticism and give prevalence to Soviet-era constructs of national mythology.<sup>16</sup>

### Non-Conformist Artistic Production

Yet, even in an unwelcoming environment, non-conformist artistic production is on the rise. Contemporary Tajik art can trace its origins to a project called *Starter* that was launched in 2005 by the Swiss Cooperation Office and Consular Agency in Tajikistan. Led by Tajik People's Artist Sabzali Sharifov, students from various art educational institutions in Dushanbe and Khujand took part in the project as a

<sup>10</sup> IWPR Central Asia, "It's Hard to be a Punk in Tajikistan", June 7, 2016, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/its-hard-be-punk-tajikistan>

<sup>11</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, (Khujand, Tajikistan), <https://www.britannica.com/place/Khujand>

<sup>12</sup> Harris, Colette, "The capacity to aspire: young persons and gender—age relations in southern Tajikistan and North India", School of International Development, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK, Central Asian Survey, V. 38, 2019- issue 4, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02634937.2019.1642850?af=R&journalCode=ccas20>

<sup>13</sup> Thibaut, Helene, "Female Virtue, Religion and State Ideology in Tajikistan", CERIA Briefs #10, January 2016, [https://www.academia.edu/20167317/Female\\_Virtue\\_Religion\\_and\\_State\\_Ideology\\_in\\_Tajikistan](https://www.academia.edu/20167317/Female_Virtue_Religion_and_State_Ideology_in_Tajikistan)

<sup>14</sup> Boinazarov, Boinazar, "Istoria stanovlenia i razvitiia izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva tadjikskogo naroda: 20-80-e gody XX veka", (History of establishment and development of visual arts of Tajik people: 20-80 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) Dushanbe, 2004, <https://search.rsl.ru/ru/record/01002738098>

<sup>15</sup> Dodkhodeva, Larisa, "Grafika i skulptura Tadjikistana XX veka", (Graphic Art and Sculpture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century of Tajikistan), Dushanbe, 2006

<sup>16</sup> Dodkhodeva, Larisa, "Aktualnoe iskusstvo Tadjikistana, deset let puti" (Conceptual Arts of Tajikistan: 10 years of development), pp. 6-8, Dushanbe, 2016

first attempt to introduce innovative approaches to the arts into the curriculum of the Tajik educational system.<sup>17</sup> It resulted in some follow-up exhibitions, mostly presented by a small group of artists who used video as their main medium. The first exhibition of contemporary arts was *Parallel*, which opened in 2006 as a series of outcomes from the *Starter*



Sharipov Murodjon, 2012 "Granat", Dushanbe,  
photo: Sharipov's archives

workshop. The exhibition had national coloring but was at the same time grounded in a more modern conception of art as questioning society.

### ***Censored arts***

Well acclimated to and integrated with globalized cultural trends, some Tajik artists have been using new styles like rock and rap music to express themselves. In 2014, the authorities banned the broadcasting of rock and rap music, considering it to be alien to national and universal human values and in confrontation with the national culture.<sup>18</sup>

Paradoxically, they rely on a Soviet definition of what traditional art is: for instance, opera, ballet, and symphonic music, now considered as traditional, were never part of Tajik "traditions" before the Russian colonization, and integrated with the national pantheon only during Soviet times. Even jazz is not perceived today as a hostile art, but rock and rap are because they convey social messaging which confronts the official state doctrine, pointing out problems and criticizing the authorities for failing to tackle corruption, unemployment, and other acute problems.

Following this ban, the Open Society Institute – Assistance Foundation (OSIAF) (Open Society Foundations - network) launched a project—which I coordinated as an Arts and Social Activism Program Coordinator—to help Tajik rappers find ways to reconcile their lyrics with the demands of authorities.<sup>19</sup> To meet the project's strategic goal of supporting freedom of expression, OSIAF aimed to brush up the artists' rap lyrics, avoid curse words, and try to find analogies in Persian poetry and literature to substitute the current reality with the Tajik verbal heritage of the past. Topics of lyrics were varied but each track denounced injustice in general, drug abuse, unemployment, migrant nostalgia for their home country, etc. Unfortunately, the project was ultimately unable to persuade the authorities to recognize the rappers' lyrics as socially acceptable

The most vivid example of disobedience and protest in rap music has been the Pamiri singer Dorob Dorobov (1989).<sup>20</sup> Escaping the civil war of the 1990s, he made a bitter track on how Dushanbe authorities treat the GBAO (Gorno-Badakhshan Oblast) region. During the 2012 anti-government riots in Khorog,<sup>21</sup> a close relative of his died, causing him to express his pain and resentment towards the state in a new series of songs. In his tracks, he criticized the government for its inability to control the situation and for letting innocent dwellers be killed.

<sup>17</sup> Dodkhudoeva, Larisa, "Aktualnoe iskusstvo Tadjikistana, deset let puti" (Conceptual Arts of Tajikistan: 10 years of development), pp. 2-4, Dushanbe, 2016

<sup>18</sup> Sodiqov, Alexander, "Tajikistan: As Tajik rap gets political, authorities resort to bans and pressure", *Freemuse.org*, June 5, 2014, <https://freemuse.org/news/tajikistan-as-tajik-rap-gets-political-authorities-resort-to-bans-and-pressure-2/>

<sup>19</sup> Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation (OSIAF), operational project "Armonia", [https://www.facebook.com/armoniaproject/?epa=SEARCH\\_BOX](https://www.facebook.com/armoniaproject/?epa=SEARCH_BOX)

<sup>20</sup> Dorobov, Dorob, rapper, [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAq1\\_c\\_w0y4ewLbBUky7krQ](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAq1_c_w0y4ewLbBUky7krQ)

<sup>21</sup> For more information on Khorog events see: Najibullah, Farangis, "Explainer: What's Going on in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan?", May 29, 2014 <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-explainer-gorno-badakhshan/25403342.html>

Furthermore, he reflects the situation in the country as one of excess power and abuse. He was detained in 2013 and interrogated for two weeks in a detention center in Russia.<sup>22</sup> He was freed afterward, but he has been banned from entering Tajikistan and continues to receive threats on social media.

Although, the state restricts rappers and rockers by banning them from public performances, it seems ready to support artists who sing patriotic rap songs on state television and radio.<sup>23</sup> This is the case with Baron's song "Diyori Archmand" (Motherland), which praises the authorities, especially the President, and was widely broadcast on state television channels. The lyrics, more than the musical style per se, are therefore at the center of the authorities' attention.

### Uneasy but Safer Subjects

Unlike rap and rock, which are officially banned, many other sensitive topics find themselves in a grey zone: not officially forbidden, yet still not welcome by Tajik authorities. In this broad category, one may find artists addressing issues such as the memory of the civil war, abuse of power, corruption, violence in the army or prisons, domestic violence, sexuality, etc. In these cases, the issue of self-censorship has played and continues to play a huge role; artists have to be careful in choosing each word/scene, and they have to balance their ability to provoke with their social status and the patronage they may benefit from—as some well-placed patrons can protect them from repression.

### Denouncing violence

The level of violence in Tajikistan is high, and illegal cases of torture and abuse in the country's army and prisons are widespread.<sup>24</sup> Several artists tackle this

issue with caution. I can say from my own experience in 2019, when I produced a performance against illegal actions such as torture and abuse called "Youth for Laws Supremacy," I weighed each word in the script.<sup>25</sup> The public response often stated that it was too brave to produce such a performance in which a range of acute social issues were directly addressed. These performances often have a very limited



*Shabi dur az Vatan (Nostalgia) play, 2017, Nozim Melikov director, Dushanbe Javanon theater, photo: Ulugova*

audience and do not attract the public. This was the case with the recent exhibition of Farrukh Negmatzade,<sup>26</sup> which marked June 26, the United Nations' International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, by depicting different forms of violence, both physical and psychological.<sup>27</sup> The same goes for Murodjon Sharifov<sup>28</sup> and Anisa Sabiri,<sup>29</sup> two prominent young artists who use painting along with video media and photo media/cinematography

<sup>22</sup> Petrov, Egor, "Rapper Dorob-Yan's: Na scene mena zadushat posle tretiego trecka" (Rapper Dorob-Yan's: I will be choked after the third track), December 27, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Rapper XZ Baron, "Diyori arjmand" (Motherland), label weTAJshow, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yfkNa8CIZE>

<sup>24</sup> Coalition against torture, "Tajikistan: Committee against Torture (written information for the list of issues, June 2017)" <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5a140fe46.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> Ulugova, Lolisanam, independent art journalist, curator "Youth for Laws Supremacy", performance, June 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0aayuF9vNXE&t=2s>

<sup>26</sup> Negmatzade, Farrukh, visual artist's Facebook account <https://www.facebook.com/farrukh.negmatzade>

<sup>27</sup> Notorture.tj, "V Dushanbe sostioyalas vystavka graphicheskoyh rabot hudojnika Farrukha Negmatzade".

<sup>28</sup> Sharifov, Murodjon, visual artist, designer's Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/sharifov.murod>

<sup>29</sup> Artists at risk connection, Anisa Sabiri's profile, <https://artistsatriskconnection.org/story/anisa-sabiri>

respectively to address social problems on the subject of violence. Sharifov's recent works reflect migration issues, the war in Syria, and the conflict in Gaza, while Anisa Sabiri, in her film *Nolai Tanbur*, reveals the wounds of the civil war in Tajikistan. The topic of the civil war of Tajikistan (1991-1997) has been sensitive and is painful to cover for any artist in Tajikistan, whether they are visual artists, theater or cinema directors, or journalists. Discussions on the civil war can still ignite tensions between the different sides in the conflict, so artists tend to avoid this difficult topic.

### **Women and environmental issues**

Topics of gender, domestic violence, abuse towards women, and environmental issues find themselves in more of a safe zone for non-conformist artists. The Rumansevs, Alla and Alexey, are the most prominent Tajik artists that contribute to youth education regarding non-conventional thinking over arts.<sup>30</sup> Alla's *Modality-3* project<sup>31</sup> invites youth to rethink the role of women in society. Surayo Tuichieva<sup>32</sup> also helps analyze the ways that society impacts women's daily life and ways of thinking. Her video entitled "Generation Next" reveals "the transformation of political ideology in Tajikistan through the prism of changing accessories worn by women."<sup>33</sup> The recent ironic cartoons of Azam Mirzones,<sup>34</sup> widely circulated on social media, echo issues of environmental damages, domestic violence, and cultural norms such as required behavior in public transport, etc. The Nihohi Nav (New Vision) theater group, which has brought documentary trends into the Tajik theater scene since 2012, touches subjects of abuse, labor migration, and psychological problems that youth face as they grow up.<sup>35</sup>

### **Nudity**

The topic of nudity—along with all aspects of sexuality—is not a welcomed subject but is not officially banned. The first "nude" exhibition, *Green and Orange, Blue and White* of a visual painter



Marifat Davlatova, 2018, *Desire*, Dushanbe, photo: Ulugova's archives

Farrukh Negmatzde, was organized by me, Lolisanam Ulugova, with the support of the Swiss Cooperation Office and Consular Agency in Tajikistan. It was one of the first art exhibitions after the civil war, celebrating peace and the hope for reconstruction of the country. His exhibition was quite a success and, despite this being one of the first "nude" exhibitions, it did not cause an outburst from Tajik officials—perhaps because of the weakness of social media at that time. Similarly, a later exhibition by Mizrob Kholov also presented several nude works, and here too, the exhibition concluded without raising vocal criticisms.<sup>36</sup> Things changed in 2018 when Marifat

<sup>30</sup> Rumansev, Alexey, contemporary artist, head of ArtBooz project, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Rumanseva, Alla, contemporary artist, curator of "Modality-3" project.

<sup>32</sup> Tuichieva, Surayo, contemporary artist, curator, a brief at 10<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial, 2007, <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/istanbul/eng/2007/tour/santralistanbul/img-07-3.htm>

<sup>33</sup> Stefan, Olga, curator, Itinerant Projects, June 6, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Mirzones, Azam, "Satirical cartoons on social issues", 2019, [https://www.facebook.com/pg/Repckasatir/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/Repckasatir/about/?ref=page_internal), coverage on Radiio Ozodi, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B4Jho22HJID/>

<sup>35</sup> "Nigohi Nav" theater group, Facebook' page.

<sup>36</sup> Kholov, Mizrob, visual artist, event at Serena hotel, Tajikistan, February, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/events/dushanbe-serena-hotel/painting-exhibition/247148169516124/>

Davlatova displayed her nude paintings at the Serena Hotel, one of the most popular places to exhibit arts in the capital due to its open-minded management policies.

The subject of her exposition was showing her contemporaries' daily life, denuding their inner and outer world. Davlatova expressed her protest of the existing traditional practice of arranged marriages, imposing a woman as a trading symbol for beauty. This event divided the viewers into her admirers and critics. For the latter, Tajikistan's traditional unwritten code of laws regulates that women show her body only within the marriage links.<sup>37</sup> The fact that the author of nudes was a woman herself—and not a man as with the two previous cases mentioned—may have played a crucial role here. Her work "Hopelessness," which shows a half-dressed girl wearing traditional pants and eagerly inhaling a cigarette, depicts any Tajik girl who restrains herself to show her real identity publicly. It proves the hypocrisy and dominance of the honor-and-shame system which hinders citizens from being honest in public. "I depicted my counterparts as sincere and without hypocrisy," said Marifat in my interview with her, adding, "our society is closed, hypocritical, and cruel; people do not say the truth to each other and for themselves."

Colette Harris's research on women in Tajikistan in the 1990s has proven to remain relevant as it provides background information that is helpful for understanding the situation surrounding Davlatova's exhibition. The artist has indicated her protest over the patriarchal dominance in Tajik society. "Tajikistan is influenced by the honor-and-shame system; in Tajikistan, shame (*ayb*) has become reified and is a notable hindrance to virtually everything a girl or young woman wishes to undertake."<sup>38</sup> The fact that viewers of artists' works rushed to defend their honor or *namus* (appropriate gender performances) shows the piety of a growing part of the society. These cases show how Tajik public opinion accepts male artists' depictions of women's

nude bodies while simultaneously condemning female artists for doing the same thing, reflecting the whole society's traditional mindset.

### **Youth resistance**

In the past few years, Tajik youth subcultures have become more active globally. In 2019, footage on social media of Tajik-Russian Slavonic University graduate student Azamat Ziyaev reflects a revolt against the state media for its dull and outdated programs. The video, entitled "A Lie, the Truth, and a Stupidity," metaphorically denounces the three main components of state television, and calls for resistance to obedience and the platitudes of Tajik journalism.<sup>39</sup> I asked Ziyaev if he was not afraid of publishing his diploma work on the same topic. He said there was no panacea from the punishment of dissidence so far. However, he admitted that he did not criticize any senior officials directly and used metaphors to protect himself from reverse accusations. He believes that the video will force the authorities to react and improve the quality of its television programs.

### **Conclusion**

Since its independence, Tajikistan has faced many challenges that cannot be easily solved, such as the trauma from the civil war and the lack of economic development. However, the main obstacles to the country's improvement can actually be found in the state's own limitations to freedom of expression, speech, and faith. Preservation of "national traditions" may be important in a time of nation-building, but it does not have to limit artistic expressions, especially as freedom of expression is officially inscribed into Tajik legislation. The current definition of Tajik art has been too narrow to integrate the modernity of new forms of arts, from rap music to street art.

The country still has to overcome the Soviet

<sup>37</sup> Jaafar-Mohammad, Imani; Lehmann Charlie, "Women's rights in Islam Regarding Marriage and Divorce", Journal of Law and Practice, V.4, article 3, 2011, <https://open.mitchellhamline.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1020&context=lawandpractice>

<sup>38</sup> Harris, Colette, "State business: gender, sex and marriage in Tajikistan", School of International Development, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK, Central Asian Survey, April 8, 2011, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02634937.2011.554057?journalCode=ccas20>

<sup>39</sup> Ziyaev, Azamat, journalist, "Eto bilo smeshno- Tadjikskaya telejurnalistika, shto s toboid ne tak?" (It was funny- Tajik TV journalism, what is wrong with you), own produced video, 2019.

legacy of banning formalism and allow for a more critical perspective on how art can depict society and address its social ills. The authorities cannot develop the country economically without empowering the younger generation and giving them room to blossom and imagine another future. A dialogue between national traditions and non-conformist art is thus possible and should be seen by the authorities as paving the way to use culture as a tool to foster national identity and unity, and to help the country integrate more successfully on the international scene. The rich cultural legacy of Tajikistan, particularly in Persian poetry and music, as well as the Soviet repertoire, constitutes fertile soil for contemporary artists to develop new forms of art that can be both national and globalized—so long as the state is ready to accompany them and support them.

### **Recommendations**

To the Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Education for encouraging the Contemporary Arts:

- Increase the number of art galleries in the country. Each art educational institution (there are just a few) might open its own art gallery: the Tajikistan State Institute of Art, Visual Arts and Design University, and College of Arts. In addition, there are some abandoned buildings

across the country. Some of them could be the contemporary arts galleries;

- Update the educational curricula on art subjects, ensuring an increase in the development of contemporary arts subjects;
- Update the maps/guidance for tourists including the location of galleries and art studios;
- Launch a series on TV programs describing art trends worldwide; invite non-traditional artists to take part in these TV programs to discuss their art.

To the Embassies in RT, European Union Commission to RT, Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation (OSIAF), Swiss Cooperation Office and Consular Agency in Tajikistan (SCD), and other internationally affiliated organizations:

- Include in your grant-making programs support for individual artists and art institutions for developing the contemporary arts in the field of visual and performing arts as well as other artistic genres and styles;
- Facilitate dialogues between the Ministries of Culture and Education and non-traditional artists by bringing renowned experts in the field to help bridge the gap between artists and the state.

# Chapter 11.

## The Many Challenges of Native Language Journalism in Central Asia: The Case of Kyrgyzstan

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Elmurat Ashiraliev<sup>1</sup> (2019)

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The influence of the Russian language is still apparent in almost all spheres of life in Central Asia. Despite the new states' policies of developing their native languages—policies that have now been in place for nearly 30 years—Russian remains a key language in the realms of politics, education, economics, culture, and information technology. The mediascape is no exception. In Kyrgyzstan, as in other neighboring Central Asian states, journalism is mostly bilingual. Kyrgyz and Russian—recognized in the Constitution as the state and official languages, respectively— can be used equally for legislation and other official pronouncements.

Depending on the language used, the coverage of particular events and issues varies in tone, emphasis, content, and perspective. Russian-speaking news outlets are more Bishkek-centric and some are likely to cover stories from a Russia-oriented perspective, while Kyrgyz-language mass media are more conservative and “provincial” in the sense of doing more reporting on regional issues. Oftentimes, Russian-speaking mass media have wider public resonance and social consequence than Kyrgyz-language outlets. Kyrgyz-speaking news outlets are often considered to be biased and to carry unverified information, making them closer to tabloid journalism than Russian-speaking media, even if the latter have also produced what is called “yellow press” (*zheltaia pressa*). The regional director of IWPR in Central Asia, Abahon Sultonazarov, summarizes well the many issues faced by Kyrgyz-language media outlets:

News websites in Kyrgyz were mostly tabloid [yellow press]. Or they belonged to certain politicians. They could be opposition members, current and former politicians, and so on. Kyrgyz is a beautiful language, but you know, it was used, I would like to emphasize, unfortunately, for blackening, uncovering who slept with whom, what they did, who is the relative of whom. Kyrgyz is spoken in rural areas. The majority of people in our region [Central Asia] live in rural areas and they are the electorate. The politicians used mass media to discredit their opponents.<sup>2</sup>

Based on a study of 21 countries across Europe and Eurasia, the IREX 2018 report on media sustainability<sup>3</sup> ranks professional journalism in Central Asian countries at a very low level in terms of their quality and professional standards (see Figure 1). Some of the IREX report's points highlight the main issues that this paper will discuss. These include the observations that, “Entertainment content tends to dominate. When the media do publish articles on political or socially important topics, the quality is low” (Kazakhstan); “A code of ethics for journalists has been in effect since 2007, but it has little impact” (Kyrgyzstan); “Television broadcasts do not present a balance of opinions, and reports are usually written in the first person” (Tajikistan); and “The most common violations among Uzbek journalists are favoritism and plagiarism, as well as the use of a single source of information” (Uzbekistan).

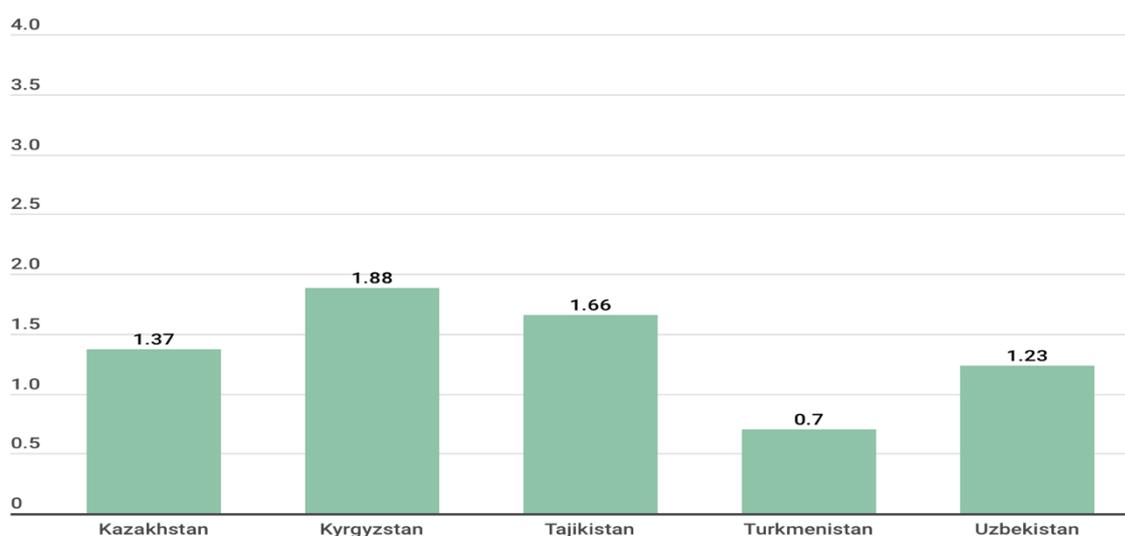
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<sup>1</sup> Elmurat Ashiraliev is a journalist at Kloop Media, an independent Kyrgyz media outlet that covers topics including politics, human rights, and corruption. As a part of the Kloop Media team, Elmurat served as the Kyrgyz editor for the UNDEF- and UNESCO-supported “Community Media Centers” projects. He is a member of the “Esimde” team that researches the history and memory of the Kyrgyz Republic. Elmurat earned an M.A. in Central Asian Studies from the American University of Central Asia in 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Abahon Sultonazarov, personal interview with the author, Washington, DC, March 2019.

<sup>3</sup> The report looks at five aspects: Free Speech, Professional Journalism, Plurality of News Sources, Business Management, and Supporting Institutions. These are scored on a scale from one to four, where one corresponds to Unsustainable Anti-Free Press, two to Unsustainable Mixed System, three to Near Sustainability, and four to Sustainable.

Figure 1. IREX media sustainability assessment for Central Asia



Source: IREX, *Media Sustainability Index 2018*

This paper investigates Kyrgyzstan's mediascape in the country's native language and the challenges it faces. It focuses on online media, which represent a significant share of Kyrgyzstan's media consumption today. Although there are no generally accepted data on the level of Internet penetration in the country, estimates reach up to 80 percent. According to a Digital Central Asia report, Internet penetration is at a low 35 percent,<sup>4</sup> while M-Vector research estimates it at 59 percent,<sup>5</sup> and calculations by local official institutions are way too high, at above 80 percent.<sup>6</sup> A large share of the population still prefers to receive news via traditional mass media; nevertheless, news coming from the Internet is increasingly prevalent across the country.<sup>7</sup> While the traditional mass media (TV, newspapers, and radio) can be effectively controlled by the government, online media in general exist without censorship and make the media environment in Kyrgyzstan fuzzy and messy by spreading fake news, sensational crime stories, gossip about celebrities and officials, etc.

This paper is based on official statistics, interviews with local and international media experts, and content analysis of Kyrgyz-language

news sites. The expert interviews were conducted between December 2018 and March 2019. The content analysis comprises five Kyrgyz-language news sites—one state-funded and four private. After discussing the changes in Kyrgyzstan's linguistic landscape, this paper explores the country's mediascape, discusses the problems in Kyrgyz-language online media, and advances some recommendations for addressing these issues.

### The Growth of Kyrgyz Language

Given the Soviet past and ethnic composition of Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz language was and remains a minority language in Bishkek, the capital city. Press releases of all kinds (from state departments, international institutions, and public and non-governmental organizations alike) are usually composed and disseminated first in Russian. Press releases in Kyrgyz are thus either translations from Russian (sometimes low in quality and difficult to understand) or unavailable entirely. Notwithstanding, production in Kyrgyz is growing: more and more movies and TV series are being produced in and/or dubbed into the national language. A good amount of local literature in

<sup>4</sup> We Are Social, "Digital in 2018 in Central Asia," January 29, 2018, accessed April 17, 2019, <https://www.slideshare.net/wearesocial/digital-in-2018-in-central-asia-86866176>.

<sup>5</sup> M-Vector, "Media predpochtenii naseleniia Kyrgyzstana," *Internews*, December 14, 2017, <http://internews.kg/glavnye-novosti/issledovanie-mediapredpochteniya-naseleniya-kyrgyzstana-8-ya-volna-2017-god/>.

<sup>6</sup> Anna Vorobeva, Aynura Eshalieva, Begaim Usenova, and Ruslan Rahimov, "Otchet po itogam issledovaniia urovnia mediagramotnosti v Kyrgyzskoi Respublike," 2018, accessed April 17, 2019, <http://soros.kg/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Otchet-po-itogam-issledovaniya-mediagramotnosti-v-KR.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Kyrgyz is available, and Kyrgyz translations of foreign literature can be obtained as well, although there are only a few. Furthermore, some theater performances are now delivered in Kyrgyz. However, Kyrgyz is rarely used in academia; academic research is still mainly produced in Russian. This is explicable by the fact that the majority of Kyrgyzstan's scholars are representatives of the Soviet generation: they studied in Russian and have limited resources to translate their materials into Kyrgyz and to use the national language in their research. The situation is quite different in the provinces, where Kyrgyz is more widely used and Russian is losing its foothold.<sup>8</sup>

Language use is the object of a growing debate in Kyrgyzstan, yet not at the same level as it has been for decades in neighboring Kazakhstan. Positions diverge between those who want to promote a more proactive Kyrgyz-speaking policy and those who want Russian to retain its status. The first group usually expresses fear of the loss of Kyrgyz culture, traditions, and values together with the loss of language. Some urge the government to implement the state (Kyrgyz) language policy.<sup>9</sup> Some insist that the status of Russian as an official language should be revoked<sup>10</sup> and that Kyrgyz should replace it in all spheres of life, while also encouraging the learning of foreign languages.<sup>11</sup> Some express concern that the quality of education in Kyrgyz is lower than that in Russian, thus causing Kyrgyz-speakers to lag behind in all spheres.<sup>12</sup> The second group, comprised of advocates of Russian, says that Russian should be strengthened and enriched because it helps to preserve Kyrgyzstan's cultural and historical legacy, including the Soviet one.<sup>13</sup> A third group worries about Russian proficiency diminishing and Kyrgyz being unable to

function as a state language, seeing in this paradox a sign of the decline of literacy in the country.<sup>14</sup>

The various issues of language translation and linguistic purity are frequently taken up by mass media in different ways, sometimes producing agreement that Kyrgyz and Russian should not confront each other and should develop in parallel,<sup>15</sup> and sometimes accusing official institutions responsible for language policy of damaging the Kyrgyz language.<sup>16</sup>

One article, for instance, criticized journalists for crafting new words and encouraged them to use Kyrgyz words instead:

Our writers [journalists] have one bad habit. It's an illness of using foreign words, which are not necessarily pleasant to the ears, in their articles. Although such a "method" might seem peculiar to people who are not familiar with ancient words in our mother tongue, it feels petty, "inappropriate," to those who value the worth of words. [...] In the past, Kyrgyz people used to call wealth that is hidden in a secret place *qan salyq* [king tax]. For example, people say "the pirates could not find the king tax sniffing over the night." [...] Today, the journalists write "the president's personal foundation"—why not just write "the president's king tax?" [...] It is an insult and shame that the Kyrgyz army calls our soldiers *sarbaz* even though we have the word *jooker* in our mother tongue. This word [*sarbaz*] was used for the knights of Kokand Khanate that attacked and invaded Kyrgyz people in its time. *Sarbaz* is a Persian word with the meaning of "knight." By the way, the soldiers of Manas were called *choro*. Or to call them *eren* is also suitable.<sup>17</sup>

Another article denounces journalists for using the wrong words:

Lately we are hearing some journalists say the word *kar* (snow) with two "a"s, which is "*kaar*."

<sup>8</sup> Zamira Derbisheva, "Iazikovaia politika i iazikovaia situatsiia v Kyrgyzstane," *Russian Language Journal* 59, (2009): 49-58, [http://rlj.americancouncils.org/issues/59/files/Derbisheva\\_2009.pdf](http://rlj.americancouncils.org/issues/59/files/Derbisheva_2009.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> "Mavlyanova: Mamlekettik til sayasati chabal bolup jatat (video)," *Azattyk.org*, January 24, 2019, <https://www.azattyk.org/a/29727802.html>.

<sup>10</sup> "Orus tilinin rasmiy makamin joyush uchun referendum otkörüü sunushtaluuda," *Azattyk.org*, January 15, 2019, <https://www.azattyk.org/a/29710747.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Abdil-Ahat Kurban uulu, "Kirgizstanda kirgiz tilin ögöylöböylü," *Azattyk.org*, February 17, 2019, [https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyz\\_language\\_low/29769846.html](https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyz_language_low/29769846.html).

<sup>12</sup> Sapar Orozbekov, "Mama til, papa meken," *Azattyk.org*, August 1, 2016, <https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyz-language-economics/27891546.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Daniyar Mukambetov, "O roli i znachenii russkogo iazika dlia Kyrgyzstana," <http://www.nisi.kg/112-stati/467-o-rol-i-znachenii-russkogo-yazyka-dlya-kyrgyzstana.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Derbisheva, "Iazikovaia politika."

<sup>15</sup> Sere Chalkanova, "Govorit po kirgizski—eto modno!" *Elgezit.kg*, January 28, 2019, <https://elgezit.kg/2019/01/28/govorit-po-kyrgyzski-eto-modno>.

<sup>16</sup> Oljobay Shakir, "Kirgiz tilin kiyratuunun massalik masshtaby," *Azattyk.org*, December 11, 2019, [https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan\\_books\\_oljobai\\_shakir/29649607.html](https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_books_oljobai_shakir/29649607.html).

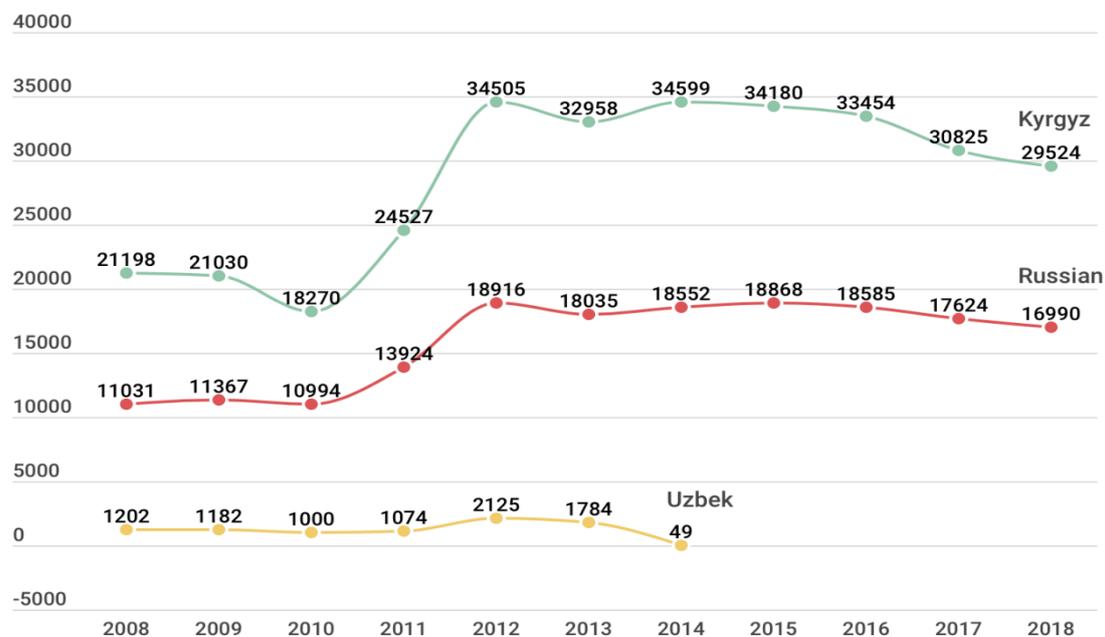
<sup>17</sup> Shayloobek Düsheev, "Jookerdi 'sarbaz' debeyli," *Azattyk.org*, August 25, 2018, <https://www.azattyk.org/a/shailoobek-duisheev-blog-/29447128.html>.

Only one “a” is used in the word *kar*. It is said, “*Kar jaady*,” “*kar túshtü*” (it snowed). It is said, “*Kar kalyñ jaady*” or “*kar juka jaady*” (it snowed heavily or it snowed lightly) [...] while “*kaar*” is used for angry people. For example, it is said, “one got very angry.” It means one is upset. [...] One of our singers has been singing the verse “*Bolgondursuñ ömürgö özüñ cherik*” incorrectly. The sound director who recorded the song and the music editor who gave permission to broadcast it should not have permitted the song to be aired until the words of the song were corrected. Unfortunately, they didn’t. The song “*Kyzyl örük*” has been sung wrongly for a long time. We would like to appeal to the editors and singer who do not understand the difference between “*sherik*” and “*cherik*.” “*Sherik*” means “friend, comrade.” In the song “*Kyzyl örük*” it has

this meaning. But “*cherik*” is the name of one of the four tribes of Kyrgyz people.<sup>18</sup>

A good way to follow the growth of the Kyrgyz language is to look at secondary education. It has remained trilingual, with Kyrgyz, Russian, and, to a lesser extent, Uzbek being the main languages of instruction. Pupils graduating from secondary schools are required to take the National Test in order to apply for higher education in the country. Nowadays, the test is available in two languages: Kyrgyz and Russian. Before 2014, pupils also had the option to take the test in Uzbek, but due to reforms to the test system, Uzbek is no longer available.

Figure 2. Number of pupils taking the National Test in Kyrgyz, Russian, and Uzbek over the past ten years



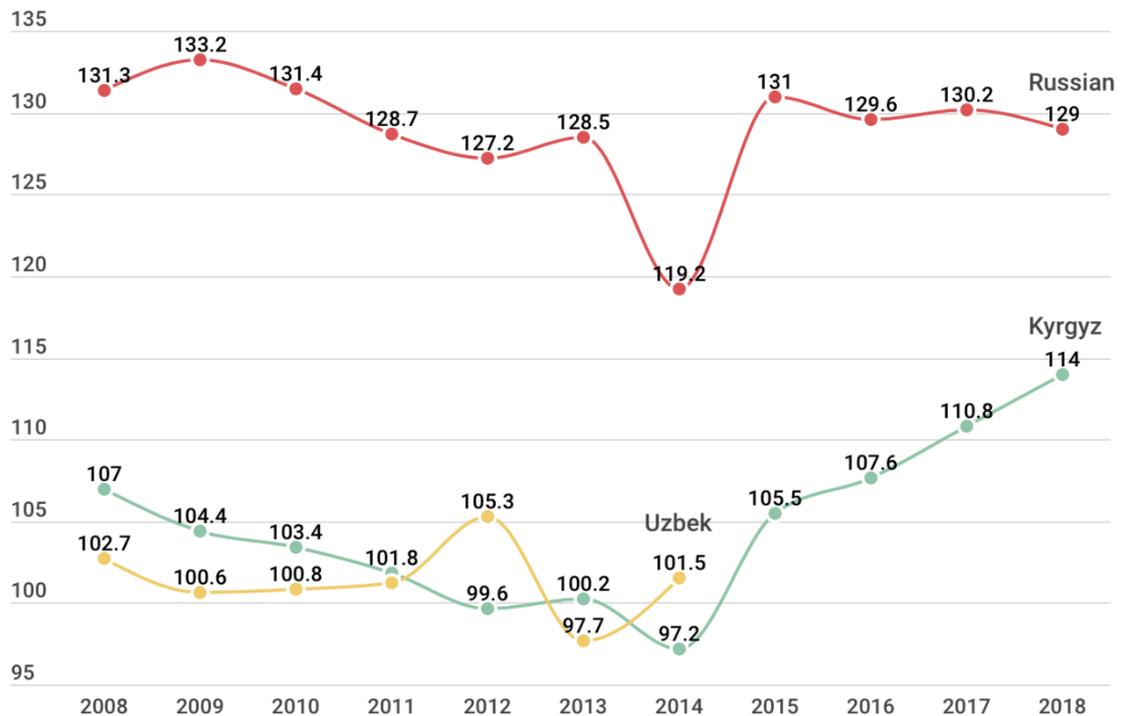
Source: Center for Educational Assessment and Teaching Methods. [Testing.kg/eng](http://Testing.kg/eng)

As we can see from Figure 2, there is a huge difference between the numbers of National Test takers in Kyrgyz and Russian. There are typically twice as many pupils taking the test in Kyrgyz as in Russian. In 2008, a total of 21,198 students took the test in Kyrgyz, twice as many as the 11,031 students who took it in Russian. That year, 1,202 students took the exam in Uzbek. As for 2018, 29,524 took

the test in Kyrgyz and 16,990 in Russian. However, as we see in Figure 3, the average score earned by Kyrgyz-speaking test-takers is typically lower than that of their Russian-language counterparts, revealing the difficulties that Kyrgyz-speaking schools have in reaching the level of their Russian-speaking counterparts and developing a full-fledged Kyrgyz language.

<sup>18</sup> Shayloobek Düsheev, “Türmө emes kürmө, cherik emes sherik,” *Azattyk.org*, June 27, 2017, [https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan\\_soz\\_daira\\_duisheev\\_2017/28577057.html](https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_soz_daira_duisheev_2017/28577057.html).

Figure 3. Average score of test-takers for the past ten years



Source: Center for Educational Assessment and Teaching Methods. [Testing.kg/eng](http://Testing.kg/eng)

### Kyrgyzstan’s Mediascape and Its Bilingualism

In such a linguistic context, what is the state of the media landscape in Kyrgyzstan? According to Kyrgyzstan’s Ministry of Justice, which grants licenses to mass media, there are 2,564 registered mass media in the country.<sup>19</sup> However, online media are not included in that list, which counts 1,392 newspapers, 666 magazines, 394 TV and radio companies, and a number of almanacs, periodicals, video studios, books, newspaper and magazine supplements, and programs. The Ministry of Justice does not specify the ownership type (public or private), language, or location of these media.

Importantly, not all of the mass media registered with the Ministry of Justice are operational—many exist only on paper. According to research conducted in 2013, the number of functioning media outlets in the country was only around 200. The Mass Media Support Center in

Kyrgyzstan recorded about 112 print media.<sup>20</sup> A local organization called Tinchtik Monitoring Service lists on its webpage 27 radio stations that are available online.<sup>21</sup> The National Union of Television and Radio Broadcasting lists 30 TV channels available by satellite to Kyrgyz citizens.<sup>22</sup> The traditional media landscape is thus much more limited than the official number of outlets registered would suggest.

The majority of Kyrgyzstan’s mass media are located in Bishkek, even if there are also a few media outlets functioning in the regions, mostly covering local issues. Some state-financed TV channels, radio stations, and newspapers operate on all levels (national, regional, and district): the TV channels KTRK, ELTR, 5 Kanal, and Piramida; the radio stations Birinchi Radio, Kyrgyz Radio, and Min Kiyal Radio; the newspaper *Erkin Too* (5,000–6,000 print circulation); and the online outlet *Kabar.kg* are all state-funded and are the largest of the regional state news media. Besides these state media, the

<sup>19</sup> As of February 2019. This information was provided to me as an official response to my request for information.

<sup>20</sup> SMI Help Center, “Redaktsii gazet Kyrgyzstana,” accessed April 17, 2019, <http://msc.kg/ru/partnery/redakcii-gazet-kyrgyzstana/>.

<sup>21</sup> Tinchtikin Monitoring Service, accessed April 17, 2019, <http://tms.kg/radiouk/>.

<sup>22</sup> National Union of Radio and TV Broadcasting, “Spisok telekanalov,” accessed April 17, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2CBhFYy>.

private sector also has a strong presence. The majority of the mass media, regardless of their type, fall into this category. Private TV companies, radio stations, and newspapers can operate in the country once they receive a license from the Ministry of Justice. In contrast to traditional mass media, online media outlets are not obliged to register.

As for the international media corporations functioning in Kyrgyzstan, three of them are widely visible and present in both traditional and new formats: Azattyk (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Kyrgyz service), the BBC's Kyrgyz service, and Sputnik Kyrgyzstan. Although less significantly, there are also Turkish (TRT Kyrgyz), Iranian (Cairnews.com/kg), and Chinese (one-hour "Travel to China" program aired daily on the biggest public TV channel, KTRK) offerings that target the Kyrgyzstani audience.

Among international radio and TV outlets, Azattyk has the most air time. Most of its programming is in Kyrgyz, the exception being a weekly 40-minute program in Russian. Its programs range from talk shows on local political and social issues to youth and world news. Azattyk averages one hour of TV airtime per day (except on Sundays), mostly in the afternoons and evenings. Its programs have been broadcast on the private NTS channel since July 2015. Before that, Azattyk's programs used to be aired on a channel owned by KTRK, the largest public TV company in Kyrgyzstan. Its radio programs are broadcast on the regional stations as well as for three hours a day on the biggest public radio station, Birinchi: a one-hour radio program in the mornings, a 30-minute one in the afternoons, and a 90-minute one in the evenings. Radio programs consist of local and international news, in-studio talk shows on social, political, and economic topics, etc. Azattyk's website offers online radio programming as well as archives of past broadcasts. Azattyk runs two sites (Kyrgyz and Russian) and has a strong presence on social media, with over 1.5 million users across various platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Odnoklassniki.

In comparison with Azattyk, the airtime of BBC Kyrgyz is much more modest: 15 minutes per day on airspace owned by the public TV company KTRK. BBC Kyrgyz TV programs are described as BBC

world news and are delivered in Kyrgyz. The hour-long daily radio programs of BBC Kyrgyz, which cover local and international news, are also aired on Birinchi Radio. BBC Kyrgyz operates a website in Kyrgyz and is active on social media, with over 120,000 users across Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

Sputnik Kyrgyzstan, funded by Russian media holding Rossiia Segodnia, has radio programs that are aired across the country. It also has a strong presence on the Internet, providing online radio, news, video, and photo stories on its site and social media pages, which attract a combined 135,000 users. Radio programs in Kyrgyz and Russian discuss social, economic, cultural, and political issues in the country. Its online radio airs 24 hours per day. During the day, content from Kyrgyzstan is included in the broadcast, while at other times it consists entirely of rebroadcasts in Russian.

In terms of language use, almost all TV channels have some content in Russian, but most of their programming is in Kyrgyz. Two TV channels, Yntymak and Nur TV, which operate in southern Kyrgyzstan, also have some content in Uzbek. On public channels, the proportion of Kyrgyz-language content ranges from a minimum of 23 percent (Piramida) to a maximum of 69 percent (ELTR).<sup>23</sup> Not all Russian-language content is produced in Kyrgyzstan: the majority of it is rebroadcast from Russia, especially movies, series, and entertainment programs. Private channels are all bilingual, featuring content in Kyrgyz and in Russian. One of the biggest private companies, NTS, offers 40 percent Kyrgyz content and 60 percent Russian content (with the latter being both locally produced and imported from Russia). The same trend is visible in radio. The biggest public radio station, Birinchi Radio, offers approximately 70 percent of programming in Kyrgyz and 30 percent in Russian. The exceptions are Kyrgyzstan Obondoru, Sanjyra, Min Kiyal and Kyrgyz Radiosu, which broadcast in Kyrgyz only.

Unlike television and radio, print media are usually monolingual, either completely in Kyrgyz or completely in Russian. Kyrgyz-language print media are more numerous than their Russian-language counterparts. According to Mass Media Support Center in Kyrgyzstan, 66 of 112 newspapers are in

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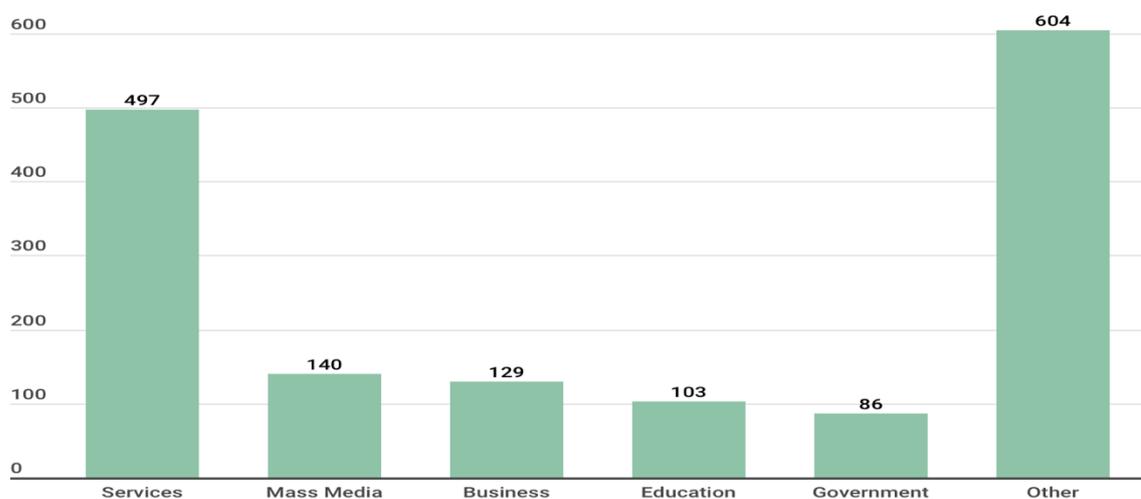
<sup>23</sup> Expert Consulting Agency, "Analiz iazika veshaniia i proizvodstva kontenta teleprogram v Kyrgyzstane," accessed April 17, 2019, <http://www.media.kg/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/presentation.pdf>.

Kyrgyz, while 21 of them are in Russian. The state-financed biweekly newspaper *Erkin Too* is in Kyrgyz and Russian. It also features local political, social, and economic news in Kyrgyz. Most of the print media are privately owned and focus more on political and social issues. Eighteen newspapers are bilingual Kyrgyz-Russian. There are also print media in Korean, Azeri, Dungan, Uzbek, English, Uyghur, and Turkish. Most of them are bilingual with Russian content, while Uyghur and Uzbek newspapers are monolingual.

### The Kyrgyz-Speaking Online Media World

Kyrgyzstan’s online media world is difficult to study and measure, for several reasons. First, launching a web-based mass media activity does not require state registration. Second, not all websites are run by journalists. Activists, bloggers, experts, and the like might be running the website and competing with online media outlets for audience share. Third, a website can function and spread information among the Kyrgyz audience without being physically located in Kyrgyzstan.

Figure 4. Thematic division of the Kyrnet word

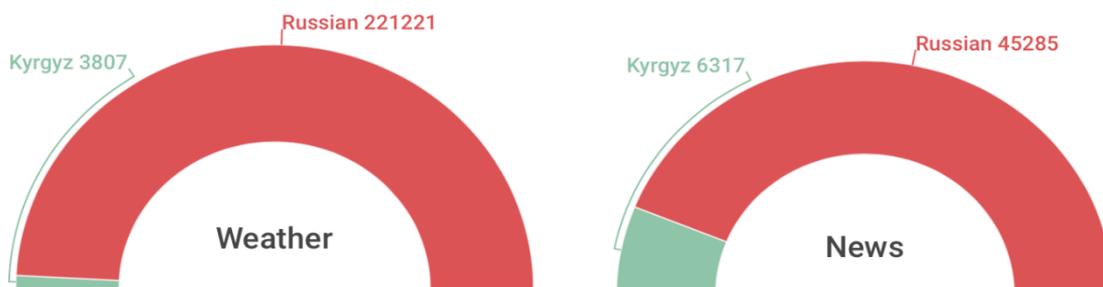


Source: Author’s compilation based on Net.kg

Kyrgyzstan-based website aggregator service Net.kg gathers information on websites that are operating in the country. As of March 27, 2019, it had data for 1,559 sites, which it groups into several

categories, as shown in Figure 4. This does not include those media outlets that do not want to disclose traffic information and are therefore not captured by Net.kg.

Figure 5. Word usage in Kyrnet



Source: Author’s compilation based on Yandex Keyword Statistics

Surprisingly, it is challenging to precisely identify the division between Kyrgyz-language and Russian-language media, in particular because many websites are bilingual. But one can observe high circulation among Kyrgyz-language newspapers, a growing number of Internet users consuming digital content in Kyrgyz, and more programs on public TV and radio broadcasts in Kyrgyz.

For online media, data retrieved from Yandex Keyword Statistics seems to indicate the dominance of the Russian language over the Kyrgyz language in Kyrnet. For instance, in February 2019, traffic from Kyrgyzstan shows that the Kyrgyz word for weather, *aba irayi*, was used 3,807 times, while the Russian equivalent, *pogoda*, was used 221,221

times; the Kyrgyz word for news, *janylyktar*, was used 6,317 times, while the Russian term, *novosti*, was used 45,285 times. Russian-language queries in Kyrnet are also 20 times more numerous than those in Kyrgyz, although the data show that Kyrgyz-language news websites are in demand and are consumed on an equal basis with Russian-language news portals. Indeed, according to the Net.kg ranking, of the top 20 websites, 10 are in Kyrgyz, meaning that websites in Kyrgyz and Russian are equally popular among Internet users.

Online media can be monolingual (Russian or Kyrgyz) as well as bilingual. Figure 6 shows the top 20 news sites on the aggregator service Net.kg and classifies them by language.

Figure 6. Top 20 most visited news sites according to Net.kg (listed in alphabetical order)

Kyrgyz	Bilingual	Russian
Argument.kg	Barometr.kg	Kaktus.media
Chagylgan.kg	Eldik.media	Ca-news.org
Kalys.media	Kabar.kg and Kabar.kg/kyr	Svodka.akipress.org
Super.kg	Knews.kg	Tazabek.kg
	Kyrgyztoday.org	Mp.kg
	Sputnik.kg	Delo.kg
	Turmush.kg	
	Vesti.kg	
	24.kg	

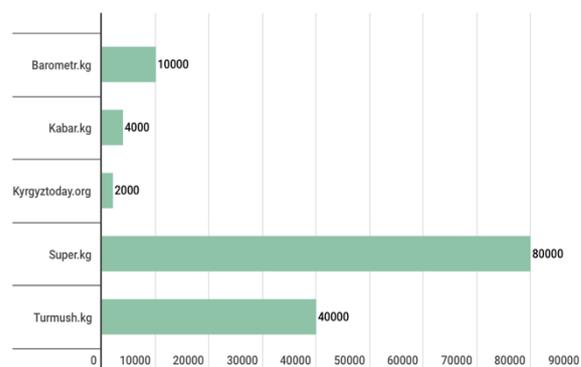
Source: Author's compilation based on Net.kg

In this paper, I focus primarily on monolingual news sites that publish articles only in Kyrgyz. To that list, I also add several bilingual sites on the basis of their ranking on the website-ranking aggregator. For example, Net.kg shows 24.kg in its top 5, but its main page is in Russian and it has a different domain for the Kyrgyz version (24.kg/kyrgyzcha). Since I do not have traffic data for 24.kg/kyrgyzcha, I do not include this media outlet in my analysis. By contrast, *Barometr.kg* has the same domain name in Kyrgyz and in Russian; as such, I have included it in my analysis. In this paper, I investigate the following five most-visited news sites: Barometr.kg, Kabar.kg, Kyrgyztoday.org, Super.kg, and Turmush.kg. With the exception of Kabar.kg, all are private media companies.

**Super.kg** is the website of popular newspaper *Super Info*, a weekly with the largest print circulation in the country, at 50,000. A recent

study found that it was the main print medium that respondents reported reading.<sup>24</sup>

Figure 7. Daily readership of news sites



Source: Author's compilation based on Net.kg

Like its print counterpart, the website is popular among Kyrgyz-speaking Internet users. The online version contains more options, such as daily news, songs, music videos, movies, and a forum.

<sup>24</sup> M-Vector, "Media predpochteniiia naseleniia Kyrgyzstana."

According to internet statistics, around 80,000 users visit Super.kg daily—a huge number for the Kyrgyz mediascape. The website writes mostly about singers, actors, and celebrities, as well as accidents, politics, and sports, and covers both Bishkek-based news and regional stories.

**Turmush.kg // Svodka.akipress.org // Ca-news.org.** Although these websites appear separately on ranking services, they are all part of Akipress.org, which is one of the most-visited private online media in the country. Akipress.org covers almost all spheres of life in Kyrgyzstan. It has different websites with specific content, of which these three are the most visited by Internet users, according to the aggregator. Turmush.kg’s daily number of readers ranges from 40,000 to 90,000. It mostly covers news stories in regional towns and rural areas, reporting on everything taking place outside Bishkek. The homepage is in Kyrgyz and the site also has a Russian version. Svodka.akipress.org’s daily readership hovers around 20,000; the site, which is available only in Russian, offers news about crimes, lawsuits, trials, and accidents. Between 20,000 and 40,000 people visit Ca-news.org on a daily basis; the site contains news stories on Central Asia and migrants from the region. A limited assortment of international materials is also available.

**Barometr.kg’s** daily readership is between 10,000 to 20,000 people. The site, which has Kyrgyz and Russian versions, covers politics, social problems, crime, and show business as well as

sports and international news. The Kyrgyz content does not usually duplicate the Russian content and vice versa.

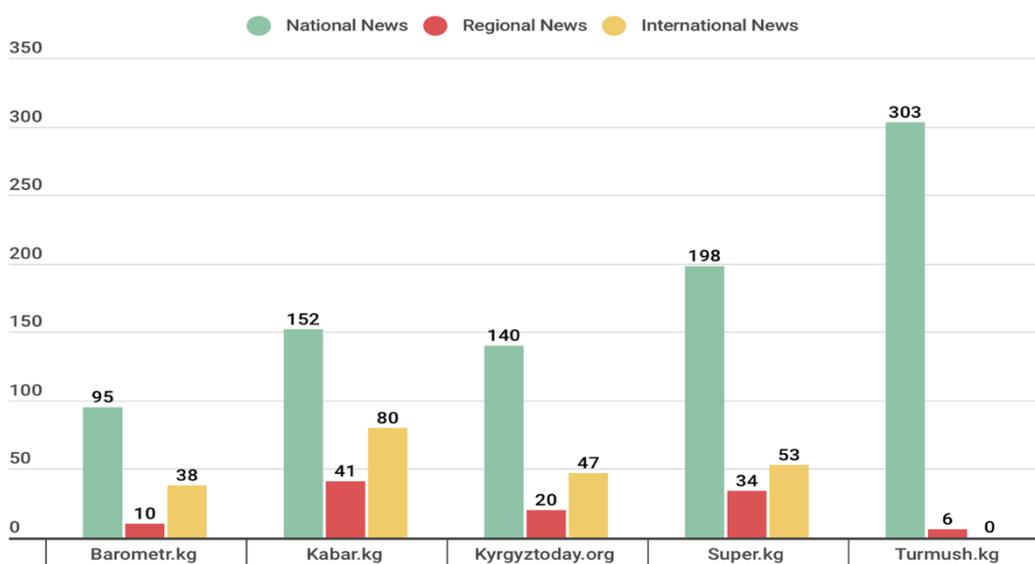
State information agency **Kabar.kg’s** daily readership is around 4,000. Although its homepage is in Russian, it is possible to use the navigation button to go to its Kyrgyz version. It also has versions in Arabic, Chinese, English, and Turkish. Its main sections are President, Parliament, and Government, followed by Politics, Economics, Society, Analytics, and Provinces.

With between 1,000 and 6,000 daily visitors, **Kyrgyztoday.org** has two versions: Kyrgyz and Russian. Its materials are mostly focused on political and social issues in Bishkek, with a few news stories covering regional and international events. The most frequently used categories on the site are: Central Asia, World, Society, Crime Stories, Position and Power, Official News, Politics, Sports, Economics, Culture and Literature, and Show Business. The Kyrgyz content does not usually duplicate the Russian content and vice versa.

### The Kyrgyz-Speaking News World and Its Challenges

As we can see, Kyrgyz-speaking online news media form a lively and multifaceted environment. Yet the question this paper seeks to explore is not so much the quantity of Kyrgyz-language news websites as their content and the difficulties associated with producing high-quality content.

Figure 8. News coverage of sites



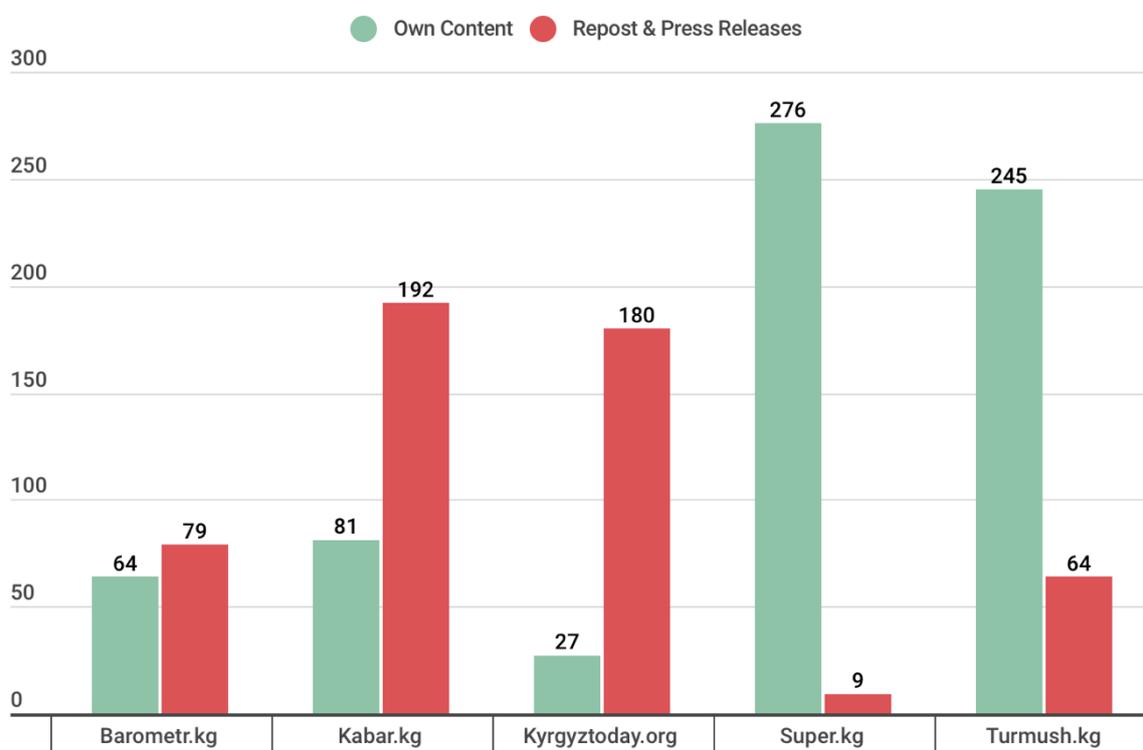
Source: Author’s compilation based on content analysis

All the data presented here are from the week of March 25 – March 31, 2019. The news sites in question do not always offer materials that comply with journalistic principles such as fairness, balance, accuracy, and ethics.

The coverage of different issues varies depending on the news portals’ editorial policy, which is not always clearly stated (see Figure 8). For instance, on Turmush.kg, one cannot find news about national-level events taking place in Bishkek and related to the president, government ministries, and members of parliament. Instead, the site’s focus is on events outside the capital. In

contrast to Turmush.kg, Barometr.kg, Kabar.kg, Kyrgyztoday.org, and Super.kg are more Bishkek-centric. The majority of international news on Kabar.kg and Kyrgyztoday.org are reposts from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Central Asia service. Barometr.kg and Super.kg also provide international stories in Kyrgyz, with or without referring to the sites where they were originally published. Turmush.kg’s international news stories usually relate to Kyrgyz citizens who have lived or still live abroad.

Figure 9. Content production of news sit



Source: Author’s compilation based on content analysis

Another important point regarding the content of news sites is whether the materials are collected and processed by journalists themselves. For example, as shown in Figure 9, Barometr.kg, Kabar.kg and Kyrgyztoday.org repost more from other outlets than they produce their own content. Having said that, it is not always easy to identify which material is their own and which is not. Super.kg and Turmush.kg, meanwhile, have more of their own content than republications. The presence of expressions like “... told Super.kg” and

“As Turmush.kg’s regional journalist reported...” indicate that they interviewed their sources themselves. The former three news sites often lack such formulas.

In general, news sites’ narratives are heavily descriptive and often present the views of only one side. They thus fall short of fair and balanced reporting, which is vital to quality journalism.

Let us briefly summarize the significant differences between these websites. Turmush.kg is

successful at informing its readers about everyday life in the country's provinces. It offers stories about people's everyday lives and achievements and covers almost all activities carried out by local municipal authorities at various regional levels (towns, districts, villages). But most of the time, the stories are covered loosely, without emphasizing why it is important that the story be told. Some pieces come across as little more than press releases: they just provide information about new appointments and what the local municipal administration is doing. Some pieces are purely personal and intimate stories of ordinary residents, who share their successes or tell about their bad luck. There are several articles that mainly involve people complaining about bad infrastructure in their neighborhoods.

The majority of publications on Barometr.kg are social media posts, press releases from state organizations, and international news. These are often sensationalized, presenting extreme opinions and events—with little or no editing and based on one or no sources (where there are sources, these are often of dubious trustworthiness). Celebrities' social media posts are published under sensationalist titles; some articles treat social media posts as news without providing any further development or analysis.

Kabar.kg looks more like a press-release website. The majority of its content is comprised of press releases and statements by state officials or about their meetings and visits to other places.

On all the websites, stories about accidents and crimes feature prominently. These may be local or international and can range from car accidents to sexual abuse to deadly offenses. Such events are taken up by news outlets and offered as sensational stories.

On Barometr.kg, Kabar.kg, and Kyrgyztoday.org, photos are presented without credits. Super.kg and Turmush.kg, meanwhile, watermark their photos, indicating that they hold the copyright for the images they are using.

Building on these case studies of the five main Kyrgyz-speaking online news outlets, one can identify three main issues facing Kyrgyz-language online journalism: lack of transparency, lack of ethics and lack of professional training. Yet Kyrgyz-language news websites are not the only ones facing these issues; Russian-language sites have similar limitations.

### ***Lack of Transparency***

Transparency about how news is collected and how information and facts are cross-checked is one of the main issues relating to Kyrgyzstan's media. First, not all websites provide basic information about what type of media company they are, what their editorial policy is, and who works on their team. It is not always clear whether the website is commercial, noncommercial, private, government-affiliated, nongovernmental, etc., nor what its financial status is. As a result, readers are unable to determine whether websites earn advertising revenues, receive grants, are financed by politicians or businessmen, etc.

The majority of Kyrgyz-speaking websites describe themselves variously as news portals, news agencies, internet publications, information agencies, internet editions, or information-analytical portals, among other descriptors. But they rarely provide information about their editorial policy, while contact information is often limited to phone numbers and email addresses. Some websites are easy to use and navigate, while others are dominated by advertising or contain distracting formatting that confirms the low level of professionalism of website designers (not to mention the actual content of the website).

To take one example, Barometr.kg provides only a phone (and WhatsApp) number and email address in the footer of its webpage, briefly mentioning that it is an information agency. But if one digs into its advertising media kit, it calls itself the "fastest-growing news portal" in Kyrgyzstan and states:

We assist readers in understanding complicated political, economic, and social problems with the help of argumentative analysis and an accessible/comprehensible mode of explanation. Our resource is actively developing its communities and groups across key social media using its "viral" (*quote in original*) material. We post materials with different points of view, which removes restrictions and promotes discussion.

### ***Lack of Code of Conduct***

The professionalism of Kyrgyz-speaking online media is limited by several factors. Although international media outlets usually function in accordance with journalistic principles and ethics,

the Central Asian bureaus of some international media outlets may not be neutral, expressing either support for the government or systematic criticism.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, local journalists working at international media outlets may not share the values of their umbrella organization, for instance some may oppose NGOs that are supported by the West. For their part, local websites can be divided into two broad categories: those that (try to) comply with journalistic principles and ethics (e.g., Kloop.kg) and those that are less concerned with this. Most of the websites that appear on the Net.kg list of most-visited sites fall into the second category.

Among the main indicators of a lack of professionalism, many articles are published both without naming the source of a fact/opinion and without explaining the absence of a named source (security concerns, spoke on condition of anonymity, etc.). Kabar.kg and Turmush.kg also do not indicate the authors of articles, unlike Barometr.kg, Kyrgyztoday.org, and Super.kg.

Many articles tell stories that rely on the words of unidentified people and/or are based on rumors. In order to discredit and mock particular figures, they often deploy a judgmental, accusatory, or humiliating tone. Some texts make strong statements based on the author's personal observations, impressions, or feelings while not providing the other side of the story. In many cases, an author will not interview sources, instead composing the story as he or she wishes, making assumptions, disinforming, and producing biased content. Such materials are prevalent on Kyrgyztoday.org in the form of reposts.

Here are four typical articles:

***Atambaev's right-hand man Farid Niyazov also participated in the funeral of Babirbek Jeenbekov***

*Author: Baktibek Ergeshov*

*Date: March 25, 2019*

*On March 23, famous journalist and revolutionary Babirbek Jeenbekov's funeral took place in Bishkek. Many public figures participated in it. Dosaly Esenaliev, the chief of the Presidential Administration, spoke on behalf of the state and talked about his [the late journalist's] work for the Kyrgyz Republic and his personal qualities.*

*But Farid Niyazov, the representative of the former power that did not value our brother Babirbek's work in its time, came pathetically, quickly expressed his condolences, and ran away. Atambaev should have come to the funeral himself instead of sending his right-hand man Farid.*

*As the popular saying goes, "Heroes make revolution, inciters get its fruit." The 2010 revolution was accomplished by heroes like brother Babirbek, but evil individuals like Atambaev and Niyazov benefited from its fruits.*

*Source: KyrgyzToday<sup>26</sup>*

***Offended Atambaev, who moved out of the residence, now wants to move back into the residence upon Putin's visit***

*Author: Baktibek Ergeshov*

*Date: March 26, 2019*

*In April 2018, when the power did not allow Almazbek Atambaev's revanchist friends to enter the "Ala-Archa" residence, the offended ex-president moved to his palace, which was built on Maxim Bakiev's land in Koy-Tash.*

*Since then, Atambaev, who [allegedly declared that he] would "never return" to the residence, is trying to move back into the residence for Russian president Vladimir Putin's visit to Kyrgyzstan. Apparently, Atambaev is planning to meet Putin and complain about his problems.*

*As a reminder, in the fall of last year (2018), ex-president Almazbek Atambaev was unable to meet with Russian president V. Putin on his trip to Moscow. It was said that even his [Putin's] press secretary Dmitry Peskov did not agree to receive him.*

<sup>25</sup> Peter Leonard, "US-Funded Broadcaster Under Scrutiny for Enabling Tajikistan's Strongman Rule," *Eurasianet.org*, March 26, 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/us-funded-broadcaster-under-scrutiny-for-enabling-tajikistans-strongman-rule>; Jessica Donati, "U.S. Broadcaster Under Scrutiny for Disseminating Autocratic Propaganda," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-broadcaster-under-scrutiny-for-disseminating-propaganda-11556184602>.

<sup>26</sup> Baktibek Ergeshov, "Babirbek Jeenbekovdu akirki saparga uzatuu zynatyna Atambaevdin on kolu Farid Niyazov da keldi," *Kyrgyztoday.org*, March 25, 2019, [https://kyrgyztoday.org/news\\_ky/babyrbek-zheebekovdu-akyrky-saparga-uzatuu-zynatyna-atambaevdin-on-kolu-fyrid-niyazov-da-keldi/](https://kyrgyztoday.org/news_ky/babyrbek-zheebekovdu-akyrky-saparga-uzatuu-zynatyna-atambaevdin-on-kolu-fyrid-niyazov-da-keldi/).

*If Atambaev manages to meet with Putin on March 28-29, it is clear that he will hug him as always and take photos to make PR of it.*

Source: *Kyrgyztoday.kg*<sup>27</sup>

### ***Kiyanbek Satibaldiev's illiteracy resulted in words***

Author: *Adina Sagymbekova*

Date: *March 25, 2019*

*(...) Unfortunately, Kiyanbek Satibaldiev, the representative for Government [Governor] of Jalal-Abad, could not shine for the president, Sooronbay Jeenbekov. He is going wrong. On March 17, he should have given a word to the relatives of people who died in the Aksi events. It was his duty as the governor. But he did not. The relatives of the Aksi victims were offended and it became a sensitive issue. Satibaldiev's poor understanding of politics and incompetence at organizing public events are becoming clear in his unprofessionalism. This shames not only him, but also the president. Kiyanbek's other "rotten behaviors" and scandals have also appeared in the mass media. How long do we have to keep illiterate and false heads in their positions? It seems probable that we cannot develop because of them.*

*Akin Bekchoroev*

Source: *Asia News*<sup>28</sup>

### ***Chinibay demonstrated his cunning...***

Author: *Adina Sagymbekova*

Date: *March 26, 2019*

*Chinibay Tursunbekov, once a head of coalition and speaker, two-time leader of the KSDP parliamentary faction, is currently doing the complete opposite. What this means is that he announced his withdrawal from KSDP, thanks to which he came into political arena and took high positions. He said he would not participate in the KSDP congress and implied that he would not want*

*more problems. In other words, he demonstrated his cunning, which seeks only his personal interest. When KSDP was flourishing, he was with them; now, when it is going through a hard time, he runs away. Isn't that "betrayal?"*

Source: *Fabula*<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, it is not always clear if news sites produce their own content. Online media are more likely than their print counterparts to (re-)publish press releases with little or no editing. This is particularly the case on *Kabar.kg*. Moreover, press releases are often published in their original language, meaning that they are often difficult for the general public to understand.

On news sites, publications may be credited to other media outlets or authors; alternatively, they may be posted without any attribution. Some websites publish posts from social media—usually sensational crime stories, extreme political views, rumors about celebrities, etc.—without cross-checking and verifying information. Several websites contain social media posts by public figures and ordinary citizens that express apparently surprising opinions about political, social, or personal issues. Such materials are prevalent on *Barometr.kg*. Here are two examples of the site publishing Facebook posts as news:

### ***Ahmatbek Keldibekov and Isa Ömürkulov went to eat free burgers***

Author: *Barometr*

Date: *March 26, 2019*

*Yesterday, March 25, well-known politicians went to the opening of Timati's Black Star Burger café in Bishkek. The activist Adil Turdukulov posted on Twitter a photo of parliamentarian Isa Ömürkulov and ex-parliamentarian Ahmatbek Keldibekov, who appeared at the café opening.*

<sup>27</sup> Baktibek Ergeshov, "Taarinip rezidentsiyadan chigip ketken Atambaev emi Putindin kelishine karata kayra rezidentsiyaga köchüp kelem dep julunup jatiptir," *Kyrgyztoday.org*, March 26, 2019, [https://kyrgyztoday.org/news\\_ky/dosuna-taarynyp-rezidentsiyadan-chygyp-ketken-atambaev-emi-putindin-kelishine-karata-kajra-rezidentsiyaga-kochup-kelem-dep-zhulunup-zhatyptyr/](https://kyrgyztoday.org/news_ky/dosuna-taarynyp-rezidentsiyadan-chygyp-ketken-atambaev-emi-putindin-kelishine-karata-kajra-rezidentsiyaga-kochup-kelem-dep-zhulunup-zhatyptyr/).

<sup>28</sup> Adina Sagimbekova, "Kiyanbek Satibaldievdin chala sabattigi söz eerchitti," *Kyrgyztoday.org*, March 25, 2019, [https://kyrgyztoday.org/news\\_ky/kyyanbek-satybaldievdin-chala-sabattygy-soz-eerchitti/](https://kyrgyztoday.org/news_ky/kyyanbek-satybaldievdin-chala-sabattygy-soz-eerchitti/).

<sup>29</sup> Adina Sagimbekova, "Chinibay kuulugun aygineledi," *Kyrgyztoday.org*, March 26, 2019, [https://kyrgyztoday.org/news\\_ky/chynybaj-kuulugun-aygineledi/](https://kyrgyztoday.org/news_ky/chynybaj-kuulugun-aygineledi/).

*“Are they serving Black Burger for them?” he wrote.*

*Social media users are responding in different ways.*

*As a reminder, yesterday, March 25, Russian rapper Timati (Timur Yunusov) promised free burgers to residents of Bishkek in Asia Mall shopping center.<sup>30</sup>*

**Nazira Aytbekova: “Nobody knows about my tomorrow?! But I am not sad anymore”**

*Author: Atirgöl Muhammatkulova*

*Date: March 25, 2019*

*Journalist and host Nazira Aytbekova wrote that her grandmother told her to marry as soon as possible. Aytbekova posted her ideas about that on Facebook.*

*She posted: “Hey, girl, while you are young, marry and bear [kids]. It is difficult to be alone. When you become old, not even the dog will look at you, let alone a husband,” Grandmother said. She constantly repeats it, so that I hear it. [...] Granny, in your time, you were able to do men’s jobs as well as women’s. Your soul wants to lie and you are asleep again. When you wake up, you say you worry about me and repeat that word a thousand times. I could do nothing but smile. Nobody knows about my tomorrow?! But I am not sad anymore. My wound recovered. I am looking at life with joy. When you are sinking, you try to swim. I did the same. Didn’t want to sink. Wanted to live, granny. Made friends with water. [...]*

*Certainly, it is obvious that Aytbekova wants to express her love of life with her post. Many encourage the blogger lady, saying, “Everything will be all right.”<sup>31</sup>*

Last but not least, stories of private matters prevail, oftentimes loosely covered rather than being investigated in detail and their importance explained. Stories such as a disabled boy living in a

train car, a pensioner in a rural area earning 10,000 soms daily, a cockfighter who won a car in a competition in a neighboring town, a couple that has been working in the same school for 30 years, a village kindergarten being furnished, etc., are prevalent on Turmush.kg.

To summarize, as mentioned above, the self-presentation of online news portals is often misleading. Although they promise analytical and diversified content with accessible language, they frequently fall short of keeping those promises. What they usually offer to the audience is: content based on one or no sources (resulting in heavily biased articles); articles without authors; social media reposts; press releases in difficult language; and sensational crime stories. But on one point they prove to be successful, namely “promot[ing] discussion and receiv[ing] greater visibility and audience on social media.” The majority of their content may go viral, provoking broader discussions. There are even some cases where the state administration has resolved problems following social media discussions.

### **Lack of Professional Training**

All the issues discussed above imply that journalism faculties at universities are not necessarily successful in their goal of training professional journalists. In total, seven universities teach journalism in Kyrgyzstan (see Figure 10).<sup>32</sup> The majority of the higher educational institutions preparing journalists are based in Bishkek, with Osh State University the only provincial institution that still has a journalism faculty. Depending on the type of university (private, national, international), the language of instruction varies. Some faculties offer courses only in Kyrgyz, Russian, or English, while other programs are bilingual (Kyrgyz-Russian and Kyrgyz-Turkish).

<sup>30</sup> “Ahmatbek Keldibekov menen Isa Ömürkulov akisiz burger jegenge barishti,” *Barometr.kg*, March 26, 2019, <https://barometr.kg/ahmatbek-keldibekov-menen-isa-mrkulov-akysyz-burger-zhegenge-baryshty>.

<sup>31</sup> Atirgöl Muhammatkulova, “Nazira Aytbekov, ‘Eteñim emne boloorun kim bilsin?! Birok taarinichim taradi’,” *Barometr.kg*, March 25, 2019, <https://barometr.kg/nazira-ajtbekova-erteim-emne-boloorun-kim-bilsin-birok-taarynychym-tarady>.

<sup>32</sup> As of March 2019. This information was provided to me as an official response to my request for information.

Figure 10. Journalism faculties at universities in Kyrgyzstan

#	Journalism Faculties	Students for 2019-2020 academic year	Language	Type
1	American University of Central Asia (AUCA)	45	English	Private
2	Bishkek Humanities University (BHU)	165	Kyrgyz, Russian	State
3	International Kuwait University (IKU)	93	Kyrgyz	Private
4	Kyrgyz National University (KNU)	284	Kyrgyz, Russian	State
5	Kyrgyz-Russian University (KRU)	136	Russian	State
6	Kyrgyz-Turkish University (KTU)	364	Kyrgyz, Turkish	State
7	Osh State University (OSU)	66	Kyrgyz	State

Source: Author's survey and compilation

At AUCA, English is the main language of instruction. Undergraduate students receive both Kyrgyz and U.S. diplomas. The journalism departments of BHU and KNU are divided into two sections: one Kyrgyz, one Russian. At KNU, lectures are delivered in Kyrgyz and Russian, respectively; at BHU, lectures and literature are usually given in Russian, but the Kyrgyz group has the option to answer questions and participate in class discussions using the Kyrgyz language.

Students in KRU's journalism department study in Russian. KRU issues two diplomas, one Kyrgyz and one Russian. The same is true at KTU, one of the biggest universities in Kyrgyzstan: graduates receive one Kyrgyz diploma and one Turkish one. KTU's journalism department is bilingual, with lectures delivered in Kyrgyz and Turkish equally.

One can tentatively conclude that (state) universities' education system remains outdated, as it consists of heavily theoretical lectures. Practical skills are hardly taught, which may produce a disconnect between college knowledge and the reality on the ground when graduates enter the media industry.

According to Abahon Sultonazarov, Regional Director of IWPR in Central Asia, professional journalists are often graduates of faculties other than journalism. Journalism faculties, he says, have long been in need of improvement:

Good journalists did not graduate from journalism faculties. They studied philology, history. Among them, it is rare to find individuals who graduated from journalism faculties. This is

true not only for Kyrgyzstan, but for all Central Asian countries, because journalism faculties focus more on TV journalism. Print journalists are very rare.<sup>33</sup>

Two vivid examples of the truth in this view are Marat Tokoiev and Mars Tölögönov. Neither of them studied journalism as undergraduates, yet both are now prominent media instructors in Kyrgyzstan. They entered the journalism field in the late 1990s and have worked in all spheres of the country's mass media (TV, radio, print and online media). Between 2006 and 2016, Tokoiev chaired the Public Union of Journalists; he remains a member of the union's board. Tölögönov is now chair of the Union. In separate interviews, both Tokoiev and Tölögönov emphasized the low level of education in journalism faculties in Kyrgyzstan. In response, one of the Union's main activities has been to work with Kyrgyz-speaking students and journalists to improve the quality of undergraduate journalism training.

### How Can the Quality of Kyrgyz-Language Journalism Be Improved?

No government organs control and monitor whether new and traditional media comply with the journalistic code of ethics. In the event of libel or defamation, the supposed victim can ask the mass media to refute the information and/or can file a lawsuit against the outlet.

To respond to these issues, the Commission for Complaints on Mass Media was created on the initiative of local journalists and has been operational since 2007. Its decisions are not

<sup>33</sup> Abahon Sultonazarov, personal interview with the author, Washington, DC, March 2019.

legally binding but aim to publicly denounce mass media that violate journalistic ethics. The Commission acts according to the code of journalistic ethics adopted during a 2007 congress of journalists. The Commission includes 10 to 15 people with backgrounds in journalism as well as the private and public sectors. They consider only the complaints they receive and do not monitor the mass media's compliance with the code of ethics.

Journalism schools and courses could become a central place where the issues faced by mass media are addressed. In February 2019 alone, there were two different announcements of journalism trainings in Kyrgyzstan. One of them, called Original Kyrgyz Journalism School, seemed to be addressing all the problems in the current wave of online media. Without indicating the duration of the program, it promised to teach (in Kyrgyz) the mission of journalists, the "secrets to becoming the best journalist," effective writing skills, and new directions in journalism. Prominent journalists—among them Marat Tokoev, Jyrgalbek Kasabolotov, and Daniyar Isanov—were listed as instructors. However, these types of courses are not delivered on a consistent basis and remain on a small scale.

Another institution, Kloop Media Foundation (linked to the online media outlet Kloop.kg), has been organizing journalism courses (paid and free of charge) for the past 10 years. The media company believes it is possible to become a journalist without studying at a journalism faculty. Therefore, it focuses more on applied journalism and offers its students the opportunity to practice journalism, but only after six days of theoretical training. During in-class and practical sessions, it emphasizes journalistic professionalism, including providing a balance of views, impartiality, and transparency. Its website serves as a publication platform for the news materials of its participants. Courses range in length from one month to three months and are offered both in Kyrgyz and in Russian.

Besides Kloop, there are other local and international organizations that organize journalism courses or work with journalists. These include Internews and IWPR, among others. IWPR has been operating in Central Asia since establishing its Bishkek bureau in 1999. It has been supporting local reporters, citizen journalists, and civil society activists by providing them with various

trainings. As Abahon Sultonazarov explained, in its first decade of work, his organization conducted trainings and published articles in Russian only, excluding the Kyrgyz (or other Central Asian national) language journalists. He says this was a shortcoming/omission (*upushchenie*) of the program. From 2008 onwards, IWPR began to incorporate native languages into its program and educate instructors in Kyrgyz language. IWPR organized a Training of Trainers in Kyrgyz so that they could conduct trainings in the provinces. The participants were practicing journalists and editors. As Sultonazarov explained, "There was a necessity for that. It was a time when we started to see our first results. They conducted trainings, wrote stories, and edited in Kyrgyz, and translated into Kyrgyz."

He added that IWPR's next project will focus on journalism faculties in Central Asia:

In our new project, we want to work with the teachers in order for them to work with the students. [...] If we work directly with the teachers and deans, and conduct trainings for them, they get education, qualifications. We will provide them with a curriculum to use in their classes. [...] The teachers do not meet the requirements of the new realities. They lag behind on innovational approaches, social media, new media, visualization, storytelling, data journalism. They still write 20 pages; one paragraph is one page. Now, 800-900 words are enough; more is too much. It is a problem. It should be upgraded with a new curriculum and new approaches. [...]<sup>34</sup>

Almas Turdumamatov, a media expert from Kyrgyzstan who has been working in the media sphere since 1995, agrees with Sultonazarov that journalists write too much. However, he suggests that this has improved since the 1990s, when the practice was most widespread:

During the independence years, the Kyrgyz-language journalists considered themselves writers. They used to bring 10-page articles. In order to make the print media language accessible, the new style was adopted. If I am not mistaken, it was *Asaba*. They introduced the spoken Kyrgyz language to newspapers. It really affected the print media readership. The number of big materials that occupied 4-5 pages decreased and short pieces were produced instead. On the other hand, when they introduced this style, it was accompanied by

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

printing unverified information. I do not remember when exactly it started; it needs additional research. However, materials based on rumors started to appear more and more. It was a model for other new print media; as a result, they also deployed this style in their publications. In my opinion, our newspapers usually publish information without cross-checking, based on what they heard, [leading to facts that] are closer to rumors. This style still has impact and is being exported to social and online media.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

The international media organizations that are operating in Central Asia work to improve the quality of journalism. However, their focus is often on engaging the Russian-speaking journalism world, whereas it should be on journalists writing in the national languages of Central Asia. Almas Turdumamatov explains:

Many international media organizations conducted most of their trainings for journalists in Russian. Of late, they are trying to conduct the trainings in Kyrgyz too, but the new formats and technologies are taught by Russian-speaking instructors. [...] I asked Internews why journalists from the regions should be trained in Russian, of which they do not have a good command; why the effectiveness and accessibility of trainings was not taken into account. They answered that they did not have experts with Kyrgyz language skills. But when the trainings were conducted in English or in other European languages, we were offered a translator into Russian language. Why they did not do the same with Kyrgyz-language trainees is another issue. [...] One might claim that Kyrgyz-language mass media are not interested in new skills. They might be right. But their announcements are all still released in Russian. I think it also might be a language barrier for Kyrgyz-language journalists. [...] If we consider that Kyrgyz-language mass media have problems, shortcomings, then the international organizations should address them, work with them, improve their level.<sup>36</sup>

Many Kyrgyz-language online media publish low-quality articles that often do not comply with journalistic principles such as fairness, accuracy, and professional ethics. Low-quality

journalism has other implications, too. As Turdumamatov notes, the existence of such media outlets indicates that they are supported and financed by figures who have an interest in influencing public opinion, and therefore that the critical issue of media independence remains to be addressed:

The independence of mass media depends on what you mean by the mass media—whether it is a business or an organization with social responsibilities and duties. Who is establishing the mass media and for what purpose? In our country, the mass media are created by politicians or those with close ties with politicians. Their purpose is not to earn revenue; their goal is to influence public opinion. [...] We do not have an advertising market sufficient to support the mass media. Despite this, many TV channels continue to operate. To the best of my knowledge, most TV channels are linked to a particular [group of] politicians.<sup>37</sup>

With a population of just 6 million, Kyrgyzstan's media sector has limited financial possibilities: the media market generates around \$19 million per year.<sup>38</sup> This has the knock-on effect that journalists rarely challenge their employer and defend their independence. "When signing a contract with the employer, the journalists should make it clear that they comply with ethical standards and principles of journalism. But again, because of financial constraints, the journalists are less likely to put forward their conditions," Tölögönov indicates.<sup>39</sup>

Yet even under such conditions, international media organizations should continue to teach young journalists the basic principles of journalism: how to prepare questions, how to interview, how to find the source of a piece of information, how to cross-check information, etc. These skills are essential in an era of information abundance. Young journalists should learn to capture issues vital to the country and not overlook social, economic, and political problems on the ground, such as "reminding" authorities to provide rural areas with clean water, to prevent maternal mortality, to improve the level of education, and so on. Understandably, the desire to be the first to

<sup>35</sup> Almas Turdumamatov, personal interview with the author, Bishkek, December 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Akchabar, "Reklamnii ryok Kyrgyzstana otsenivaetsia v \$19 mln v god—issledovanie," April 25, 2019, <https://www.akchabar.kg/ru/news/media-ads-2019/>.

<sup>39</sup> Mars Tölögönov, personal interview with the author, Bishkek, December 2018.

break a news story is widespread among journalists—but it should not be allowed to compromise the quality, accuracy, and impartiality of journalism.

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## Chapter 12.

# Turkmenistan: Plebiscite of a Nation of Artisans

Snejana Atanova<sup>1</sup> (2018)



Turkmen carpet-maker, *Altyn Asyr bazaar, Ashgabat, May 2018*

The Altyn Asyr bazaar, located in Turkmenistan's capital, Ashgabat, attracts thousands of visitors every week. Local residents and foreign tourists rush to explore the richness of the country's largest market. National crafts, from embroidery and carpets to jewelry and clothing, constitute a significant proportion of the bazaar's diversity. By exploring the links between the demand for and consumption of handicrafts within the Ashgabat bazaar, this paper aims to understand to what extent handicrafts influence Turkmen economics and society and express "banal nationalism."

The term "banal nationalism," coined by Michael Billig in 1995, refers to daily representations of the nation that build a shared sense of belonging to one national community. As

Billig states, "the term banal nationalism is introduced to cover ideological habits which enable established nations of the West to be reproduced."<sup>2</sup> Some signs of nationhood are not recognized as such by the population because they are "so familiar, so continual."<sup>3</sup> In Turkmenistan, national crafts seem to be the main reminders of national belonging. The majority of Turkmen women wear long dresses with embroidery and traditional jewelry; every apartment or house has wool carpets and felt mats (*koshma*), as well as amulets. Carpets, embroidery, dresses, and jewelry make individuals the bearers and creators of national narratives and "flag" the Turkmen nation.<sup>4</sup>

The majority of publications on post-Soviet Central Asia focus on states' narratives as created and disseminated by official authorities and academics. Based on a historical or even mythological past, these ideological narratives are devoted to raising national awareness and to legitimizing and consolidating state power.<sup>5</sup> A limited number of papers explore the role of handicrafts in unofficial narratives in Central Asia, analyze crafts as a source of identity and livelihood, discuss the role of textile heritage in nation-building and cultural identity, or examine artisanal products within the context of the new

<sup>1</sup> Snezhana Atanova is a PhD candidate at INALCO. Her thesis focuses on nationalism and cultural heritage in Central Asia. She recently finished an IFEAC fellowship devoted to national identity in everyday life in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. She was awarded a Carnegie fellowship in 2017, in which she explored national identity through the nation-branding initiatives of Russia and Central Asian countries. She earned a Master's in International Communication from the University of Strasbourg in 2012 and a Master's from the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO) in 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995), 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Erica Marat, "State-Propagated Narratives About a National Defender in Central Asian States," *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* 6/7 (2007); Matteo Fumagalli, "When Security Trumps Identity: Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy under Islam Karimov," in *Constructing the Uzbek State: Narratives of Post-Soviet Years*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017), 3-19; Nick Megoran, "The Magic of Territory: Remaking of Border Landscapes as a Spatial Manifestation of Nationalist Ideology," in *Constructing the Uzbek State: Narratives of Post-Soviet Years*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017), 21-44; Marlene Laruelle, "The Nation Narrated: Uzbekistan's Political and Cultural Nationalism," in *Constructing the Uzbek State: Narratives of Post-Soviet Years*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017); Rico Isaacs and Abel Polese, eds., *Nation-Building and Identity in the Post-Soviet Space: New Tools and Approaches* (London: Routledge, 2016); Erica Marat, "National Ideology and State-Building in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan," *Silk Road Paper* (January 2008), [https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2008\\_01\\_SRP\\_Marat\\_National-Ideology.pdf](https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2008_01_SRP_Marat_National-Ideology.pdf); Bhavna Dave, *Kazakhstan: Ethnicity, Language and Power* (London: Routledge, 2007).

market environment.<sup>6</sup> Although there are academic papers on Turkmen handicrafts themselves,<sup>7</sup> no research is devoted to handicrafts as a source of national identity. This paper aims to fill the gap by focusing on handicrafts as presented through the space of the Turkmen market and traditional rituals and practices.

This research is based on visits to the Altyn Asyr bazaar in Ashgabat in August 2013, October 2017, and April-May 2018. I apply a combination of qualitative methods to analyze Turkmen handicrafts and social practices in Ashgabat—these include interviews and conversations with bazaar sellers and customers (both Turkmen citizens and international visitors) and participant observations within and beyond the bazaar. I interviewed fifty bazaar sellers/customers and thirty international visitors, as well as acquired over fifty handcrafted products. I collected statistical data on socioeconomic indicators from the State Statistics Committee of Turkmenistan, as well as data on international tourism from the World Bank and IndexMundi.

By analyzing interactions between Turkmen artisans and consumers, as well as international guests, this paper explores how the high demand for handicrafts is driven by traditional rituals and practices, how handicrafts represent a livelihood and daily consumption practice, and how handicrafts linked to traditional rituals give room to everyday narratives of Turkmen identity.

### **Beyond the Bazaar: Long Traditions in Turkmenistan**

I borrow Eric Hobsbawm's definition of traditions as "a set of practices, normally governed by

overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature."<sup>8</sup> Among the first mentions of Turkmen traditions, dating back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, are the pictures and reports of Russian and Western travelers. Turkmen and Soviet scholars<sup>9</sup> also devoted detailed studies to everyday customs and traditions.

Soviet ethnographer Anna Morozova remarked, for instance, on the simplicity, tunic-like silhouette, and preference for red-brown colors in Turkmen clothing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>10</sup> The main components of women's costume were a dress (*koynek*), pants (*balak*), and coats (*kurte* and *çabyt*). Traditional dress is an essential part of everyday and festive wardrobes alike; it is worn at work and at home. Collars and necklines are decorated with *yaka*, a V-shaped embroidery that begins at the neckline and extends to the waist. *Yaka* can be large or narrow, with handmade or machine-made embroidery. Dress cuffs may also be decorated with embroidery. While staple dresses are worn at home, velvet, panne velvet, satin, and silk are preferable for special festive occasions. For special occasions, *yaka* are always handmade, while machine-made embroidery may decorate casual dresses.

The Turkmen bridal costume always includes a red dress and a red *çabyt*; the *kurte* can be any of a range of colors, such as rose, green, or yellow. "A wedding dress is always decorated with embroidery and jewelry, sewn on the chest in several rows and performing the function of amulets. When walking, decorations make a melodious sound and, according to legend, drive away evil spirits who are always hovering near young women."<sup>11</sup> The several layers of clothes the bride wears also aim to shield her from evil forces. The wedding costume includes a *gupba*—

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<sup>6</sup> Gül Berna Özcan, "Seeking Divine Harmony: Uzbek Artisans and Their Space," *CAP Uzbekistan Initiative Papers* 9 (February 2014), <http://centralasiaprogram.org/archives/7852>; Gabriela Mentges and Lola Shamukhitdinova, eds., *Textiles as National Heritage: Identities, Politics and Material Culture* (Munster: Waxmann Verlag, 2017); Aisalkyn Botoeva and Regine A. Spector, "Sewing to Satisfaction: Craft-Based Entrepreneurs in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 32, no. 4 (2013): 487-500, DOI: 10.1080/02634937.2013.862963.

<sup>7</sup> N. Dubova and A.T. Bayliev, eds., *Turkmeny* (Moscow: Nauka, 2017); Layla S. Diba, *Turkmen Jewelry* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011); Dieter Schletzer and Reinhold Schletzer, *Old Silver Jewellery of the Turkoman: An Essay on Symbols in the Culture of Inner Asian Nomads* (Berlin: Reimer, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *Invention of Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>9</sup> These scholars include Georgiy Karpov, Galina Vasilieva, Sergey Polyakov, Yuriy Bregel, Gennadiy Markov, Anna Morozova, Annadurdy Orazov, Ata Djikiev, Tchary Yazliev, and Orazberdy Amanteyev.

<sup>10</sup> A.S. Morozova, "Traditsionnaia narodnaia odezhda Turkmen," in *Traditsionnaia odezhda narodov Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana*, ed. N.B. Lobacheva and M.V. Sazonova (Moscow: Nauka, 1989), 60.

<sup>11</sup> A. Soyunova, N. Bashimova, and G. Ataeva, "Semeinye obriady turkmen i sviazannye s nimi pover'ia," in *Turkmeny*, ed. N. Dubova and A.T. Bayliev (Moscow: Nauka, 2016), 294-329, 300.

a dome-shaped silver headdress. The change of headgear after the wedding symbolizes “the girl’s promotion into the next highest age- and social group.”<sup>12</sup> The bride also wears other silver jewelry, including *bilezik* (armbands) and *guljaka* (an ornamental disc that is used as “a button to close the front neck part of the dress”<sup>13</sup>). The tradition of wearing silver jewelry for wedding ceremonies, festive events, and as part of everyday attire has been noted since colonial times.<sup>14</sup> Every stage of the wedding ceremony requires traditional clothes heavily decorated with embroidery and jewelry.

Carpets and talismans also form part of the wedding ceremony, and even of the traditional costume. Wool carpets decorate the room where the bride-dressing is held. Carpets and *koshma* (felt rugs), together with jewelry and clothing, are included in the bride’s dowry. Carpets and amulets like *aladja* and *dagdan* decorate the car that takes the bride and groom to the wedding venue and then to their evening event.<sup>15</sup> The amulets aim to protect the bride and the groom from bewitchment and evil forces. Nor is the bride alone in wearing traditional clothes and jewelry; numerous guests do so, too. It seems to be impossible to hold a marriage ceremony without artisanal masterpieces.

The cultural, social, and economic changes of the twentieth century partially transformed Turkmen traditional costume, yet its elements—color, fabric, embroidered ornamentation, and cut—continue to indicate ethnic and local affiliation. Traditional rituals and practices, meanwhile, were more profoundly transformed. Over time, the “magical functions of the wedding costume have weakened or disappeared.”<sup>16</sup> Today, some elements of the traditional costume are confined to museum exhibits, yet the bridal costume remains similar to those of previous epochs and remains in high demand. Over time, the elements have been slightly modified, but the main features have been retained, such as embroidered motifs and the use of the traditional fabric *keteni*.

## In the Bazaar: Handicrafts and Consumption



*Alтын Asyr bazaar, Ashgabat, October 2017*

It takes 25-35 minutes to get to Turkmenistan’s main bazaar, Alтын Asyr, from the city center. The bazaar is located in the northern part of Ashgabat, in the Choganli district. The market complex was built in 2011 on the former site of the chaotic but charismatic Tolkuchka bazaar.

The vast territory of the bazaar is divided into specialized trade zones, each of which focuses on certain types of products. In the center is a zone intended for food products. Around it are zones devoted to household goods, building materials and furniture, textiles and footwear, electronics and household appliances, haberdashery and perfumes, jewelry and carpet products, etc. All in all, Alтын Asyr has over 2,000 stalls, divided into five sections: A, B, Ç, E, and D. National handicrafts are presented in section Ç. Carpets, *koshma* (felt mats), and tapestries are sold between section A and section D. Additionally, one can find some handicrafts in other sections. In total, between 40-60 percent of the bazaar’s offerings are handicrafts or can be considered part of the traditional life of Turkmen: embroidery, national clothes, headdresses, scarves, jewelry, carpets and *koshma*, amulets, and so on.<sup>17</sup>

The bazaar is very popular in Ashgabat and throughout the country, attracting people from all social groups. The marketplace operates

<sup>12</sup> Schletzer and Schletzer, “Old Silver Jewellery,” 182.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>14</sup> *Narody Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana. Etnograficheskie ocherki* (Moscow: Akad. Nauk SSSR, 1962), 96.

<sup>15</sup> Sh. N. Djumaev and A.A. Tcharyev, “Svadebnye obriady Turkmen,” *Nauchnaia diskussia: Voprosy sotsiologii, politologii, filosofii, istorii* 1, no. 41 (January 2016): 41.

<sup>16</sup> A. Bayrieva, “Evolutsiia svadebnogo kostuma turkmenok-teke” (PhD diss., St. Petersburg, 2005), 135-136.

<sup>17</sup> This figure is based on visits to the Alтын Asyr bazaar, where they constituted 60 percent at weekends and during the holiday season, and 40 percent on other days.

on Wednesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays, with the busiest days being the weekend days and festive days, when many kiosks with handicrafts are added. In the spring and summer, one can meet women-artisans who offer their embroideries and tapestries from the grass outside the bazaar.

### Jewelry

There are very few remaining examples of Turkmen jewelry from previous epochs. This can be explained by the fact that Turkmen women gave about 7,392 kilograms (16,297 lbs) of silver and gold to the Defense Fund during the Second World War. This amounted to about 80 percent of all precious metals collected throughout the Soviet Union.<sup>18</sup>

The illustrations of Henri Couliboeuf de Blocqueville are one of the most important sources we have about nineteenth-century Turkmen jewelry.<sup>19</sup> However, the earliest description of Turkmen women's jewelry was provided by the German explorer Samuel Gottlieb Gmelin in the eighteenth century.<sup>20</sup> Edmund O'Donovan, Henri Moser, Samuil Dudin, Grigoriy Karelin, and de Blocqueville all described the impressive silver ornaments that covered women's clothing from head to waist, front and back, and acknowledged the presence of expert jewelers among the Turkmen people.<sup>21</sup> Armin Vambéry, meanwhile, noted the melodious sound produced by this jewelry.<sup>22</sup> These historians assessed the degree of Turkish, Persian, Mongolian, and Islamic influence on Turkmen ornaments and jewelry, concluding that they were clearly distinct from those of their neighbors. The earliest accounts, dating from the mid-nineteenth century, describe "a well-developed tradition, using a single medium, silver (gilded or plain); a single stone, the carnelian; arabesque design; and coinage."<sup>23</sup> Centuries later, Turkmen silver ornaments remain

essentially unchanged. The wide range of jewelry displayed at the bazaar includes *bilezik* (bracelets), *gulyaka* (collar-clasp), *teneçir* (earrings), *asyk* (pendant), *dagdan* (neck jewelry, amulet), and *tumar* (pectoral jewelry, amulet). Only women's jewelry is available at the bazaar; silver items for men and jeweled trappings for horses can be seen in museum exhibitions.



*Tumar, Altyn Asyr bazaar, Ashgabat, October 2017*

Jewelry represents about 20 percent of all handicrafts available at the bazaar. A significant share of these items are made by the silversmiths of Ashgabat and Mary, or by the jewelry plant Turkmenaltyn, located in Turkmenabad, which produces jewelry for the state jewelry stores. Besides silver, gold, and non-precious ornaments produced in Turkmenistan, one can also find relatively ancient objects imported from Afghanistan, where a sizable Turkmen community is located. Turkmen silver ornaments are among the most requested handicrafts, despite their high price. However, jewelry purchases are made with a much lower frequency than purchases of embroidery or carpets.

### Carpets

Artifacts indicate that carpet-weaving has taken place on the territory of present-day Turkmenistan since the Bronze Age.<sup>24</sup> In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, carpets

<sup>18</sup> "Turkmenistan v gody voyny: tol'ko fakty," May 8, 2013, <http://infoabad.com/vs-o-turkmenistane/turkmenistan-v-gody-voiny-tolkofakty.html> (accessed January 24, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Henri Couliboeuf de Blocqueville, "Quatorze mois de captivité chez les Turcomans (frontières du Turkestan et de la Perse), 1860-1861, Le Tour du monde, 1866," in Layla S. Diba, *Turkmen Jewelry* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), 225-272.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Gottlieb Gmelin [1774-1784], cited by Diba, *Turkmen Jewelry*, 282.

<sup>21</sup> Diba, *Turkmen Jewelry*, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Armin Vambéry, *Travels in Central Asia* (London, 1864).

<sup>23</sup> Diba, *Turkmen Jewelry*, 23.

<sup>24</sup> E.G. Zareva, "Kover kak istoricheskii istochnik: k istorii formirovaniia khudozhestvennogo oblika i strukturnykh osobennosti turkmenskogo kovra XVI—nachala XX v.," *Vestnik arkheologii, antropologii i etnografii* 3, no. 22 (2013): 166.

acquired an “individual-tribal character”<sup>25</sup> that makes it possible to differentiate between the carpets of the five main Turkmen tribes, if not be more specific. The ornaments of the Turkmen tribes date back to the totem symbols of the Oguz tribes.<sup>26</sup> The Oguz *tamgas*<sup>27</sup> were described by Makhmud Kashgari in *Divanu Lugat-it-Turk* (1077 AD). Such ornaments-*guls*<sup>28</sup> coexist with motifs characteristic of the material culture of the region. Five carpet *guls*, each corresponding to a tribe—Teke, Yomut, Salor, Chovdur, or Ersary—are represented on the national flag of Turkmenistan.<sup>29</sup>

Each carpet has a small geometric pattern along the border, while the center is filled with medallion *guls*. According to the Russian specialist Elena Tsareva, “the range of carpet products produced by the Turkmen [...] is more than 30 types,”<sup>30</sup> and the existing varieties are constantly supplemented with new ones.<sup>31</sup> Besides the traditional tapestries, carpet-weaving techniques are used to produce novelties like clutch purses, handbags, cushion covers, and cell phone cases, all of which are available at the



Turkmen carpets, koshmas, clutch purses and handbags, Altyn Asyr bazaar, Ashgabat, October 2017

bazaar. One might say that globalization has transformed the carpet industry: carpet makers

are producing products that meet the needs created by globalization. Carpets and tapestries represent about one-third of the handicrafts for sale in the bazaar.

### Embroidery and Clothes



Newly married women visit their husbands' relatives in the Mir 2 microdistrict, Ashgabat, May 2018

Embroidered *yaka* are the most requested of the handicrafts presented in Altyn Asyr. Women buy them to decorate their traditional dresses or modernized versions of traditional dresses. In the first half of the twentieth century, embroidery was confined to the neckline or cuffs of a dress. Today, by contrast, the entirety of a woman's attire may be lavishly decorated with embroidery. Usually, garments are embroidered in sections and then made into a dress.<sup>32</sup> Thus, there are three options for embroidered purchases: “*yaka* only,” “*yaka* and cuffs,” and “*yaka*, cuffs, and additional sections.” With the advent and

<sup>25</sup> Jack Cassin and Peter Hoffmeister, *Tent Band, Tent Bag: Classic Turkmen Weaving* (Coburg/Esbach: Magna Mater Press, 1988).

<sup>26</sup> Jack Cassin, “Turkmen Rug Studies: Some ‘S’ Group ‘Salor’ Gol Chuval Examined,” accessed January 19, 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/15399119/TURKMEN\\_RUG\\_STUDIES\\_Some\\_S\\_group\\_salor\\_gol\\_chuval\\_](https://www.academia.edu/15399119/TURKMEN_RUG_STUDIES_Some_S_group_salor_gol_chuval_).

<sup>27</sup> A *tamga* is the emblem of a particular tribe, clan, or family.

<sup>28</sup> *Gul* is a medallion-like design element typical of Turkmen traditional carpets.

<sup>29</sup> Law “On the National Flag,” Mejlis of Turkmenistan, 2001.

<sup>30</sup> Elena G. Tsareva, *Iskusstvo kovrodeliia i kultur'noe nasledie Turkmenistana* (Ashgabat and St. Petersburg: Kulturnoe nasledie Turkmenistana, 2000), 203.

<sup>31</sup> These include the floor carpet (*haly*), the door curtain (*ensi*, *kapounnuk*, and *dezlik*), carpet bags for storing utensils, dishes and clothes (*torba*, *tchouval*, *mafratch*, and *khordjoun*), camel blanket (*asmaldyk*), prayer mat (*namazlyk*), burial mat (*ayatlyk*), yurt band (*iolam*, *bou*, and *yup*), cradle rug (*salachak*), and Quran case (*bochtche*).

<sup>32</sup> Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood, “Turkmen Dress and Embroidery,” in *Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: Central and Southwest Asia*, ed. Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 355-368.

broader usage of embroidery sewing machines, embroidery is divided into two principal groups: handmade and machine-made. Handmade embroidery is a minimum of 10 times more expensive than machine-made embroidery.

Different Turkmen tribes prefer different embroidery stitches, which makes it possible to identify the origin of a particular piece of embroidery.<sup>33</sup> The embroidery's motifs, which echo the designs on carpets, also help to determine its origin. The favored colors for embroidery and carpets alike are yellow, white, red, and green, which symbolize the four elements of fire, earth, air, and water. The most elegant motifs decorate a woman's *kurte*, the coat that is part of the costume of a bride or married women. The traditional ornament used on a *kurte* is called the "tree of life": stylized embroidered tulips are reflected by silver ornaments. Embroidery may also decorate handmade *bokche* (small bags), wallets, *balak* (pants), and *tahya* (skullcaps). In general, this category represents about one-third of handicrafts in the bazaar.<sup>34</sup>

### Amulets

Amulets and talismans, intended to ward off evil spirits and the evil eye, are displayed in houses and apartments. Usually, triangular or round amulets are suspended on the wall above the front door to a house/apartment. They may be accompanied by *yuzerlik*, a plant that is said to have the magical property of keeping evil spirits away and helps increase one's number of offspring and reinforce prosperity. Today, *yuzerlik* is sold in small shopping kiosks in villages and sophisticated boutiques in the cities alike. Stores protected with amulets and *yuzerlik* can also be found in the bazaar.

Amulets are worn mainly by woman and children. Divided into three main categories (*alaja*, *doga*, and *dagdan*), they are made from colored braid and wool, sometimes by adding the

wood of the sacred tree<sup>35</sup> *dagdan* (literally, "made from mountain," a reference to both its hardness and the fact that the tree is found in mountainous areas).<sup>36</sup> Its hardness means that evil spirits cannot dwell in *dagdan* amulets.<sup>37</sup> *Dagdan* are widespread in Turkmenistan and are worn under clothes.



Amulets and *yuzerlik*, *Altyn Asyr bazaar*, Ashgabat, May 2018

The second category of amulets is *doga*.<sup>38</sup> Today, *doga* are made from cloth or wool and have a handwritten prayer enclosed in them.<sup>39</sup> The third category, *alaja*, is a colored braid. The most popular color combination is white and black, representing the confrontation between the forces of good and evil.<sup>40</sup> Another explication is the confrontation between strong-willed actions and those led by the heart, analogous to the masculine and feminine sides of character.<sup>41</sup> Another type of *alaja* is a braid with three or four colors. All in all, amulets represent about 5 percent of bazaar handicrafts.

### Plebiscite of the Turkmen Nation of Artisans

At the end of the nineteenth century, the French intellectual Ernest Renan (1823–1892) stated, "The existence of a nation is a daily plebiscite, like the existence of an individual is a perpetual affirmation of life."<sup>42</sup> According to him, a nation has two faces: the common heritage of memories and the current consent to live in a community

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> I include in this category *telpeks* and men's clothes.

<sup>35</sup> The word *dagdan* has the double meaning of "amulet" and "ash tree."

<sup>36</sup> There are also amulets made of silver: *bozbend*, *tumar*, *gözmonžuk*, and *çapraz*.

<sup>37</sup> Schletzer and Schletzer, "Old Silver Jewellery," 48

<sup>38</sup> Derived from Arabic, *doga* means "prayer call."

<sup>39</sup> S. Demidov, *Turkmenskie ovliady* (Ashkhabad: Ylym, 1976), 24.

<sup>40</sup> Author's field research (AFR) in *Altyn Asyr bazaar*, October 2017.

<sup>41</sup> AFR, May 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Ernest Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation ? Conférence en Sorbonne, Paris," 1882, accessed January 24, 2019.

and continue to assert an undivided heritage.<sup>43</sup> A century after Renan, Michael Billig explored the idea of daily representation of a nation. His conclusions intersected with Renan's approach: both insist on the idea that citizens express a "daily plebiscite" by indicating, flagging, appreciating, remembering, and sharing the nation.

### *Continuity of Knowledge*

For centuries, the Turkmen people have valorized their common heritage by producing and consuming handcrafted products. Altyn Asyr is one of the public places where one can watch how Turkmen express their daily consent to live together. Producers and consumers of handicrafts from all over Turkmenistan meet at the bazaar. Among the country's regions (*velayat*)—Akhhal, Balkan, Mary, Dashoguz and Lebap—Akhhal and Balkan are the most represented among sellers. Akhhal artisans or members of their families dominate almost all handcrafted products, while Balkan and Mary artisans are mostly present in the carpet section.

The interviews I conducted at the bazaar highlight the everyday plebiscite nature of crafts in Turkmenistan. Djahan is a typical representative of bazaar attendees, particularly of sellers-producers. She lives in Akhhal *velayat* and is about 28 years old. Three times a week, she comes to the bazaar to offer *yaka* embroidered by herself and by women in her family. Djahan's assortment includes handmade and machine-made embroidery. When I bought a *yaka* of green, blue, red, and white, Djahan told me about the motifs used in embroidery. Her words demonstrate that to wear a Turkmen dress is to continue a tradition—the same motifs, colors, and stitches remain popular:

I know the motifs that were used by my mother and grandmother. I also insert traditional Turkmen motifs into my embroidery, mostly for handmade items. The motif *goçak* protects against evil; you can see it on the *tandoor*.<sup>44</sup> Floral or geometric ornaments also have protective force.

Djahan added that the *yaka* ornaments could be used to embroider *tahya* or *kurte*. She went into great detail, showing a genuine

knowledge of the ornaments. Other bazaar sellers and their clients provided equally in-depth descriptions of embroidery ornaments and Turkmen women's dress.

Ogultaç lives in Balkan *velayat*. In her fifties, she is an artisan who makes carpets. Carpet-making is a family tradition: she learned it from her mother and grandmother, and today she makes carpets with her daughters, though the youngest, Khatidja, does embroidery. With her friends, who are also carpet-makers, Ogultaç comes to Altyn Asyr on Saturdays. To illustrate her family's long tradition of carpet-weaving, Ogultaç showed me a wide variety of carpets and tapestries, from the biggest *haly* to the smallest clutch bag.

I have a large collection of carpets made in previous years by my grandmother and mother. They were very skillful and taught me many things. I did my first carpet with my mother. When my daughters grew up, I passed my skills on to them. My daughters will transfer this knowledge to my granddaughters. Turkmen need carpets and Turkmen women will always make them.

Ogultaç showed me relatively old carpets, dating back to the 1980s, and more recent ones. Like my previous interlocutor, she knew motifs and could distinguish carpets with *teke*, *beshir*, and *yomud gul* ornamentation. She demonstrated a knowledge of the history of carpet production and highlighted the importance of continuity in carpet-making.

Maral lives in Ashgabat. A thirty-year-old accountant, she comes to the bazaar only once a week, on Saturdays. She offers silver jewelry made by her husband, a silversmith. She pointed out the items made by her husband and by his father.

My husband is a hereditary silversmith from Mary region. He makes traditional or modern jewelry. If you would like to order something, you could call him or meet with him and explain exactly what you want. He has great experience with making preordered pieces.

While women artisans dominate the fields of embroidery and carpets, silver jewelry is

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> *Tandoor* (Turkm. *tadyr*) refers to a cylindrical clay oven used in cooking and baking in Turkmenistan and Central Asia more broadly

mostly the domain of men.<sup>45</sup> Maral herself does not make any silver ornaments, though she does design them. I later spoke to her husband, Begenç, who told me more about Turkmen jewelry. My conversations with Maral and Begenç demonstrated the heredity of silver jewelry production.

The talismans produced by my next interlocutor serve as a good example of widespread demand in Turkmen society. Mamadjan is about 65 years old. She is from Akhal velayat and comes to the bazaar twice a week. Very energetic and charismatic, she makes *alaja* amulets for her relatives and for the bazaar's clients. She has *alaja* for every occasion, from wearing as a wardrobe detail to decorating the interior of a home. She also offers *dagdan* and *doga*, but their producers are from Dashoguz. During our conversation, Mamadjan shared stories about the meaning of Turkmen talismans:

*Alaja* protects against evil forces. The most powerful are the combination of white and black threads. I recommend that you take an *alaja* with *dagdan* to wear on your wrist. This will help you, as you travel a lot and meet many people. I am also wearing an *alaja* in my clothes.

These conversations with sellers and artisans demonstrate the continuity of handicrafts and traditional practices, and sellers' respect for both. They also show the transmission of knowledge on traditional practices and handicrafts from the older generation to the younger generation, and the widespread demand for and use of handicrafts in daily life.

### *Everyday Items*

In Turkmenistan, the average monthly wages in 2013, 2016, and 2017 were 1,047, 1,381, and 1,509 manat, respectively, equaling US\$299, \$395, and \$431 at the official rate.<sup>46</sup> The report on retail prices for products and services prepared by the State Statistics Committee of Turkmenistan states that a *çerek* flatbread costs 1 manat, a dozen eggs 3 manat, a kilogram of fish 11 manat, a kilogram of sausage about 13 manat,

and a kilogram of soft cheese 15 manat.<sup>47</sup> Prices for handicrafts range from 25-30 manat for a machine-made *yaka* to 250-550 for a handmade one. The most expensive carpets, those with a high knot density, range from 800 to 1,500 manat. Those with low or average density cost only 100-300 manat. A carpet clutch or small women's bag costs between 150 and 450 manat. Silver bracelets with carnelians start at 1,000 manat. *Alaja* cost about 2 manat each and *doga* 5-10 manat. A handcrafted talisman *alaja*, therefore, costs about the same as a *çerek*, while an embroidered *yaka* costs a little more than soft cheese. The prices of handcrafted products are thus affordable for Turkmen.

### *Sellers and Buyers*

As mentioned above, far more handicrafts are displayed on weekend days and during holidays. The bazaar attracts more potential buyers on these days, which prompts more artisans to also come. Many of these "weekend artisans" have a professional background that is not related to their bazaar activities: five days per week they work as accountants or clerks, but once or twice per week they come to Altyn Asyr with their handicrafts. These non-professional sellers also offer products made by their relatives. During working hours at the bazaar, they sometimes leave their stalls to purchase items offered by other sellers. Those who offer embroidery purchase carpets or *dagdan* with *yuzerlik*, and vice versa. Yet even when a seller is also a buyer, he or she remains above all an artisan.

Women constitute the majority of artisans and sellers in the bazaar, producing almost all handicrafts except jewelry. But it would be wrong to say that men are excluded from artisanal practices. They are engaged in herding flocks of sheep and camels, whose wool is necessary to produce carpets, tapestries, and felt rugs. Men also make silver ornaments and wooden handicrafts.

I talked to some Turkmen who visited the bazaar to purchase handcrafted items. Batyr and Djerem are a married couple. Both are

<sup>45</sup> There are a few women silversmiths in modern Turkmenistan. In earlier eras, Turkmen jewelry was produced exclusively by men.

<sup>46</sup> According to exchange rate of the Central Bank of Turkmenistan, accessed January 24, 2019, [http://www.cbt.tm/kurs/kurs\\_today\\_en.html](http://www.cbt.tm/kurs/kurs_today_en.html).

<sup>47</sup> State Statistics Committee of Turkmenistan, "2017-njy ýylyň noýabr aýy üçin "Türkmenistan boýunça bölek satuw söwdasynda harytlaryň we hyzmatlaryň ortaça bazar nyrlary barada maglumat," accessed January 24, 2019, [http://www.stat.gov.tm/netcat\\_files/70/125/h\\_ff40da074638fab702d2e6bf8ebd7df](http://www.stat.gov.tm/netcat_files/70/125/h_ff40da074638fab702d2e6bf8ebd7df).

working professionals. While Batyr was choosing a carpet, Djerem explained:

I can embroider *yaka* for myself, but I don't have much time. I came to the bazaar to buy a ready-made *yaka*. We will also purchase a carpet, as we just moved to a new apartment.

My interviewees—Mamadjan, Ogultaç, Djahan, Maral, Begenc, Djerem, and Batyr—are typical representatives of the bazaar public. They wear clothes embroidered by themselves or by their compatriots; their houses and apartments are decorated by carpets they made themselves or bought at the Altyn Asyr bazaar. On a daily basis, they produce and they consume; they sell and buy local handcrafted products. This commercial activity supports and revives their traditions, serving as an everyday plebiscite of the nation.

At the same time, Turkmen cultural heritage, such as handicrafts and ornaments, is broadly presented in official narratives. Carpet *guls* are represented on the national flag. The Day of the Carpet has been celebrated on the last Sunday in May every year since 1992. The State Carpet Museum in Ashgabat, which has hundreds of examples of Turkmen carpets, opened in 1993. Permanent exhibitions of Turkmen embroidery, jewelry, and garments are visible in state museums across the country. President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov writes books devoted to Turkmenistan's tangible and intangible cultural heritage.<sup>48</sup> The national narrative created and maintained by Turkmen citizen-artisans is therefore reflected in the country's official narrative.

Billig's analysis of the nature of banal nationalism in "the established nations of the West"<sup>49</sup> demonstrated that their nationhood is continually reproduced through political discourses and cultural and media products.

Taken together, they narrate the "endemic condition"<sup>50</sup> of "state-guided" nationalism. In Turkmenistan, "people-guided" and "state-guided" narratives overlap over the meaning of handicrafts in everyday nationalism.

### Self-Orientalism and Exoticism: International Visitors

International visitors also constitute a share of bazaar consumers. For them, handicrafts are not an everyday plebiscite of the nation, to which they do not belong, but rather an element of Orientalism.

The Orient has always constituted an intrinsic part of European (Western) civilization, serving as one of Europe's "constituent Others."<sup>51</sup> Orientalism is defined as "a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident.'"<sup>52</sup> Following this logic, Self-Orientalism is defined as the decision by the "subjects" of Orientalism to highlight their own Otherness to speak to a Western imagination. This section, dedicated to foreign expatriates and tourists in the bazaar, seeks to understand which perception—Orientalism or Self-Orientalism—dominates interactions between domestic sellers-artisans and international visitors.

According to tourist agencies based in Turkmenistan, Altyn Asyr is a prime tourist attraction in the country. International tourists (whose post-independence number peaked at 1998 in 300,000 before falling to a nadir of 3,400 in 2000<sup>53</sup>) visit bazaars in Ashgabat and in other cities, such as Mary and Turkmenabat. Bazaar visits are listed on sample travel itineraries and suggested by tourist guides.<sup>54</sup> Ashgabat's expatriate community also actively purchases Turkmen handicrafts at bazaars, commercial centers, and specialized shops.

<sup>48</sup> Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, *Türkmen Medenieti* (Ashgabat, 2015); Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, *Bakhshis are Heralds of National Happiness* (Ashgabat, 2015).

<sup>49</sup> Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 6.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 1-3, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> We do not have data for more recent dates. "Turkmenistan-International Tourism," Index Mundi, accessed January 24, 2019, <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/turkmenistan/international-tourism>; "International Tourism, Number of Arrivals," World Bank, accessed January 24, 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ST.INT.ARVL?locations=TM>.

<sup>54</sup> "Sample Program 3: Short & Spectacular," Owadan Tourism, accessed January 24, 2019, <http://www.owadan.net/en/custom-tours/short-spectacular>; "Sample Program 2: A Week of Highlights," accessed January 24, 2019, <http://www.owadan.net/en/custom-tours/a-week-of-highlights>.

Tourists and expats are attracted to bazaars to purchase souvenirs or presents for their relatives and families. Sellers indicate that tourists prefer to purchase small handcrafted items: mobile phone covers, clutch bags, and scarves. Expats are less interested in embroidered *yaka*, jewelry, or Turkmen traditional clothes. Bazaar sellers agree that locals are the principal consumers of handicrafts and their main source of revenue, but they appreciate foreign visitors' interest in their handicrafts.

While foreign travelers' need for small and non-expensive items could be explained by the limits of luggage space and time, expats have more opportunities to purchase handcrafted products. Many of them, having lived in the country for some period of time, demonstrate a genuine interest in Turkmen handicrafts. They make gowns from *keteni* with embroidered *yaka*, they wear Turkmen silver ornaments, and they decorate their apartments with Turkmen carpets or *koshma*.



Turkmen carpet, Altyn Asyr bazaar, Ashgabat, May 2018

Marie is a French expat who has lived in Ashgabat with her husband for a long time. Her days are very busy with her kids, but she likes to spend some of her precious free time at Altyn Asyr. She has acquired a number of embroidered pieces, tapestries, Turkmen *keteni* cloth, and scarves. Though Marie perceives Turkmen handicrafts to represent the culture of the Other, she does not interpret them as exotic. When she wears a Turkmen *asyk* pendant or a Turkmen scarf made of *keteni* at work on a daily basis, she demonstrates her respect for the host country's culture. The Turkmen carpets and amulets that decorate her apartment can be interpreted in

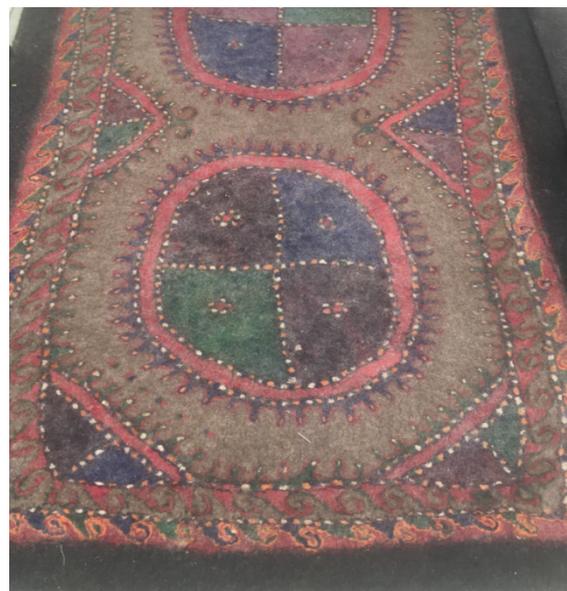
that same spirit: "Embroideries and carpets are colorful and they are made with great taste. Handicrafts reflect Turkmen culture and they look very bright and modern. I'd love to decorate my apartment with Turkmen carpets," she explained. Her husband, Sebastien, was similarly positive about Turkmen handicrafts: "Turkmen women look very elegant and stylish in their traditional long dresses with embroidery. Today, it is rare to see such elegance on the streets of French cities."

Olga has been working in Turkmenistan for a year. She came to Altyn Asyr with members of her family, who were visiting her for a few days. They were looking to purchase a *koshma* for their *dacha* in Russia. Olga had experience of living in other Central Asian countries, and her interpretation of handcrafted products blended a perception of their exoticness with an aesthetic appreciation and a utilitarian approach:

Turkmen felt rugs differ from Kyrgyz ones. I cannot say that one is better than the other, because both are unique. I really appreciate that their ornaments create a special atmosphere in my home and they fit perfectly in every interior, whether the furniture is modern or antique.

She also commented on the silver *asyk* that she wears:

I purchased the *asyk* during my first visit to the bazaar. I was charmed by its simple beauty and I know that it symbolizes a woman. Sometimes I wear the *asyk* to work with my office suit. And yes, by wearing it, I partly feel my connection to Turkmen history, art, and probably to the Turkmen people.



Turkmen koshma, Altyn Asyr bazaar, Ashgabat, May 2018

Foreign tourists interpret handmade items slightly differently. They perceive handcrafted products to be exotic and even magical. Julian, a tourist from Switzerland, explained:

Central Asian markets are places with a special atmosphere. Turkmen rugs, embroideries, and clothes are kind of like we saw in Uzbekistan, where I was a few days ago, but they are also different. I like the colorful dresses and scarves that I see everywhere here. The color combinations are striking. I don't think I will purchase anything except a round amulet. This will decorate my home to remind me about my trip to Asia.

Hannah, a German traveler, commented:

I always dreamed of going to the region of mountains and steppes. What I see here, around me, is so exciting. People are so friendly and smiling. Women look beautiful in their oriental clothes. I bought embroidered phone cases for my daughters and camel miniatures for my friends. I believe they will be happy to get them, because the embroidered cases are unique and they stand out among all those ordinary phone cases.

These international visitors' comments reflect two different but intersecting narratives. Many expats testify to their integration into Turkmen society through the active consumption of national handicrafts: they decorate their houses with carpets and felt rugs and wear silver jewelry and embroidered items. International tourists apparently interpret Turkmen handicrafts mostly as exotic and catchy souvenirs. However, except for a few small items, like mobile phone cases and camel miniatures, almost nothing within the bazaar is made specifically for international guests.<sup>55</sup> From observations and conversations with sellers and buyers, it appears that the majority of Turkmen handicrafts, garments, embroidery, carpets, and jewelry are aimed at and bought by local residents.

International visitors thus consume products that are designed for locals. In the eyes of foreign travelers, the exoticism distinguishes and unites Turkmen artisanal items in the context of other souvenirs bought at bazaars in Central Asia or beyond. However, artisans are driven by the needs of Turkmen society, not by international requests. With minor exceptions,

Turkmens do not cultivate their own exoticism to attract international tourists' or expats' attention. Artisanal products are made for domestic consumption.

## Conclusion

The case of Turkmenistan is applicable to a greater or lesser degree to every country of Central Asia. Existing or reinvented traditions impact the contemporary lifestyles of Central Asian societies. Through traditional practices, which ensure the use and consumption of handicrafts, people-guided national narratives are expressed and constructed on a daily basis, enabling the Turkmen national identity to be seen as banal and obvious.

The plebiscite of the nation in Turkmenistan is realized through the role given to handicrafts in everyday life. Turkmen motifs are identified and known, traditional clothes are worn, and amulets are requested and used beyond and within the bazaar. Artisans and their masterpieces nurture and foster "people-guided" and "state-guided" national narratives. As long as the "tree of life" is an essential embroidery motif on a *kurte* and the *kurte* is an essential element of the marriage ceremony, handicrafts will exist and will continue to epitomize the everyday plebiscite of a Turkmen nation of artisans.

However, in recent years, Turkmen colorful ornaments and traditional clothes have begun to pop up in the collections of Indian and Pakistani designers. If Turkmenistan does not put appropriate preventative measures in place, Ashgabat could lose the "licensing" and "branding" of its crafts and motifs. The same is true of other Central Asian motifs, which are now widely used in haute couture or designers' collections, often without any mention of any Central Asian country. In accordance with intellectual property law as well as respect for traditional knowledge and cultural heritage, I propose here a series of recommendations that would help to protect Turkmen craftsmanship, handicraft techniques, and motifs.

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<sup>55</sup> However, in the boutiques in Turkmen hotels like "Nisa," "Grand Otel Turkmen," and "Ak Altyn," one can find a wide range of souvenirs made especially for foreign tourists. Among these souvenirs are embroidered boxes, miniatures of Turkmen women and men in national costume, and miniatures of camels and Turkmen horses.

## Policy Recommendations

### *Recommendations for the central government:*

- Initiate a working group comprised of representatives of governmental institutions; the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and UNESCO; the state carpet, fabric, and jewelry plants; the Turkmen State Academy of Arts; experts on Turkmen material culture; and international consultants to prepare comprehensive files on Turkmen traditional knowledge or cultural heritage, such as Turkmen craftsmanship, handicraft techniques, and motifs. The documents will be useful for classifying and registering Turkmen cultural heritage in the International Trademark System under WIPO or for inscribing it on the UNESCO Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage.
- Conduct an international lobbying campaign with the help of WIPO experts and WIPO member states to classify and internationally register Turkmen traditional knowledge under the “Turkmen” brand under the International Trademark System of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) in accordance with the conditions established by the Madrid Agreement concerning the International Registration

of Marks (1891) and the Madrid Protocol (1989).

- Inscribe Turkmen cultural heritage on the UNESCO Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage. This will ensure the recognition of Turkmen heritage as part of the cultural heritage of humanity and acknowledge the role of Turkmen artisans in the production, maintenance, and safeguarding of this cultural heritage, which enriches global cultural diversity.

### *Recommendations for international and local donor organizations:*

- Provide technical assistance in designing, developing, and implementing national intellectual property strategy related to Turkmen traditional knowledge.
- In cooperation with the EBRD, OSCE, and USAID, the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs of Turkmenistan should develop a training in how to market and distribute Turkmen handicrafts to international audiences, as well as small grant programs for individual entrepreneurs to support small-scale handicrafts.
- In cooperation with the UNESCO Intangible Heritage Fund, the Turkmen State Commission for UNESCO should develop preventive programs and activities aimed at safeguarding Turkmen cultural heritage.

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## PART IV.

# FACING GLOBALIZATION: TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP TRANSFORMATIONS

## Chapter 13. The Digital Generation and Startups in Tajikistan

Ilhom Aliyev<sup>1</sup> (2019)



*Startup Weekend. Dushanbe, 2016.*

In the age of the internet, technology startups are disrupting markets globally, growing faster than ever, and changing the world in which we live. Companies like Uber, Snapchat, and Instagram, which did not even exist ten years ago, are now valued at billions of U.S. dollars while operating globally and creating thousands of jobs. In Tajikistan, a small landlocked country in Central Asia, a fin-tech startup called Alif Sarmoya that started with only three co-founders six years ago is now introducing innovative solutions to the banking sector. It currently has over 250 employees and is already expanding regionally.

As a matter of fact, a sudden flourishing of the startup scene is occurring across Tajikistan. Young people's interest in innovation, digital technology, and entrepreneurship is growing faster than ever. Technology startup seminars, talks, and conferences are organized on regular basis. In the last seven years, three innovative accelerators have been set up—with another two currently under

way; three co-working spaces have been launched; hundreds of startup events have been organized all over the country. The quick rise of local startups such as Alif Sarmoya (fin-tech), Shedeivr (creative marketing), somon.tj (e-commerce) shows a major shift in young people's aspirations as they now hope to stay in Tajikistan to become role models and develop a new culture of entrepreneurship.

This paper seeks to analyze the dynamics of the growing startup culture in Tajikistan and the conditions that help this culture prosper. It concludes that the rapid startup scene in Tajikistan is due to the growth of a bottom-up, individualistic culture and the embrace of market liberalism among the younger population, despite the complex entrepreneurial environment in the country. This paper first introduces a short theoretical framework. Second, it presents an overview of the development of the 'startup scene' globally and then specifically in Tajikistan. The paper concludes by drawing attention to the underlying discussion related to startup culture among youth in Tajikistan and presenting short policy recommendations based on academic literature, policy practices, and interviews.

It is important to note that by startups, I take the definition offered by Steve Blank: a startup is a temporary, for-profit organization that uses technology and looks for a business model that is repeatable and scalable. Startups have a mentality of becoming a large dominant business, but they are temporary and use different types of funding in

<sup>1</sup> Ilhom Aliyev advises DAI Europe on Policy Innovation Facility, a UK government-funded initiative that brings innovative solutions to economic policy challenges of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. He previously served as the Executive Director of the American Chamber of Commerce in Tajikistan (AmCham Tajikistan) from 2015 to 2019. Ilhom holds a MA in Political Economy from the University of Manchester, UK, and a BA in International Relations from the Russian-Tajik Slavonic University, Tajikistan.

comparison to small and medium enterprises. 2 Because the term startup became famous during the dotcom boom, the majority of people associate the term startup with technology. In my paper, I classify startups as early stage businesses that are in search of business model, scalable, and use innovation and technology in their business endeavors.

## Startups in the Digital Age

### *The Internet, Youth, and Entrepreneurship*

According to the World Economic Forum, the biggest consumer of online social media globally is generation Z (those born in the mid-1990s to early 2000s), followed by millennials (those born in the early 1980s to mid-1990s).<sup>3</sup> As digital natives, they have been constantly wired from a young age and brought up in the information technology era.<sup>4</sup> Having access to education and resources through technology, young people start to feel empowered, which in turn brings changes to the societies that they are a part of. According to Welzel, human empowerment has begun to globalize as education, technology, and globalization advance.<sup>5</sup> This, in turn, as Fukuyama points out, creates a strong relationship between higher education levels and higher values ascribed to democracy, individual freedom, and tolerance of alternative lifestyles.<sup>6</sup>

Access to entrepreneurship via the internet is easy, and the trend of using informational technology for entrepreneurial activities is global.<sup>7</sup> Startups remain a big contributor to economic growth. In the US, for instance, high-growth startups account for 50 percent of job creations.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, Frick has found that the majority of startups founders were 31 years old when they founded their companies.<sup>9</sup> Contrary to Frick, Azoulay has found that the median age of successful technology startup founders is higher, at 40.8.<sup>10</sup> There is additional research which asserts that venture capital-backed startups focus on younger ages, leading to additional debate on the bias of venture capital firms towards younger startup founders; however, this particular issue is beyond the scope of this paper.

Seeing the benefits of technology startups, policymakers globally are paying close attention to the development of their country's information and communication technology sectors and business environments in order to diversify their economies. As an example, Israel, synonymously called the "Startup-Nation," has heavily invested in innovation, research & development (R&D), and human capital. The country sparked the growth of the venture capital industry in the 1990s, helping to boost the modern tech scene. Today, Israel boasts over 65,000 startups, with notable examples including the Viber instant messaging application, the Gett taxi service platform, and the Waze mobile satellite navigation application—which was acquired by Google for US\$ 1.15 billion.<sup>11</sup>

### Startups and Startup Ecosystems Globally

According to Blank's definition, a startup is a scalable, high growth business that is ready to innovate and disrupt. In contrast with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that work according to a set business plan, startups use and test different business models.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, they usually rely on

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<sup>2</sup> S. Blank and B. Dorf, *The startup owner's manual, the step-by-step guide for building a great company*, Pescadero, CA: K&S Ranch, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> World Economic Forum, "This graph tells us who uses social media the most," Oct 2, 2019. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/10/social-media-use-by-generation/>.

<sup>4</sup> M. Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon*, MCB University Press, Vol. 9 No. 5, October, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> C. Welzel, "Freedom Rising: Human Empowerment and the Quest for Emancipation," Cambridge University Press, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> F. Fukuyama, "The Middle - Class Revolution," *Wall Street Journal*, June 28, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> J. Postlethwaite, "No business without new tech, say young entrepreneurs," *The Guardian*, Feb 12, 2014, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/small-business-network/2014/feb/12/technology-young-entrepreneurs-business>.

<sup>8</sup> R. Decker et al. *The Role of Entrepreneurship in US Job Creation and Economic Dynamism*, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Volume 28, Number 3, Summer 2014.

<sup>9</sup> W. Frick, "How old are Silicon Valley's top Founders," *Harvard Business Review*, April 3, 2014. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2014/04/how-old-are-silicon-valleys-top-founders-heres-the-data>.

<sup>10</sup> P. Azoulay et al. "Research: The Average Age of a Successful Startup Founder Is 45," *Harvard Business Review*, July 18, 2018. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2018/07/research-the-average-age-of-a-successful-startup-founder-is-45>.

<sup>11</sup> J. Yerman, "A Startup Nation: Why Israel Has Become The New Silicon Valley," *Airline Passenger Experience Association*, May 22, 2019. Available at: <https://apex.aero/2019/05/22/startup-nation-israel-become-silicon-valley>.

<sup>12</sup> S. Blank and B. Dorf, *The startup owner's manual, the step-by-step guide for building a great company*, 2012.

different sources of funding, such as venture capital. The mentality of startups is completely different from SMEs: startups focus on searching and failing over and over again until they find a model that works. The startup mentality can be attributed to the desire to make history in some way or to be part of something big. Most founders want to build businesses that will improve people's lives by changing the way products or services are created, distributed, or consumed.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the startup mentality embraces failure and change, encourages questions, and always stays creative.

Technology-based startups play an important role in innovation and are pivotal to transforming a country's production and earning models and diversifying the economy. In this open and global economy, founders of startups are looking for the best environment—or 'startup ecosystem'—to start and grow their business. Therefore, a country's startup ecosystem has to be internationally competitive if it does not want to be vulnerable to brain drain.<sup>14</sup> According to Fiona Murray of MIT's Sloan School, there are two logics for how prosperous startup ecosystems develop: the first is the public sector's heavy involvement and investment into technology parks, innovation centers, etc. The second logic lies in the bottom-up approach, which is based on people and a founder-friendly mentality that slowly grows from within.<sup>15</sup>

If we consider the Top 20 Global Startup Ecosystem Ranking, it shows us some measurements of a successful environment and innovation hub in which technology startups will prosper. These include: availability of tech & entrepreneurial talent, availability of top-notch technology, access to capital, availability of

incubators and accelerators, presence of corporates with open innovation, entrepreneurial culture (support via mentors, open networks and culture, policy, forward-looking regulation, tax, etc.), academia fostering innovative entrepreneurship, including intellectual property arrangements, and access to large markets, international scope and connectivity.<sup>16</sup>

It is important to note that the role of the policymakers in managing the strength of the startup ecosystem is crucial. As noted previously in the case of Israel, by investing in education, facilitating access to finance, providing infrastructure, and setting up a framework of startup-friendly conditions in academia, the country was able to position itself as a leading startup nation globally.<sup>17</sup>

We can also consider the example of Estonia, a Baltic country of 1.3 million people where taxes are completed online just under five minutes, 99 percent of public services are available online, and one third of people vote online.<sup>18</sup> Another interesting initiative is Estonia's e-Residency, a first-of-its-kind initiative that allows individuals to start businesses in Estonia without living there. More than 50,000 people from around the world have applied for it since it was launched in 2014.<sup>19</sup> The Startup visa allows non-residents and non-EU talents to come and work in Estonia.<sup>20</sup> The country has had the most competitive tax system in the developed world for the last three years in a row, according to the International Tax Competitiveness Index.<sup>21</sup> Estonia currently boasts multiple startup unicorns valued at over US\$ 1 billion such as Skype, Uber competitor Taxify, and payments firm TransferWire.<sup>22</sup> Local startups raised a record of nearly EUR 328 million in investments in 2018.

<sup>13</sup> R. Gulati, "The Soul of the Start-up," Harvard Business Review, July - August 2019 Issue, Available at: <https://hbr.org/2019/07/the-soul-of-a-start-up>.

<sup>14</sup> P. Andrez et al. "Specific Support to Slovakia. Boosting the Slovak Startup Ecosystem," Horizon 2020 Policy Support Facility, European Commission, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> A. Regalado, "Innovation Quest, Regions Seek Critical Mass," MIT Technology Review, September/October 2013, Vol. 116, No. 5. P. 84-86.

<sup>16</sup> P. Andrez, et al. "Specific Support to Slovakia. Boosting the Slovak Startup Ecosystem".

<sup>17</sup> J. Yerman, "A Startup Nation: Why Israel Has Become The New Silicon Valley".

<sup>18</sup> E. Schulze, "How a tiny country bordering Russia became one of the most tech-savvy societies in the world," CNBC, Feb 8, 2019. Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02/08/how-estonia-became-a-digital-society.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Fintech News Switzerland, "How Estonia is secretly rising to be Europe's Startup Nation," Feb 8, 2019. Available at: <https://fintechnews.ch/baltic/estonia-startup-nation/26600/>.

<sup>21</sup> K. Vabamae et al. "It's no coincidence that Estonia has one of the highest rates of startups per capita in Europe. So... how has Estonia become a startup paradise? Let's see what's behind these figures," E-Estonia, August, 2017. Available at: <https://e-estonia.com/why-is-estonia-a-startup-paradise/>.

<sup>22</sup> E. Schulze, "How a tiny country bordering Russia became one of the most tech-savvy societies in the world".

Another key indicator is startup employment, which has also been on the rise, demonstrating Estonia's insatiable demand for tech workers. The total number of citizens working in startups passed 5,000 in 2018 and is projected to increase by 30 percent in 2019.<sup>23</sup> One of the Estonian government's unique policies is the introduction of a public-private partnership, a program called ProgeTiiger ("Programming Tiger"), which teaches five-year-olds the basics of coding.<sup>24</sup>

These two examples show us that the public sector's involvement in the formation of a startup eco-system, combined with a bottom-up approach based on a founder-friendly mentality, shows the best results in startup eco-system development.

### Business Environment in Tajikistan

According to the World Bank's 2020 Doing Business report, Tajikistan is ranked 106 out of 190 countries, gaining ten positions above last year's ranking.<sup>25</sup> Tajikistan's recent business-friendly policy reforms have also earned the country a top ten ranking among other reforming countries. The report highlights Tajikistan's progress in registering businesses, accessing credit, and trading across borders.<sup>26</sup> According to the International Trade Administration, the country has taken initiatives to simplify its business registration processes and customs clearances.<sup>27</sup>

Despite these developments, the business environment is still complex and difficult to navigate. The primary contributors to this complex business system include a lack of specialized skilled labor, a complicated taxation system, and weak access to finance.<sup>28</sup> As pointed out by Sobirzoda and Mirzoev, both access to finance and financial literacy remain low. Unless the country's business environment, entrepreneurial skills, and banking

sector improve, the ability of small and medium enterprises to withstand future economic shocks will weaken.<sup>29</sup>

In the following chapter, I point out that despite Tajikistan's complex business environment, we can still see the grassroots growth of a startup culture and the formation of a startup ecosystem in the country, largely facilitated by Tajikistan's youth.

### Startup Culture in Tajikistan

#### Digital Generation



*Alif Bank. Dushanbe, 2019.*

Tajikistan is one of the poorest countries in Central Asia. Of its population of 8.8 million people, over 1.2 million Tajiks work as labor migrants abroad—mainly in Russia—and their remittances constitute up to 35 percent of the GDP of the country.<sup>30</sup> In addition to a high unemployment rate, Tajikistan lacks the natural resources that its neighbors, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan, can use to bolster their economies. Given these obstacles, the development of Tajikistan's entrepreneurial potential and information technology startup ecosystem could offer a pathway towards economic growth and, moreover, could lead to the closer integration of Central Asia. Indeed, as put by Anatoliy Motkin: "Developing advanced technologies, attracting Western investment and

<sup>23</sup> Fintech News Switzerland, "How Estonia is secretly rising to be Europe's Startup Nation".

<sup>24</sup> The Economist, "How did Estonia become a leader in technology," July 31, 2013. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2013/07/30/how-did-estonia-become-a-leader-in-technology>.

<sup>25</sup> Doing Business 2020, "Economy Profile – Tajikistan," World Bank Group, 2019. p.4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> International Trade Administration, "Tajikistan Country Commercial Guide," 2019. Available at <https://www.export.gov/article?id=Tajikistan-Market-Opportunities>.

<sup>28</sup> M. Erman et al. "Issledovanie Infrastruktury Razvitiia Predprinimatelstva Respubliki Tadjikistan," HSE, UNDP, October 16-20, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> R. Sobirzoda and Sh. Mirzoev, "Leveraging SME Finance through Value Chains in Tajikistan," ADBI Working Paper Series, No 1020, Asian Development Bank Institute, Tokyo, October, 2019. Available at: <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/534291/adb-wp1020.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Ria Novosti, "Igor Liakin Frolov: Perevody migrantov sostavliaut 35 protsentov VVP," Jan 25, 2019. Available at: <https://ria.ru/20190125/1549868756.html>.

Western experience, and creating an information technology market will serve a dual purpose in the Central Asian region: reducing the Central Asian countries' dependence on their neighbors and becoming the catalyst for unification processes in the region."<sup>31</sup>

Those aged under 30 constitutes about 70 percent of the general population of Tajikistan.<sup>32</sup> This young generation has been exposed to and influenced by globalization, bringing a new era of dynamism—especially in the capital city of Dushanbe.<sup>33</sup> According to Deputy Minister of Communications Tatyana Kholmurodova, in 2016 about 3 million people were active internet users in Tajikistan.<sup>34</sup> A survey conducted among respondents aged 15-32 by the Open Society Institute in Tajikistan and Markazi Subhi Donish found that about 77 percent of internet usage came from smartphones. According to the survey, the main focus for using smartphones was getting information and staying in touch.<sup>35</sup>

With increasing exposure to world news, trends, and social media, young people are becoming more aware of changing global trends. Indeed, the creation of such platforms on Facebook as ent.tj - Economic News of Tajikistan—which currently has 15,482 members—and My - Tadjikistantsi (We, the Tajiks)—which has 114,706 members as of today—gives people the opportunity to express their opinion, engage in discussions, form partnerships, find talent for businesses, receive advice, and network. These interesting dynamics show us that young people are better exercising their critical abilities online as access to the internet increases.

In their exposure to globalization and access to the internet, there has been a rapid growth of young people's interest in information technology startups. In the past 5-7 years, we have seen the sudden emergence of such locally prestigious

startups as Alif Sarmoya (fin-tech), Somon.tj (e-commerce), Raksh Taxi (online taxi platform), tonight.tj (entertainment) and many others. The majority of these startup founders share a common vision of changing the society. As put by Zuhursho Rakhmatullaev, co-founder of Alif Sarmoya: "The important mission of Alif is to create an infrastructure where all financial transactions are available through technology; and by going cashless—an important element of building any society nowadays—Alif is making sure banking is working for the people."<sup>36</sup>

### Startup Community Formation

The growing technology entrepreneurship movement in Tajikistan is causing the emergence of a startup community and strong networks, especially in Dushanbe. During the last five years, there has been a spike of startup seminars, conferences, talks and networking events. Notable examples include: Startup Weekend, Startup Chohona, Startup Eco-system Summit, Startupstan Cup, Startup Central Asia, Digital Camp, Upshift, Tech Central Asia Weekend, Global Entrepreneurship Week, and many others. The formation of these initiatives has laid the groundwork for the startup mentality, connecting ideas with mentors, investors, and policymakers.

Startup Weekend, a Techstars program that helps young people go from generating ideas and forming teams to testing products and pitching ideas to a panel of investors, has been conducted in Tajikistan since 2016. The program is organized through an impressive collaboration of several entities across the public and private sectors, including the Association of Innovative and Technological Entrepreneurship of Tajikistan, the American Chamber of Commerce in Tajikistan, Ilmhona, OSCE, Tcell, Coca Cola, Spitamen Bank, and others. Thus far, about 500 young men and

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<sup>31</sup> A. Motkin, "Developing the IT sector will make Central Asia more united and independent," *Modern Diplomacy*, Nov 22, 2018. Available at: <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2018/11/22/developing-the-it-sector-will-make-central-asia-more-united-and-independent/>.

<sup>32</sup> UN Volunteers, "Increasing youth employment in Tajikistan through the promotion of entrepreneurship," Aug 10, 2017. Available at: <https://www.unv.org/our-stories/increasing-youth-employment-tajikistan-through-promotion-entrepreneurship>.

<sup>33</sup> C. Cartier, "After civil war and economic chaos, Tajikistan's young innovators are rebuilding their cultural legacy," *The Calvert Journal*. May 21, 2019. Available at: <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/11179/tajik-culture-profile-dushanbe-film-photography-youtube-poetry-business-entrepreneurs>.

<sup>34</sup> Radio Ozodi, "Chislo pol'zovatelei Interneta v Tadjikistane sokratilos' na 800,000," *Radio Ozodi Tajikistan* Feb 7, 2016. Available at: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/27536631.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Kosimov et al. "Research on usage of mobile technologies in Tajikistan," OSIAF and Markazi Subhi Donish, Dushanbe 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Z. Rakhmatullaev, Personal Communication, 2019.

women have gone through the three-day program. One of the examples of success stories from Startup Weekend events includes a young farm owner from Hissar, a town outside of Dushanbe, who partnered with application builders and marketing professionals to form an online platform called Mevamix that delivers fresh fruits to its customers all over Dushanbe. In 2018, Startup Weekend launched a special female-focused program called Startup Weekend Women. According to Zaytuna Saydullaeva, Ambassador of Women in STEM and one of the co-organizers of Startup Weekend program, the current trend is that lots of traditional services, such as local craft makers, are starting to actively use technology services in their business endeavors in order to scale up their businesses and grow faster. This leads to larger participation of the local entrepreneurs in Startup Weekend program.<sup>37</sup>

Global Entrepreneurship Week is an annual program sponsored by the Kauffman Foundation that takes place in 160 countries and promotes youth entrepreneurship and innovation.<sup>38</sup> In Tajikistan, it is organized by the American Chamber of Commerce. For the past four years events have been heavily focused on the development of a digital economy in the country. For example, in 2015, in honor of Global Entrepreneurship Week, the American Chamber of Commerce in Tajikistan organized an international forum with government participants and held a discussion on the importance of technology development, entrepreneurship, and related policy measures.<sup>39</sup>

Startup Chohona is a project initiative of the United Nations Volunteers Program, administered by the United Nations and supported by the government of Tajikistan, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, Accelerate Prosperity, Caritas Germany, the Young Entrepreneurs Club, Tcell, and others. The Startup Chohona project is a quarterly arranged pitching competition that provides a platform for entrepreneurs to bring forward their start-up ideas, look for business partners and

coaching, and see if their business idea has the potential to fly. It covers all regions in Tajikistan and has conducted four incubation programs involving youth.<sup>40</sup>

Startupstan is part of '55 Group' investment company and is a business hub that organizes community development events in the country. Examples of these events include the Startup Ecosystem Summit—a platform that brings together stakeholders from the Central Asian region to discuss the development of startup ecosystem; Startup Talk—a monthly discussion platform related to startups; and Startupstan Cup—a pitching platform for the best ideas to receive funding, etc.<sup>41</sup> Aside from the large community-forming programs mentioned above, the initiative formed by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), 'Accelerate Prosperity,' that plays an active role in organizing programs for startups.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, UNICEF started a program focused on solving social problems using innovation called UPSHIFT.<sup>43</sup>

These startup community events have continued to become more popular. Local ideas such as Mevamix, a fruit delivery platform, or luhtak.tj, an online marketplace for local crafts, are just a few of the many examples of up and coming success stories in Tajikistan. Hundreds of young people currently have access to international trainers, national mentors, and local investors because of startup community events. Most importantly, the country is establishing a connection to the global startup ecosystem with the support of these initiatives. Indeed, access to networks has been one of the major components of attaining global investment in startups.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, large corporations such as Tcell, Coca Cola, Megaphon, Spitamen bank, Prospect Medical Clinic, and others are supporting open innovation by supporting the organization of major events, serving as mentors, and even providing initial funding for top ideas. Some even organize their

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<sup>37</sup> Z. Saydullaeva, Personal Communication, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Global Entrepreneurship Week Tajikistan, "Tajikistan", 2019. Available at: <https://www.genglobal.org/find-events/681>.

<sup>39</sup> D. Zaretsky, Personal Communication, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> UN Volunteers, "Increasing youth employment in Tajikistan".

<sup>41</sup> Startupstan, "Official Website", 2019. Available at <http://www.startupstan.team>.

<sup>42</sup> Accelerate Prosperity, "Official Website", 2019. Available at: [http://tj.accelerateprosperity.org/?page\\_id=14](http://tj.accelerateprosperity.org/?page_id=14)

<sup>43</sup> Upshift, "Official Website", 2019. Available at: <http://navovar.tj/en/>

<sup>44</sup> Center for Global Development, Technology and Development Conference, Washington DC. October 16, 2019.

own programs on innovation. For instance, Tcell, a major telecommunications company, has organized numerous summer programs and trainings to support digital entrepreneurship activities.

### Accelerators and Incubators

Accelerators and incubators play a major role in supporting the startup ecosystem in the country. One of the leading notable examples includes Accelerate Prosperity that was founded in 2016 with accelerators in Dushanbe and Khorog. It has since incubated over 200 startups and created many jobs. It has also organized about seven large startup promotion events in 2018.<sup>45</sup>

55Startups was founded by '55 Group' in 2017 and provides business incubation, co-working space, and acceleration, making an average investment of US\$ 10,000 per project. They also offer consulting services, legal support, accounting support, and intellectual property support. One of their more notable residents is fly.tj, an online ticketing platform.<sup>46</sup>

Several development organizations are also funding the foundation of incubators. The United Kingdom's Department of Foreign and International Development (DFID) is funding a project called the Enterprise Innovation Program. It is being implemented by Development Alternatives Inc., and the project's main goal is to start an incubator with a focus on innovation.

### Importance of Co-Working Spaces

Berlin, the capital of Germany, owes much of its success as a top startup city to the affordable rent and the availability of co-working spaces in the city. According to Daniel Zaretsky, founder of Global Entrepreneurship Week in Tajikistan, even developments as small as coffee shops where young people can sit with their laptops and access the internet contributes to the growth of startup culture.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, co-working spaces provide an opportunity for aspiring entrepreneurs to access

cheap office space, cheap internet access, and connect with like-minded entrepreneurs. Three co-working spaces have opened in Dushanbe in the last five years: Puzzle, Parking, and Regus. These co-working spaces offer young people with a working space, internet access, and an environment that promotes startup culture. For example, the Puzzle co-working space also actively organizes weekly meetings that promote keynote speeches, seminars, and other talks related to startups.

### Access to Finance

Funding remains a major issue for startups in Tajikistan. According to Zaytuna Saydullaeva, there are four possibilities for startups to raise funding: through accelerators, startup events, corporate funding, or traditional bank financing.<sup>48</sup> Taking a loan tends to be seen as the last option for startups, as interest rates are high—ranging from 18 percent in foreign currency to about 35 percent in local currency— and collateral requirements are difficult to meet. The availability of finance is limited to debt only. Limited venture capital and



*Alif Bank. Dushanbe, 2019.*

the low number of angel investors and privately managed investment funds further complicate an already challenging business environment.<sup>49</sup> According to Zaytuna Saydullaeva, if large corporations could form a special fund and support startups by investing in them, it would solve many issues. However, large corporations are unlikely to do this as they already face high expenditures.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Accelerate Prosperity, "Official Website".

<sup>46</sup> M. Erman et al. "Issledovanie infrastruktury razvitiia predprinimatel'stva Respubliki Tadjikistan".

<sup>47</sup> D. Zaretsky, Personal Communication, 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Z. Saydullaeva, Personal Communication, 2019.

<sup>49</sup> R. Sobirzoda and Sh. Mirzoev, "Leveraging SME Finance through Value Chains in Tajikistan".

<sup>50</sup> Z. Saydullaeva, Personal Communication, 2019.

Startup events can help to overcome these obstacles by connecting young entrepreneurs with serial entrepreneurs and networks, often leading to early funding. Additionally, startup events, accelerators, and similar platforms have the potential to transform the business environment in Tajikistan and facilitate the establishment of angel investor and venture capital institutions in the country.

### Human Capital and Education

According to the World Bank, one of the major constraints in the information technology industry in Tajikistan is the poor quality of graduates in information technology fields. One estimate suggests that only 10 percent of graduates were employable upon graduation, and another 30 percent were considered 'trainable.'<sup>51</sup> According to Iskandar Ikrami, a young entrepreneur who started an innovative chain of coffee shops, the major issue is the lack of human capital in the country.<sup>52</sup> Daniel Zaretsky notes that it is important to bring the Western and South Asian brands of universities to Tajikistan in order to help boost the growth of technology-related programs of study.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, there has been a grassroots development of private schools to teach students the basics of information technology. Aside from them, companies such as Tcell also heavily invest in bringing educational programs related to digital education to the population. Alif Sarmoya launched its own Alif Academy to train digital skills to Tajik youth. Tajrupt, an organization based in Khujand, offers youth courses in machine learning. Unfortunately, Tajik universities generally do not partner with companies for innovation development, which hinders industry-led training options.<sup>54</sup>

Human capital is a key component of startup ecosystem formation; however, it is important to look at the broader picture, as put by Rakhmatullaev, co-founder of Alif Sarmoya: "Issues such as taxation, regulation, access to funding, and human capital are important; however, most of the issues sit in the mentality of people. Where people are used to relying on something external, they lack the enthusiasm to start something of their own."<sup>55</sup>

### Conclusion

In *Startup Rising: The Entrepreneurial Revolution Remaking the Middle East*, Christopher Schroeder offers an interesting analysis of how startups in the Arab world are changing the social landscape of the region.<sup>56</sup> Lehdonvirta Vili of Oxford University questions whether the growth of startups in Finland is changing the mentality of people towards Anglo-American liberalism.<sup>57</sup> Although these are rather philosophical questions, we can see that the Silicon Valley style startup movement is taking place globally. In Tajikistan, different factors are influencing the rise of the country's startup culture, and, most importantly, there is a growing motivation to be engaged in entrepreneurship, to bring development to the country, and to re-invent Tajikistan as an intellectual center. Indeed, as put by Iskandar Ikrami, founder of Mazza, the only way for Tajikistan to leave the deadlock of labor migration is to develop its technology and entrepreneurship potential.

Platforms such as Startup Weekend or Startup Chohona, co-working spaces like Parking or Puzzle, accelerators like Accelerate Prosperity or 55Startups, and academies like Alif Academy or Tajrupt all share one common point: they are established by young people for young people. Successful examples like Alif Sarmoya give youth the hope and belief that it is possible to start a

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<sup>51</sup> World Bank, "ICT in Central Asia: Broadband Challenge, mobile opportunity," ICT Sector Unit, Report No: ACS6876, Dec 2013, p. 25.

<sup>52</sup> I. Ikrami, Personal Communication, 2019.

<sup>53</sup> D. Zaretsky, Personal Communication, 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Z. Saydullaeva, Personal Communication, 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Z. Rakhmatullaev, Personal Communication, 2019.

<sup>56</sup> C. Schroeder, *Startup Rising: The Entrepreneurial Revolution Remaking the Middle East*. St. Martin's Press; 1 edition, August 13, 2013.

<sup>57</sup> V. Lehdonvirta, "Discussions: The Helsinki Spring: an essay on entrepreneurship and cultural change," *Research on Finnish Society* Vol. 6, 2013, pp. 25–28.

successful startup in Tajikistan. Most importantly, these role-models are speaking at startup forums, acting as mentors during the events, and standing ready to help startups to develop.

Tajikistan's business environment remains complex, with multiple barriers for entrepreneurship; however, we are seeing the grassroots movements of a startup ecosystem foundation in the country. Alif is for instance changing the traditional banking sector and standards of customer service; somon.tj is changing

the way people are engaged in retail business; and 55 group is eagerly starting to invest in early stage businesses. Aside from private companies, we can also see the active participation of the newly founded "Dushanbe Smart City" state unitary enterprise, which is eagerly incorporating digital technologies in public services and involves digital companies for the development of its smart city project. These companies are already starting to expand regionally by forming partnerships, collaborations, and joint projects.

### The Case of Alif-Sarmoya

Alif Sarmoya is a fin-tech organization and a financial entity that has become a bank in Tajikistan as of January 3, 2020. The company brings financial, retail, corporate, and private banking services to people using informational technologies.

Alif Sarmoya started about six years ago with only three co-founders: Abdullo Kurbanov, Firdavs Mirzoyev and Zuhursho Rahmatulloev. The company now has over 250 people and is growing almost on a weekly basis. Aside from its operations in Tajikistan, the company is expanding regionally in Central Asia. Alif's mission is to create an infrastructure, where all financial transactions are cashless and available by using gadgets, smartphones, and computers, as cashless transactions are becoming an increasingly important element to build any society.

Alif Sarmoya is setting new standards for customer service, and based on these innovations, other financial organizations are following as well. According to Zuhursho Rahmatulloev, consumers are becoming more

picky and the standards of choosing a bank are growing and improving, largely due to Alif's hard work to deliver high-quality customer service. He notes: "It is not just the financial industry that is being affected by certain standards of customer service; it is also the more people you serve, the more it becomes really contagious and other companies want to emulate you. They want to have better standards, and this is what is being expected from other players, such as telecom providers and even grocery shops."

One of Alif Sarmoya's most interesting projects is Alif Academy, an offshoot of Alif Capital that was formed to prepare new talents for the company and the broader fin-tech industry. The company states that Alif has felt the scarcity of information technology specialists, and by forming Alif Academy, the company is giving the people the ability to start coding and programming.

Alif strives to hire the most talented people and promotes them within the organization and beyond that, if possible. Rahmatulloev notes: "Alif bases its selection criteria on meritocratic principles where one can hire the best talent. In order to retain them, you have to give them an environment where they can grow and prosper and where they can feel they are actually doing something worthwhile—they are doing it for the growth of the system and the improvement of people, society, and the world in general." Indeed, Abdullo Kurbanov, Alif's co-founder and CEO, actively promotes the idea of meritocratic hiring at major startup events in Dushanbe.

## Policy Recommendations

The bottom up movement of the growing startup culture is happening fast; however, state policies remain important. The government has the role of acting as a facilitator during the formation of the startup eco-system in the country. Given that, I would like to offer the following three policy recommendations for the growth of the startup ecosystem in Tajikistan:

To the State Committee for Investments and State Property Management:

1. Establish a center under the Committee that will connect startups with investors, relevant

government agencies, and international development organizations in order to collect and share data on, monitor, and evaluate the startup climate, and promote startups' participation in government procurement projects.

2. Form a National Business Angels Federation under the Committee to certify and support a joint startup investment program.

3. Pilot a digital education curriculum at three secondary schools in Dushanbe that would include courses in coding, digital design, and digital entrepreneurship.

# Chapter 14.

## Who Is “Tashkent City” For? Nation-Branding and Public Dialogue in Uzbekistan

Dilmira Matyakubova<sup>1</sup> (2018)

*“If they give me a proper place somewhere nearby, I will move. Otherwise, I will not go anywhere!” – Muhabbat Umarova, a woman in her 70s who is a resident of an old neighborhood under demolition in Tashkent*

The image and reputation of a nation play an important role in international relations. Nations strive to enhance their image by promoting their ideas and institutions or rebranding their major cities. For countries which have recently arrived on the international scene, such as the post-Soviet states, the process of constructing a national identity is a challenging one, due to their desire to simultaneously preserve cultural traditions and display their competitiveness by taking on board modern (often Western-inspired) cultural values.<sup>2</sup>

In the post-Soviet space, the nation-branding process began shortly after independence in the early 1990s. The process has been particularly notable in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, each of which has its own strategies for promoting its “national brand.” These include transforming their capital cities into contemporary business capitals and pressing state-run agencies, corporate groups, and embassies to embrace the new urban spaces. Ashgabat was transformed into a material symbol of the personality cult of Turkmenbashi (the first president of independent Turkmenistan), while Astana, “City of the Future,”<sup>3</sup> is promoted as an emblem of the young Kazakh state’s progress, modernity, and burgeoning entrepreneurial identity.<sup>4</sup>

Uzbekistan is no exception to this trend, and has likewise sought to reposition itself in the international realm by rebranding its capital city. In

July 2017, soon after the country welcomed a new president following decades of being governed by Islam Karimov, the Cabinet of Ministers issued a Decree “On measures to improve the architectural appearance and improvement of the central part of Tashkent, as well as creation of appropriate conditions for the population and visitors to the capital.”<sup>5</sup> The decree aims to redesign the center of Tashkent through the so-called “Tashkent City” project, with the goal of re-branding the country as one open to political reforms, economic investment, and friendly relations with the rest of the world.<sup>6</sup>

However, projects designed to present a country’s new image to foreign audiences rarely take into consideration local citizens’ interests and concerns, sparking criticism at home. Looking at the Tashkent City project, this paper seeks to understand how Uzbekistan’s nation-branding process can accommodate the needs, desires, and input of the local population by asking: To what extent does the nation-branding process address Uzbek citizens’ needs? I argue here that the government’s vision of securing the population’s welfare through a national brand actually jeopardizes societal wellbeing. State and society have divergent perceptions of wellbeing and the state’s strategy may not be in what citizens consider their best interests.

This study builds on qualitative analysis of primary and secondary data. The primary data is comprised of semi-structured interviews with three government officials involved in the Tashkent City project, which illuminate the government’s aims and expectations. Two individuals from

<sup>1</sup> Dilmira Matyakubova is a young professional specializing in Higher Education, Public Policy, and Political Economy. Dilmira is an Associate Lecturer at Westminster International University in Tashkent (WIUT). She worked as a Senior Academic Policy Officer at WIUT from 2015 to 2017, providing expertise in the area of developing academic policies and regulations in higher education. Dilmira is a graduate of OSCE Academy’s Politics and Security (Central Asia) program (2013-2014). She also graduated from a Postgraduate Course on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education at WIUT (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Candace White and Iulia Kolesnicov, “Nation Branding in a Transitional Democracy: The Role of Corporate Diplomacy in Promoting National Identity,” *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 11, no. 4 (2015): 324-337.

<sup>3</sup> Mateusz Laszczkowski, “City of the Future”: Built Space, Modernity and Urban Change in Astana (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Adams & Rustemova 2009, cited in Laszczkowski, “City of the Future.”

<sup>5</sup> “International Business Center ‘Tashkent City’ to be Created in Uzbek Capital,” *UzDaily*, August 11, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Abdujabbor Abduvakhitov, Deputy Foreign Minister, personal interview with the author, Tashkent, March 2018.

foreign diplomatic and educational institutions were asked to provide an outsider's perspective on the project. Furthermore, the study also includes interviews with 17 residents of mahallas that are being demolished as part of the Tashkent City project. The individual case studies discuss the problems and discourses around buildings and territories slated for demolition. The names of individuals have been altered in order to protect respondents' confidentiality. The secondary data includes peer-reviewed articles, books, and media discussions of the project.

The background section provides an overview of urban transformation in the region in general and Tashkent in particular. It also describes the Tashkent City project in more detail. The section on conceptual framework reflects on the nation-branding process and government and society's conflicting perceptions of wellbeing. Subsequent sections focus on case studies related to the project and examine residents' responses to the government's construction initiatives. The discussion section pulls together key theoretical considerations and data points to shed some light on what the Tashkent City project can tell us about local citizens' participation (or lack thereof) in nation-branding. Finally, the recommendations section offers a number of policy proposals to the central government, local governments, and communities.

## Background

Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, experienced significant transformations both during and after the Soviet period. According to Paul Stronski, the author of a book on early Tashkent, the city had to become a contemporary capital of the "liberated" Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) and the political and symbolic center of a Socialist East. Tashkent, in a sense, had to grow into a "shining star" of Moscow in the East; "Soviet Tashkent" became a model of socialism.<sup>7</sup>

During the Soviet period, the city's landscape was redesigned. The Architects' Union wanted to follow Moscow's lead in building tall structures that reflected contemporary urban style and the industrial progress of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As

such, they designed multi-storey apartment blocks to be put up across the city. This was meant to facilitate a "fundamental break" with traditional, multi-family housing practices in the city, which were considered outdated, and to reshape Tashkent residents' lifestyle along Soviet lines.<sup>8</sup> With the earthquake of 1966, residents of several mahallas (traditional neighborhoods) found themselves relocated from their damaged homes to these new apartment buildings.<sup>9</sup>

After independence, there was an effort to rewrite the story of Tashkent, essentially erasing the Soviet past. Emblematic of this reimagining of national identity, a monument to Amir Timur, the Turkic conqueror, came to replace the bust of Karl Marx, while the city's streets were renamed in honor of pre-Communist figures. The Soviet cityscape likewise changed: as part of a government effort to "modernize" the city, buildings were hidden beneath shiny glass facades and Soviet-era apartment blocks were interspersed with skyscrapers.<sup>10</sup> In another nod to Uzbekistan's pre-Soviet history, some of these modern constructions feature architectural elements that hark back to the Timurid Empire.<sup>11</sup>

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who took office in late 2016 after the death of authoritarian leader Islam Karimov, is determined to spearhead reforms in various areas. Officially committed to listening to people's concerns, he pronounced 2017 the "Year of Dialogue with People and Human Interests." As part of this initiative, he established a Complaints Portal for public appeals to the president's administration and ministries,<sup>12</sup> which has allowed citizens to approach government bodies directly.

Mirziyoyev also intends to attract more foreign investment to the country by undertaking economic and political reforms. Part of creating a favorable business climate, he felt, was to redesign the center of Tashkent (see Figure 1). His predecessor's government had damaged Uzbekistan's international reputation by demonstrating a lack of willingness to cooperate with other countries or international organizations, as well as compiling a poor record on human rights. A "new" Tashkent would be a concrete symbol of

<sup>7</sup> Paul Stronski, *Tashkent: Forging a Soviet City, 1930-1966* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Resident of Olmazor mahalla, personal interview with the author, Tashkent, April 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Laura Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 30-31.

<sup>11</sup> Elena Paskaleva, "Ideology in Brick and Tile: Timurid Architecture of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Central Asian Survey* 34, no. 4 (2015): 418-439, 419.

<sup>12</sup> "Na saitakh gosorganov zakryvaiutsia onlain-priemnye," *Gazeta.uz*, February 20, 2018, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2018/02/20/virtual-reception/>.

the current administration's openness to the international community. According to Mirziyoyev, "through the Tashkent City project, we should make a statement about ourselves."<sup>13</sup> Abdujabbor Abduvakhitov, a senior official involved in the project, stresses that the international community has long held a negative view of the business climate in Uzbekistan, and the government hopes that the project will improve the national image.<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 1. Model of Tashkent City**



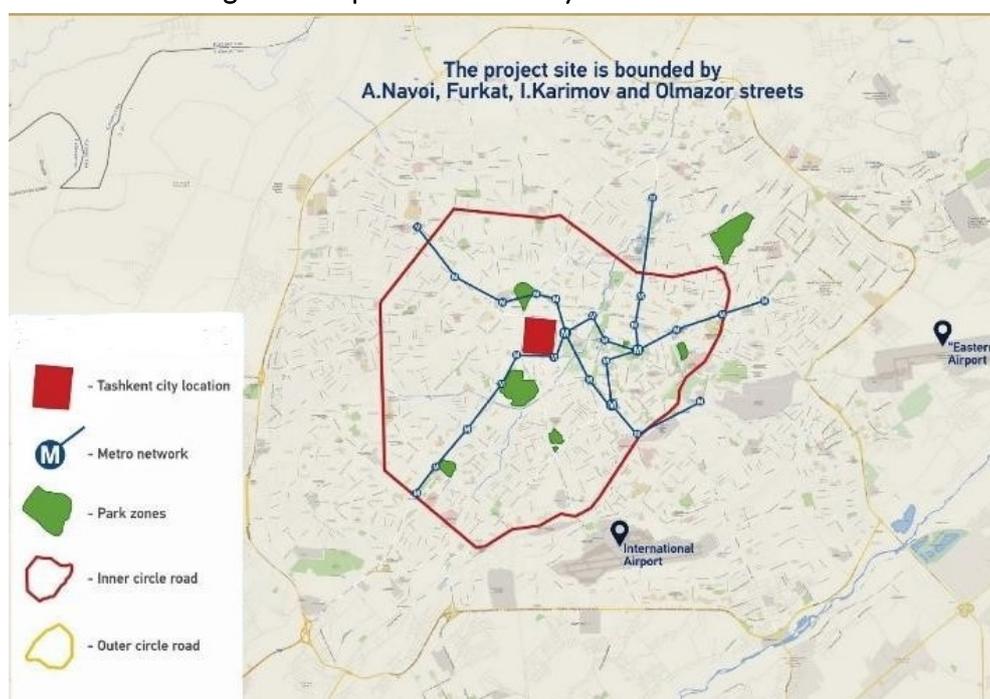
Source: "Business Center 'Tashkent City' to be Constructed in Uzbek Capital," UzDaily.com, July 10, 2017.

The Decree on the "Tashkent City" project sets out the timeframe for construction: four phases over a ten-year period.<sup>15</sup> The first phase began in late

2017 and is currently being carried out. Although the project was initially scheduled to take ten years, the government's goal is to complete it in four years to demonstrate the efficacy of the current administration and its commitment to progress in advance of the next presidential elections.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, Tashkent City will occupy 80 hectares (3.1 square miles) along Navoi and Islam Karimov Avenues (former Uzbekistanskaya), which link Olmazor and Furkat Streets (see Figure 2). The area is in the center of the city and surrounded by metro lines.

The project relies on foreign investment, grants, technical assistance, donations, loans, and other sources of funding. It involves the construction of an industrial park, eight business centers, a shopping mall, a congress hall, hotels, restaurants, and a cultural center, as well as high-rise residential apartments.<sup>17</sup> Many of the new structures in Tashkent are merely monumental and event-led constructions with limited functionality. Whether designed to look like a "tin can"<sup>18</sup> or hewn from snow-white marble, these buildings are neither attractive to tourists nor meaningful for the local population.

**Figure 2. Map of "Tashkent City" and context zones**



Source: "Tashkent City: International Business Center—Your Chance to Invest" (presentation by International Business Center, Tashkent, March 17, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Gazeta.uz, "'Proektom Tashkent City' mi dolzhni zaiavit o sebe' – Sh. Mirziyoyev."

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Abdujabbor Abduvakhitov, Deputy Foreign Minister, personal interview with the author, Tashkent, March 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "Project 'Tashkent City' International Business Center to be Improved," UzDaily, December 23, 2017..

<sup>18</sup> "Eduards Stiprais: Uzbekistanu vazhno ne poteriat arkhitekturnoe nasledie sovsetskogo vremeni," Podrobno.uz, February 27, 2018.

## Key Theoretical Insights: Nation-Branding vs. Wellbeing

Nation-branding is an attempt by a country to create a favorable and positive image of itself in order to improve its international reputation. According to Kolesnicov and White, nation-branding is something a nation does, whereas national identity and national image are something a nation has.<sup>19</sup> According to Simon Anholt, a scholar and policy advisor, a single symbolic action on the part of a country can have a lasting effect on its international image. Examples include Spain's commitment to permitting same-sex marriage in order to exhibit the nation's values after Franco, the Irish government's decision to exempt artists, writers, and poets from income tax to demonstrate the state's appreciation for creative talent, and Estonia's announcement of Internet as a human right.<sup>20</sup> Even large-scale celebrations of public holidays can illustrate the aspirations of cultural producers to be part of the international community.<sup>21</sup> Notably, although these nation-branding efforts target external audiences, the process also affects the local population.

In an effort to create an attractive image, many nations attempt to rebuild and rebrand their major cities through urban transformation projects. The challenge here is for the government "to convince the public that the building of and investment in such a mega-project would be a meaningful exercise in the articulation of the city's image, while serving the people at the same time."<sup>22</sup> City dwellers who are affected by the changes wish to have a voice in the process. For some inhabitants, a level of input into the events of their city is central to their sense of wellbeing. There is no universally accepted definition of this term, but for the purposes of this paper, I will follow Huppert et al. in considering wellbeing "a positive and sustainable state that allows

individuals, groups, or nations to thrive and flourish," physically, psychologically, and socially.<sup>23</sup> Russell Zanca, who has examined instances of the "good life" in rural Uzbekistan, argues that—post-socialist strains notwithstanding—the basis of the good life and wellbeing is in deep collectivist values and perseverance. For people in farming villages, wellbeing is rather situational and appears in shared experiences with social networks and kinship groups' solidarity in difficult periods. He claims that ordinary people are not devastated by social conditions or practices over which they think they have little control. People do not become overcome by misery or oppression; they have become reconciled to the system that threatens them and cannot imagine altering it.<sup>24</sup> At the end of the day, wellbeing is about the spaces and moments of everyday life that make life worth living.

Andrey Petrov, a local media observer, argues that the attractiveness of the country does not depend on pompous buildings or big projects; instead, the government should focus on providing adequate currency exchange, securing judicial independence, and fighting corruption.<sup>25</sup> Many argue that the government should invest more in small towns and rural areas, where electricity and gas shortages are daily challenges. Indeed, city dwellers question whether the project will have any real value for ordinary citizens, noting that numerous buildings have been constructed in Tashkent since independence without adding to people's lives. As Timur Ahmedov, an observer, told *GazetaUz*:

A lot has been built since 2001, the [Central] Square is redesigned, new (tower) clocks have gone up, and a new palace. Yet nothing to be happy about. None of these things were made [designed] for people.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>19</sup> White and Kolesnicov, "Nation Branding in a Transitional Democracy," 325.

<sup>20</sup> Simon Anholt, "Beyond the Nation Brand: The Role of Image and Identity in International Relations," *Exchange: The Journal of Public Diplomacy* 2, no. 1 (2013) p. 2-3.

<sup>21</sup> Zhanara Nauruzbayeva, review of "The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan" by Laura Adams, *Contemporary Sociology* 41, no. 5 (September 2012): 614-615.

<sup>22</sup> Tai-Lok Liu, "City Branding Without Content: Hong Kong's Aborted West Kowloon Mega-Project, 1998–2006," *International Development Planning Review* 30, no. 3 (2008): 216.

<sup>23</sup> Huppert et al., cited in Paul Allin and David J. Hand, *The Wellbeing of Nations: Meaning, Motive and Measurement* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Russell Zanca, "Eat, Drink and Be Merry, and Damn the Dictatorship," *Central Asian Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2015): 95-115, 98-100.

<sup>25</sup> Residents, comments to the author on "Tashkent City" project, Tashkent, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Timur Ahmedov, quoted in "'Proektom Tashkent City my dolzhni zaiavit o sebe'—President," *Gazeta.uz*, October 30, 2017, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/10/30/tashkent-city/>.

The new government in Uzbekistan, which is seeking to build a new brand image for the nation, needs to improve the country's reputation by committing to broader reforms in the spheres of human rights, rule of law, and domestic civil society engagement. However, it cannot transform Uzbekistan's image on its own: local citizens' wellbeing and their perception of governance affect the country's image too. Thus, the government's nation-branding efforts must begin by establishing a substantive dialogue with the local population. From this baseline, government and people can work together to address the interests and concerns of each.

In the sections that follow, three case studies illustrate the challenges of public dialogue in various contexts affected by the government's urban transformation projects. The first is that of traditional mahallas as a cultural-historical site, which illuminates the emotional and practical problems faced by residents. The second, the "modern mahalla," demonstrates the success of public dialogue due to citizens' active engagement. The third, about Dom Kino, explains the failure of public dialogue in the case of a cultural center.

## The Mahalla Debate

One of the debates prompted by the Tashkent City project is the demolition of traditional mahallas in the Olmazor (Apple Orchard) and O'qchi (Fletcher) neighborhoods. The area has been a target for redevelopment since the earthquake in 1966, when some mahallas were ruined.<sup>27</sup>

Mahalla is a local institution of self-governance that plays an important socio-economic role in Uzbek society. It also serves a cultural function: it is a place for social interactions between communities tied to a particular space. The sense of community and connectedness in mahallas is very strong. Civil society in Uzbekistan is largely associated with mahallas, since these community-driven organizations are responsible

for assisting members of the community in resolving various matters.<sup>28</sup>

Abdujabbor Abduvakhitov, a government official, notes that the relocation of mahallas has always been a very sensitive issue that creates emotional distress as well as practical problems. According to him, since redevelopment and demolition have long been planned, residents have limited rights to their dwellings. As a result, there has been no investment in mahalla infrastructure and conditions are poor. He contends that the Tashkent City project will benefit everyone in the long run, describing the removal of mahallas as a short-term issue.<sup>29</sup>

Saida, a daughter of the Tojiboev family in Olmazor mahalla, would also like to see the city develop, but is skeptical that the current plan will really make things better for her community:

If the city flourishes, it is better for us, but only if they provide us with decent houses as soon as possible. So far, what they offer as a replacement does not meet our needs. The conditions are no better.

She supports development and projects like Tashkent City, but she claims that families have been offered insufficient compensation for their properties. The law on property requires equal replacement of a residential property—that is, giving a family that has had to move a new home of the same size and value.

In addition, timely notice of demolition is enshrined in Article 4 of "Regulations on the Procedure for Compensation of Damages to Citizens and Legal Entities due to Seizure of Land for State or Public Needs" (2006), which states that the khokimiyat (city administration) must notify property owners in writing no less than six months before demolition begins.<sup>30</sup> In fact, the process of demolition and relocation of residents began earlier, as the Decree on Tashkent City (2017) required that residential and non-residential buildings be acquired within a month.<sup>31</sup> The district administration visited the mahallas and informed

<sup>27</sup> Abdujabbor Abduvakhitov, Deputy Foreign Minister, personal interview with the author, Tashkent, March 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Asian Development Bank, "Civil Society Briefs: Uzbekistan," November 2011, <https://www.adb.org/publications/civil-society-briefs-uzbekistan>.

<sup>29</sup> Abdujabbor Abduvakhitov, Deputy Foreign Minister, personal interview with the author, Tashkent, March 2018.

<sup>30</sup> "Polozhenie o poriadke vozmezheniia ubitkov grazhdanam i iuridicheskim litsam v sviazi s iziatiem zemel'nikh uchastkov dlia gosudarstvennykh i obshchestvennykh nuzhd," NormaUz, May 29, 2006, [https://nrm.uz/content?doc=105171\\_polojenie\\_o\\_poryadke\\_vozmeshcheniya\\_ubytkov\\_grajdanam\\_i\\_yuridicheskim\\_licam\\_v\\_svyazi\\_s\\_izyatiem\\_zemelnyh\\_uchastkov\\_dlya\\_gosudarstvennyh\\_i\\_obshchestvennykh\\_nujd\\_\(prilozhenie\\_k\\_postanovleniyu\\_km\\_ruz\\_ot\\_29\\_05\\_2006\\_g\\_n\\_97\)&prod\\_u](https://nrm.uz/content?doc=105171_polojenie_o_poryadke_vozmeshcheniya_ubytkov_grajdanam_i_yuridicheskim_licam_v_svyazi_s_izyatiem_zemelnyh_uchastkov_dlya_gosudarstvennyh_i_obshchestvennykh_nujd_(prilozhenie_k_postanovleniyu_km_ruz_ot_29_05_2006_g_n_97)&prod_u).

<sup>31</sup> "Postanovlenie Kabinetu Ministrov Uzbekistana o merakh po uluchsheniui arkhitekturnogo oblika i blagoustroistva tsentral'noi chasti goroda Tashkenta, a takzhe sozdaniui nadlezhashikh uslovyi dlia naseleniia i gostei stolitsi," Lex.uz, July 28, 2017, [http://lex.uz/pages/getpage.aspx?lact\\_id=3295075#3295185](http://lex.uz/pages/getpage.aspx?lact_id=3295075#3295185).

residents that they had 10 days to vacate their homes. The residents were offered replacements from the secondary housing market, as the promised relocation area is under construction. Some people appealed to the district khokimiyat, but they have not received a response.

O'qchi mahalla residents Rifat Saburov, Ahmad Asimov, and Evgenii Gorbunov described their experience:

We were not given any written notice about demolition of the area. The BTI (Bureau on Technical Inventory) just came to inform us verbally. The news just killed us. The whole mahalla, neighbors, are dispersed around the city. We will not be able to see each other anymore. Of course, we would like to have houses in this area if only they could build them. However, as we see, there is no opportunity. We were offered some places, but we did not like the places we have seen. There is construction going on in those areas too, there will be the same mess...We would like to be heard by the khokimiyat. We are living in this dust, cut off from electricity and gas. We have written zayavlenie (an appeal), but no reaction...<sup>32</sup>

**Figure 3. Traditional mahalla in Tashkent**



Source: GazetaUz

The government seeks to create national wellbeing by reimagining the capital city as a financial center to draw more investment and business. However, the residents of traditional mahallas have a different view of wellbeing. Many wish to preserve the lifestyles they had in old traditional neighborhoods, as this extract from The Guardian's coverage of the Tashkent City project shows:

"I don't want to live in a box," says an indignant Nilufar Aripova, who was sweeping the street outside her house, dusty after Uzbekistan's long hot summer. "I've lived in Olmazor all my life, for 52 years. I was born a few streets away and moved here to my husband's house as a kelinka [a young bride]."

"I don't want to leave this mahalla, but if I have to I want to be given another house big enough to keep us all together," adds Aripova, who lives with her husband, three children and several grandchildren.<sup>33</sup>

Like Aripova's, families in traditional settlements are larger than those in apartments. Extended families—parents, children, and later daughters-in-law and grandchildren—live together in a traditional house with a backyard.

**Figure 4. A private house**



Photo Credit: Alan France

As the stories of residents who remain at the demolition site show, relocation is complicated. Some residents have appealed to the khokimiyat, requesting that the process of providing appropriate alternative housing be accelerated,<sup>34</sup> but they complain that the authorities have not addressed their concerns, even as conditions at the demolition site have worsened.

Residents' stories reveal different levels of resistance and social engagement. From Evgenii Gorbunov's perspective, residents have little agency.<sup>35</sup> The deprivation in which they are currently living will force them to agree to move to

<sup>32</sup> Group of Olmazor dwellers, personal interview with the author, Tashkent, April 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Joanne Lillis, "Tashkent City: Is 'Progress' Worth the Price Being Paid in Uzbekistan?" The Guardian, October 18, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/oct/18/people-paying-tashkent-gentrification-mahallas>.

<sup>34</sup> Tojiboev family, personal interview with the author, Tashkent, April 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Evgeniy Gorbunov, personal interview with the author, Tashkent, April 2018.

houses worth less than their current homes if they are not offered better options soon. Some residents, however, continue to oppose moving to another area. Muhabbat Umarova, an elderly woman, asserted:

This is my home. My son died here. I live alone, on my own. I have been living here since I was born...I have not been informed about anything! Nobody gave me any kind of notice about moving. Now they ask me to move out. If they give me a proper place somewhere nearby (Qoratosh street), I will move. Otherwise, I will not go anywhere!

Figure 5. Muhabbat Umarova, a resident



Photo: Alan France

The lack of dialogue with the people leaves the vulnerable population—like Umarova, an elderly woman who lives alone—in a difficult position. Although Umarova is negotiating for replacement housing nearby, she is unable to oppose relocation through legal channels. A few dwellers have attempted to appeal to the relevant bodies, but the majority of the population remains unaware of how to make demands. Moreover, without a clear platform for public debate, the authorities can continue to ignore residents' concerns.

At the end of the day, wellbeing for mahalla dwellers entails being able to live in the homes where they were born, raised their children, and celebrated life events. It is emotional attachment to the spaces that have meaning for them. It is ties to the community. It is the ability to communicate with neighbors and live side by side.<sup>36</sup> Ordinary people in mahallas are not engaged in the authorities' efforts to rebrand the

city and draw global attention. Instead, they are focused on everyday issues: surviving without power and keeping the family together. To ensure mahalla dwellers' wellbeing, the government must involve residents in decisions about urban planning and observe due process on eviction and the seizure of private property.

The government envisions "modernizing" mahallas by developing their infrastructure and redesigning the cityscape. The following section discusses a project that caused public debate in a mahalla, prompting residents to put up a fight for their public space.

### The "Modern Mahalla" Debate

In March 2017, the Tashkent municipality approved a new project, "Modern Mahalla," which aims to redesign 505 neighborhoods in the city.<sup>37</sup> The local authorities are implementing the project without public engagement, despite the fact that Article 10 of the City Planning Code gives citizens, self-governing bodies, and public associations the right to receive reliable, timely information on the status of residential environment, proposed changes, general plans for settlements, and reconstruction of civil objects.

GazetaUz reported on the discontent among residents in Oqibat mahalla. The dwellers disputed the relevance of new construction that required the demolition of a playground and park, as well as the chopping-down of trees. They protested the process, resisting the delivery of construction equipment to the area. They then went to the mahalla committee, but did not receive a response. They even approached the president's administration, receiving a response from the district khokimiyat, which claimed that the mahalla contained "unlawful" structures built by residents themselves and therefore did not meet sanitary norms. This was, however, merely an excuse for the khokimiyat's decision to allocate the territory to a private construction company without securing the agreement of residents.

The media later reported that the municipality had asked that the process be temporarily halted in order to examine its compliance with the Planning Code and Decree on "Modern Mahalla."<sup>38</sup> After a few months of

<sup>36</sup> Group of Olmazor dwellers, personal interview with the author, Tashkent, April 2018.

<sup>37</sup> "Sovremennoi mahalle radi ne vse: zhiteli Belarik vystupaiut protiv stroitel'stva sovremennoi mahalli," *GazetaUz*, 2017 <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/08/20/mahalla/>

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

investigation by the Prosecutor’s Office, it was determined that the construction work had not followed due process, as local residents had not been notified. The district khokimiyat and the chair of the mahalla committee had permitted the construction without discussing it with residents and gaining popular support. Following the investigation by the district court, the project was terminated, and the mahalla dwellers celebrated their success.<sup>39</sup>

**Figure 6. Residents of Oqibat mahalla**



Source: “U nas est’ pravo na zdorovuiu okruzhaiushchuiu sredu—zhiteli Ts-1,” *GazetaUz*, February 6, 2018.

Public debate on the project—including through the media—succeeded in influencing the actions of the authorities, which usually prefer to carry out plans without discussing them with the population. The story reveals the shortcomings of the local government, where communication is sidelined in favor of implementing decisions quickly without due process. The central government is making efforts to reform the governance structure and public services, but genuine dialogue with the people can only be achieved through local-level communication. Once again, we see that the government’s desire to foster wellbeing by “modernizing” mahallas contradicts residents’ perceptions of wellbeing, which are tied to the public spaces of their neighborhoods.

In other cases spurred by the Tashkent City project, residents have likewise attempted to engage in public dialogue, although with less success. The section that follows discusses the planned demolition of Dom Kino (Cinema House), which upset a certain segment of the population.

## The Dom Kino Debate

The case of Dom Kino illustrates the reaction of Tashkent’s creative community to the planned demolition of a building of cultural significance. This is different from the mahalla case, as it involves the removal of a non-residential building, a decision that upset certain groups and communities. However, it is similar in that a public building was condemned to demolition without public discussion.

The news that Dom Kino was going to be demolished caused real distress to the community of filmmakers, artists, and architects. It was particularly disappointing because the new decree on cinema development, signed by the president earlier in 2017, had given them hope that “favorable conditions” would be created for culture.<sup>40</sup> This goes to show that governing bodies are not unanimous in their decisions, which are sometimes carried out in haste to impress the public or demonstrate the administration’s progress.

**Figure 7. Dom Kino**



Source: Jasur Ishakov, “Dom kino: Proshchalnaia istoriia,” *MyTashkent.uz*, November 10, 2017.

Dom Kino was built in the early 1980s. It hosted the Tashkent International Film Festival, which screened films from an array of Asian, African, and Latin American countries. The building, which stands out on the Tashkent landscape, is an iconic example of ‘80s modernism. Modernists constructed buildings from concrete with a minimum of decoration, considering that the concrete had an aesthetic of its own. The term *béton brut*, French for “raw concrete,” was coined

<sup>39</sup> “Prokuroskaia proverka, Oqibat mahalla,” *GazetaUz*, April 16, 2018.

<sup>40</sup> “Postanovlenie presidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan ‘o merakh po dal’neishemu razvitiyu natsional’noi kinomatografii,” *NormaUz*, August 7, 2017, [https://www.norma.uz/raznoe/o\\_merakh\\_po\\_dalneyshemu\\_razvitiyu\\_natsionalnoy\\_kinomatografii](https://www.norma.uz/raznoe/o_merakh_po_dalneyshemu_razvitiyu_natsionalnoy_kinomatografii)

by Le Corbusier, the world famous architect and urban planner. The cinema was built using the resources of Soviet cinematographers under the aegis of Sharaf Rashidov, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Uzbek SSR.<sup>41</sup> In contemporary Uzbekistan, where many other Soviet buildings have been redesigned or replaced, Dom Kino, an example of socialist realism, seemed to be out of step with the government's vision of a "post-modern" Tashkent. Accordingly, the decision was taken that it should be demolished.

This decision has sparked debate among city residents and the creative community. Some argue that the Dom Kino is part of Uzbekistan's cultural heritage and it therefore deserves to be renovated rather than knocked down. The prominent film producer Jasur Ishakov sees Dom Kino as not merely a venue, but an essential symbol of the legacy of Uzbek cinema. He supports keeping Dom Kino and renovating it in such a way that the building would fit into the Tashkent City master plan.<sup>42</sup> The proposed demolition of the cinema has also been a topic of concern among architects and urban planners. According to local experts, as long as old buildings serve a purpose, they should be allowed to remain, as they demonstrate that the city is alive, breathing, and developing.<sup>43</sup> A local architect, Gennadii Korbovtsev, argues that decisions about what should be done with old buildings should be democratized; people should be able to discuss them publicly.<sup>44</sup> Some suggest that preserving Tashkent's cultural heritage may even attract tourists, who are more likely to be interested in historic mahallas than the shiny glass skyscrapers proposed in the Tashkent City project, which are derivative and hardly unique to Uzbekistan.<sup>45</sup>

The decision to demolish Dom Kino also seems to have called the future of the arts in Uzbekistan into question. The cinema served as a distinct venue for the creation of films, providing facilities needed by the creative community. In deciding to get rid of it, the government may have suggested that it does not value the arts as part of Uzbekistan's national image.

Filmmaker and screenwriter Giyas Shermuhamedov is attempting to negotiate a replacement for Dom Kino. He supports the redevelopment of Tashkent, claiming that the creative community was so inspired by the decree on the Tashkent City project that it began to produce films expressly to increase Uzbek cinema's global importance. To support these efforts, he would like to see the construction of a Palace of Cinema as part of the Tashkent City project.<sup>46</sup>

The community has made a formal attempt to prevent the demolition of Dom Kino. Firuza Hayrutdinova, the widow of the building's architect, Rafael Hayrutdinov, wrote a letter to the president's complaint portal that was signed by the architects', cinematographers', and artists' union (see Appendix 1). An extract from the letter reads:

The Union of Architects, Cinematographers, and Artists would like to take an active role in the review of the final concept of "Tashkent City" and requests to organize an open discussion of the proposed options, with the aim of possibly preserving individual objects in the territory.<sup>47</sup>

However, the request remains unaddressed; there has been no response in any form.<sup>48</sup> By ignoring this citizens' appeal, the government has shown that it is not willing to discuss the Tashkent City project with the population. It is not going to give people a chance to comment on the project, nor is it going to address the issues raised. The government may be trying to be open and accountable by implementing such measures as a public appeals system, but it is evidently not ready for a real dialogue with the people.

## Discussion

As the above cases illustrate, the government's approach to nation-branding, which is being carried out through the Tashkent City project, has its shortcomings. The government is prioritizing the swift transformation of the urban space over the needs of locals. Despite President Mirziyoyev's

<sup>41</sup> Jasur Ishakov, "Dom kino: Proshchal'naia istoriia," MyTashkent.uz, November 10, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> "Dom kino: Chto dumaet o snose arkhitektory i kinematografi Tashkenta," TheMag.uz, December 13, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Chris Allan, British Ambassador, and Alan France, First Deputy Rector, Westminster International University in Tashkent, personal interview with the author, Uzbekistan, March 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Jasur Ishakov, "Dom kino."

<sup>47</sup> Letter to the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Mr. Sh.M. Mirziyoyev, from F.F. Havrutdinova, signed by the Architects' Union, November 2017. See Appendix 1 for a reproduction of the letter.

<sup>48</sup> Rushena Seminogova, a granddaughter of Hayrutdinov, personal interview with the author, Tashkent, March 2018.

emphasis on the role of people and the presence of a complaints system, citizens' concerns about the Tashkent City project remain unaddressed. The government's focus—creating a business-friendly climate—may be central to constructing a positive international image of the country, but any nation-branding effort should first ensure the wellbeing of the local population by addressing their needs and concerns.

The district khokimiyats have the potential to make an important contribution to public participation in urban planning. They can significantly affect the wellbeing of all interest groups by bridging the dialogue gap between the government and the people and then helping resolve public complaints. The Public Council under Mirzo Ulugbek khokimiyat is an example of a civil society institution working to address urban development and other community issues. The Council has received 48 billion Uzbek soums (US\$5,900) from the khokimiyat to improve infrastructure and public services in the district.<sup>49</sup> It has established commissions on urban planning, ecology, social protection and public relations, education, etc. (see Figure 8). The other 11 administrative divisions in Tashkent lack such a platform for public discussions. District khokimiyats should therefore support the establishment of Public Councils and people should become actively engaged in them. An Information Exchange Platform should also be established for all urban projects initiated by the government.

**Figure 8. Public Council structure**



Source: Constructed by the author

Every citizen has a right to the city. The right to the city is “not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it.”<sup>50</sup> It is a demand that all residents be part of creating the city and have the ability to participate in decisions about urban design.<sup>51</sup> City residents attempt to influence the government's decisions through an online portal for collective public appeals and petitions known as “Mening Fikrim” (My Opinion). A petition to stop the illegal removal of trees in the city is, for instance, gathering signatures to request that parliament regulate the process.<sup>52</sup> However, these systems are not suitable for all citizens, as there are people in the mahallas who are not active users of the Internet and thus cannot take advantage of virtual appeals systems. It is therefore vital that Public Councils be established to engage all layers of society, including vulnerable groups.

The city is also a space inhabitant can identify with. The right to the city means the “potential use of the city as a source of identity.”<sup>53</sup> The new district of skyscrapers and modern structures should have some meaning and purpose for local people, too; city dwellers, as the main “consumers” who are affected by the city's transformation, should have the right to participate in the planning process.

In essence, when designing a national brand for the country, leaders ought to first ensure local populations' wellbeing and treat citizens with due respect. As Anholt puts it, “no place on earth can hope to make others respect and admire it unless it first admires and respects itself.”<sup>54</sup> Currently, however, the Tashkent City project is causing damage to the population's wellbeing rather than contributing to it. The Uzbek government needs to reconsider its approach to urban planning, making the process more inclusive and more representative.

<sup>49</sup> “Obchshestvennyi sovet pri khokimiyate M. Ulugbekskogo raiona nachal svoiu rabotu,” *Gazeta.Uz*, March 30, 2018, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2018/03/30/council/>.

<sup>50</sup> Harvey 2002, cited in Rachel Kallus, “Citizenship in Action: Participatory Urban Visualization in Contested Urban Space,” *Journal of Urban Design* 21 (2016): 616-637, 619.

<sup>51</sup> Kallus, “Citizenship in Action,” 619.

<sup>52</sup> “Reforma sistemy okhrany derev'ev na territorii gorodov i sel,” *Mening Fikrim*, May 2018, <http://meningfikrim.uz/ru/petitions/view/177>.

<sup>53</sup> Kallus, “Citizenship in Action,” 619.

## Policy recommendations

### *Recommendations for the central government:*

#### *Short-term goals:*

- Establish a separate complaints system for discussion of further phases of the Tashkent City project to address the concerns of citizens (replicate the existing appeals portal)
- Provide mahalla residents with equal, adequate housing compensation, taking their needs into account

#### *Long-term goals:*

- Establish a Review and Compliance division (a system of checks and balances) to ensure unanimity of decisions and compliance with regulations among decision-making bodies
- Create a legislative basis for the protection of housing rights; ensure adequate relocation process with timely notification on evictions and relocations

- Reform the local governance system to give khokimiyats more autonomy on urban planning and development.

### *Recommendations for khokimiyats:*

- Support establishment of Public Councils in all districts of Tashkent
- Provide funding to Public Councils to develop infrastructure and public services

### *Recommendations for communities:*

- Raise housing issues and concerns on urban projects in the presence of a legal expert, mahalla leaders, the media, or local activists
- Report on unexpected urban reconstructions in their mahallas to their khokimiyat and appeal to a court
- Use social media to connect with communities and together raise concerns on urban matters

**APPENDIX 1. Letter to the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Mr. Sh.M. Mirziyoyev, from F.F. Havrutdinova, signed by the Architects' Union.**

25653-AP от 28.11.17.

*С.Ф. Мирзиёев  
28.11.17.*

ПРЕЗИДЕНТУ РЕСПУБЛИКИ УЗБЕКИСТАН  
Господину МИРЗИЁЕВУ Ш.М.  
от Хайрутдиновой Ф.Ф.,  
члена Союза Архитекторов,  
проживающей по адресу:  
г. Ташкент 100029,  
ул. Чимкентская, 7 кв. 51.  
тел: 256-56-10

**Уважаемый Шавкат Миранович!**

В дирекции штаба строительства «Ташкент - Сити» рассматриваются 5 (пять) вариантов проектов застройки, предложенные отечественными и зарубежными архитекторами.

Творческая общественность Узбекистана - Союза архитекторов, Союза художников и Союза кинематографистов - хотела бы принять активное участие в рассмотрении окончательной концепции застройки «Ташкент- Сити» и просит организовать открытое обсуждение предложенных вариантов в соответствии международной традицией реконструкций столиц мира.

Мы обеспокоены намерением проектировщиков «Ташкент - Сити» убрать уникальное, в своем роде, здание «Дома кино», построенное в 1982 году на средства Союза кинематографистов СССР при участии Узбекской ССР, под руководством Шарафа Рашидовича Рашидова.

«Дом кино» является единственным в мире зданием, специально созданным для творческого развития кинематографистов Узбекистана.

Мы просим сохранить «Дом кино» и вписать его в окончательный проект застройки «Ташкент Сити».

Союз кинематографистов Узбекистана:

*Сценарист и кинорежиссёр, кавалер ордена и Мухрад  
Тяе Шермухамедов*  
Самимов Дамир Исмаилович - кинорежиссёр, сценарист  
заслуженный деятель искусств Узбекистана, лауреат  
государственных Премий - Дипл  
Тилевер Назаров  
Заслуженный деятель искусств Узбекистана  
Лауреат Государственных премий Узбекистана  
Азизбек Мухамедов Режиссёр-аниматор  
Хасанов Фахрамон Убрагимович - режиссёр, оператор  
заслуженный работник культуры Узб.  
Азизова Айла - сценарист, редактор  
Исхаков Динар Шайхоневич, режиссёр  
сценарист, лауреат гос. и премий Узбекистана

## Chapter 15.

# Can an Authoritarian Regime Have a Meritocratic Public Administration? The Case of Azerbaijan

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Elchin Karimov<sup>1</sup> (2018)

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In 2014, in the face of a severe economic crisis following the fall in the oil price, Azerbaijan experienced the smallest GDP growth of any post-Soviet country. These severe economic shortcomings opened up space for reform. Thus, in 2016, Azerbaijan launched an initiative to diversify its economy and minimize its dependence on oil, with the goal of achieving sustainable economic growth. One element of this reform has been improving public services, including by building a meritocratic civil service system, a process that has been carried out piecemeal since 2009. Since civil servants are key actors in the design and implementation of public policies, professionalizing the civil service is central to realizing the government's reform ambitions—although many believe this aim to be unachievable without democratic changes to the political system.

At present, Azerbaijan's public administration system does not systematically rely on meritocratic principles. It is a patron-client system based on rent-seeking and corruption. The ruling regime distributes power among its clients and gives them informal authority to manipulate the country's economic activity. The clients occupy all chief administrative positions in the government. Since they are not appointed on merit, and are indeed heavily incentivized to extract rent from their positions, they are poor managers who jeopardize investment and growth in the country.

As Azerbaijan hopes to diversify its economy by attracting foreign investment to the

non-oil sector of the economy, however, it will need to create a favorable business climate. One thing that investors often look for is quality public services. Thus, building a meritocratic civil service meshes with the goals of the country's strategic economic roadmap, which seeks to attract foreign investors by 2025.

What do we mean when we say a "meritocratic civil service"? There is no universal consensus, but it is generally agreed that it involves hiring the people who are most qualified for civil service positions.<sup>2</sup> Broadly speaking, meritocracy is a social system where "merit or talent is the basis for sorting people into positions and distributing rewards."<sup>3</sup> Race, gender, class, and other identity markers are irrelevant to this competition. In many countries, meritocratic recruitment to the civil service involves open competition—exams, panel interviews, etc.—in which candidates are assessed on how well they meet each requirement of the position. Done correctly, this process should avoid patronage, nepotism, and corruption. Without a meritocratic bureaucracy, a state cannot hope to achieve its development agenda.<sup>4</sup>

Taking a narrow view of "meritocracy" in the civil service, this paper seeks to examine the current situation of Azerbaijan's civil service and compare it to the government's aspirations for reform. It begins by providing background on Azerbaijan's political system and bureaucracy, before describing the changes that have taken place since early 2018. It then seeks to answer the question of to what extent meritocratic civil service

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<sup>1</sup> Elchin Karimov is a researcher in the area of nationalism, ethno-political conflicts, and democracy in post-communist space. He obtained his Master's in "International Relations: Europe from Visegrad Perspective," a joint degree granted by four universities in Central Europe, in early 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Alikhan Baimenov and Max Everest-Phillips, "Meritocracy and Public Service Excellence," UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence (Singapore) and Regional Hub of Civil Services in Astana (Kazakhstan), 2015

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

reform can be undertaken in the context of the country's patronal system, turning to look at international practices designed to reform the bureaucracies—and improve the economies—of non-democratic states, and whether these are relevant to Azerbaijan. The methodology relies on data from secondary sources to assess the degree of meritocracy in Azerbaijan's civil service and show that there is potential to build a meritocratic system supportive of economic development even in this non-democratic regime. The paper concludes by offering recommendations to local and international non-state actors who can influence governmental decision-making in the current political context.

### **Azerbaijan as a Patronal and Authoritarian State**

Like many other former Soviet republics, Azerbaijan has struggled to transform its Soviet-era public administration and economy into more modern forms. The incumbent regime has been in power since 1993. Heidar Aliev ruled the country for nearly two decades prior to independence (1969-1987), then held the post of president for another decade, until his death in 2003. During his presidency, Azerbaijan was considered a semi-authoritarian country, maintaining some elements of political and civil liberties. After his father's death, Ilham Aliev became president, constricting political space and moving the country toward full authoritarianism. In 2017, Intelligence Unit's democracy index placed Azerbaijan on the list of

“authoritarian” regimes, with an overall score of 2.65 out of 10.<sup>5</sup>

Azerbaijan's political system is characterized by strong, centralized administration; low political participation; weak rule of law; and widespread corruption. The state administration system is formed of a “pyramidal web” of patron-client relations: the ruling elite (patron), who is at the top of the pyramid, distributes political and economic power to clients, thus buying their loyalty.<sup>6</sup> The dominant political and economic powers are the Pashayevs (the family of the First Lady)<sup>7</sup> and three regional clans (the Nakhchivanis, Yerazis, and Kurds),<sup>8</sup> with regional clans as their clients. Clan leaders, in turn, favor and support members of their own clans, causing this informal web to spread across the entire state apparatus. Henry Hale describes this “social equilibrium,” where “individuals organize their political and economic pursuits primarily around the personalized exchange of concrete rewards and punishments through chains of actual acquaintance” rather than impersonal ideas and values, as patronalism.<sup>9</sup>

Neotism, cronyism, and favoritism are characteristic of patronalist states, and Azerbaijan is no exception.<sup>10</sup> Corruption sustains the patronal structure by reinforcing clients' dependence on the ruling regime.<sup>11</sup> Unsurprisingly, therefore, Transparency International's corruption index for 2017 ranked Azerbaijan 122<sup>nd</sup> out of 180 countries (see Figure 1).<sup>12</sup> World Bank data on governance also indicates that control on corruption is very low in Azerbaijan (see Figure 2).

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<sup>5</sup> “Democracy Index 2017: Free Speech is under Attack,” The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017,

[http://www.eiu.com/Handlers/WhitepaperHandler.ashx?fi=Democracy\\_Index\\_2017.pdf&mode=wp&campaignid=DemocracyIndex2017](http://www.eiu.com/Handlers/WhitepaperHandler.ashx?fi=Democracy_Index_2017.pdf&mode=wp&campaignid=DemocracyIndex2017).

<sup>6</sup> “Azerbaijan: Turning over a New Leaf?” ICG Europe Report 156 (2004), 9 <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/156-azerbaijan-turning-over-a-new-leaf.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> “Azerbaijan: Vulnerable Stability,” ICG Europe Report 207 (2010), <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/120824/207%20Azerbaijan%20-%20Vulnerable%20Stability.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Farid Guliyev, “Political Elites in Azerbaijan,” in *Challenges of the Caspian Resource Boom. Domestic Elites and Policy-Making*, ed. Andreas Heinrich and Heiko Pleines (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 118.

<sup>9</sup> Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 20.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>11</sup> Marlene Laruelle, “Discussing Neopatrimonialism and Patronal Presidentialism in the Central Asian Context,” *Demokratizatsiya* 20, no. 4 (2012): 315.

<sup>12</sup> “Corruption Perception Index,” Transparency International, 2017,

[https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption\\_perceptions\\_index\\_2017](https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2017).

Figure 1. Transparency International corruption perception index (0—highly corrupt; 100—very clean)

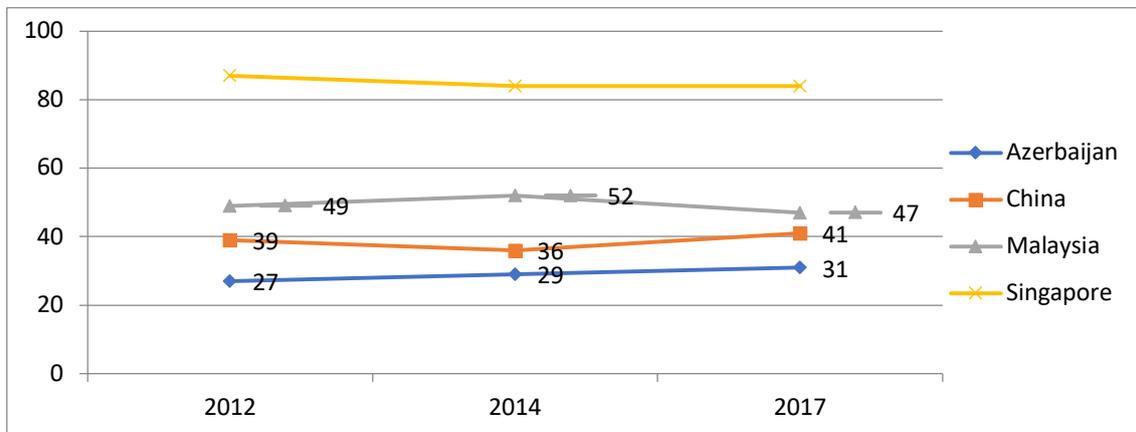
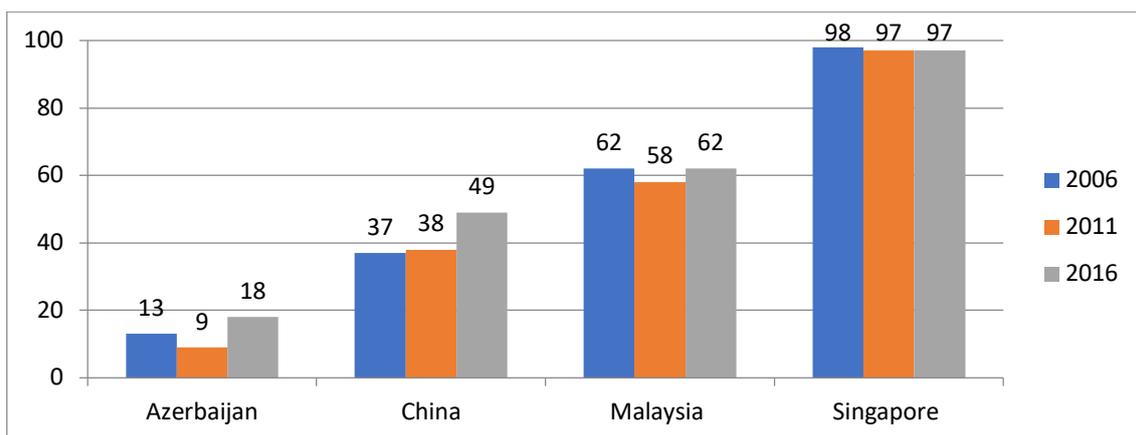


Figure 2. World Bank governance indicator: Control on corruption (percentile rank)



The patronal system means that state resources are underutilized, assets are mismanaged, and even the most qualified bureaucrats are powerless to resist corruption.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the state needs an effective body for fighting corruption. The Commission on Combatting Corruption of the Republic of Azerbaijan, intended for precisely this purpose, remains largely ineffective, although some progress has been observed, according to the latest OECD reports on Monitoring of Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plans.<sup>14</sup>

### Strategic Roadmaps for Reform

In 2016, Azerbaijan adopted a number of strategic roadmaps for developing the non-oil sector of the economy. Alongside the main “Perspectives of National Economy” document, eleven separate roadmaps were adopted for specific sectors. The project is broken down into three stages of diversification: 2016-2020, 2020-2025, and 2025 onwards. The goals for the period ending in 2020 are to increase state effectiveness and market

<sup>13</sup> Hui Li and Lance L.P. Gore, “Merit-Based Patronage: Career Incentives of Local Leading Cadres in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* (2017): 1-18.

<sup>14</sup> “Anti-Corruption Reforms in Azerbaijan. Fourth Round of Monitoring of the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan,” OECD Anti-Corruption Network For Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 2016, <http://www.oecd.org/corruption/anti-bribery/OECD-ACN-Azerbaijan-Round-4-Monitoring-Report-ENG.pdf>.

competition. This involves increasing the efficiency and flexibility of the country's public services. The main roadmap emphasizes the role of the government in establishing a favorable atmosphere for doing business. It draws attention to improving public-private partnerships, ending illegal intervention into business, increasing market competition and exports, supporting entrepreneurs, improving e-governance, and improving Azerbaijan's position on international indexes. The Presidential Administration formed a commission focused on the latter goal in 2016. It has had some early success: Azerbaijan rose 6 positions on the World Bank's "ease of doing business" index in 2017 (to 57<sup>th</sup>). The country has attempted to simplify the bureaucracy around doing business, although systemic issues continue to hinder the growth of small businesses.<sup>15</sup>

## Azerbaijan's Civil Service System

### Brief Overview of the General Situation and Recent Changes

Since the early 2000s, Azerbaijan has attempted to reform and transform its Soviet-style civil service to a contemporary model that would meet the demands of the modern world. The first law on the civil service, adopted in 2000, applies to the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, while Article 109 of the Constitution differentiates political appointees from civil servants.<sup>16</sup>

In 2005, a special government body—the Civil Service Commission—was established by presidential decree to take control of human resource policies and their implementation. The Commission was responsible for preparing a central written examination for civil service recruitment, improving and implementing civil service strategy, conducting relevant trainings for civil servants, and dealing with complaints of Ethics Code abuses. It

was subsequently abolished and the majority of its functions handed over to the State Examination Centre (SEC), established in 2016 by presidential decrees. The SEC has also subsumed the State Student Admission Commission, making it responsible for the admission of students to higher education institutions. According to the OECD's anti-corruption report, the unification of these two state commissions can be explained by "the need for cost efficiency of public administration in line with new approach of the government to transfer some state functions to the public entity, which can also exercise commercial activity and earn income."<sup>17</sup>

### Recruitment Process

There are two categories of recruitment to the civil service in Azerbaijan: general and specialized. The specialized one is for a select group of state bodies that have their own recruitment and promotion systems similar to the general one.<sup>18</sup> The recruitment process for the general civil service involves open competition, which consists of a written test and an interview. This applies to the 1<sup>st</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> classification of administrative positions of the 1<sup>st</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> category of state bodies (see details in Appendices 1 and 2). The SEC usually conducts written exams at least once a month, and exams are given by groups of civil service positions. The "A" group refers to administrative leadership positions, while the "B" group includes administrative executive positions. The written test given to the "A" group is more challenging than that given to the "B" group. Under the new system, applicants pay 70 to 110 AZN (US\$41-65), depending on the types of certificates required for the relevant subgroups of administrative positions.<sup>19</sup>

Civil service recruitment begins internally. State bodies can interview current employees with the relevant skills and experience to fill

<sup>15</sup> Natig Cafarli, economist, personal interview with the author, April 20, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Salvador Parrado, "Civil Service Professionalisation in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine," SIGMA (November 2014), <http://www.sigmaweb.org/publications/ParradoDiezS-CS-Professionalisation-Nov2014.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> OECD, "Anti-Corruption Reforms in Azerbaijan."

<sup>18</sup> The following government bodies have a specialized process: Prosecutor's Office, Ministries of Justice, Defense, Foreign Policy, Internal Affairs, Tax, Migration; State Security/ Foreign Intelligence/ Customs Services; Central Bank; and felyeger communication.

<sup>19</sup> "Dövlət Qulluğuna Qəbul Qaydaları ilə Bağlı Nələri Bilməliyik," Dövlət İmtahan Mərkəzi, 2017, [http://www.dovletqullugu.com/uploads/buklet-dovlet-qulluqu\\_.pdf](http://www.dovletqullugu.com/uploads/buklet-dovlet-qulluqu_.pdf).

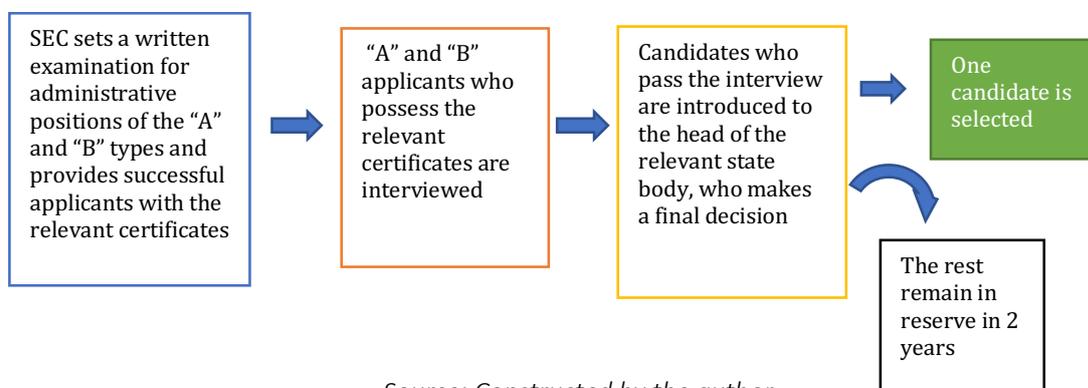
administrative vacancies. If no suitable individual is found, the position goes to open competition, a far more transparent practice. Since the implementation of changes in early 2018, the SEC has been organizing written examinations for the “A” and “B” groups, issuing certificates valid for five years to those who pass the exams. It then offers interviews only to those who possess the relevant certificates. The interview takes place before a panel composed of at least three persons—one (or more) from the relevant state body, one from the SEC, and one independent expert—and the interview process is open for public viewing in order to ensure transparency and fairness. The written competition and interview evaluate the general knowledge, professional skills, and reasoning abilities of a candidate, as well as his or her position-specific expertise. Individuals dissatisfied with their results have the right to appeal.

There is a separate general competition for those who have worked in the civil service for at

least five years and who possess the relevant skills and competencies for their intended administrative positions. The candidates for this competition are not required to have certificates to work in a civil service job.<sup>20</sup>

Candidates who pass the interview are introduced to the head of the relevant state body, who makes a final decision. The selected person does a six-month internship, during which time they are mentored by an appropriate specialist. If the mentor’s feedback is positive, the individual is hired on a three-month probationary contract. Upon successful completion of this period, the civil servant is given a long-term job contract. Other candidates remain on a reserve list for two years, to be considered should a vacancy arise. If there are suitable candidates in reserve for a new civil service vacancy, these vacancies are not announced for competition.

**Figure 3. Recruitment to Civil Service in Azerbaijan**



*Source: Constructed by the author*

Comprehensive reform efforts in 2016 have encompassed changes in the civil service. Prior to the establishment of the SEC, only the 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> classifications of administrative positions were recruited through a centralized exam (organized between 2009 and 2016 by the now-abolished Civil Service Commission). Meritocratic recruitment has now been extended to the 1<sup>st</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> classification of

administrative positions in the 1<sup>st</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> category of state bodies. Nevertheless, open competition does not apply to the supreme-3<sup>rd</sup> classes of administrative positions in the supreme category of state bodies (see details in Appendix 2). The recruitment process for this category involves direct promotion or internal interview, entailing a lack of transparency that casts doubt on the

<sup>20</sup> “Açıq dars – dövlət qulluğu,” YouTube video, 48:24, posted by “Dövlət İmtahan Mərkəzi,” November 17, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9tjRSV6btg>.

implementation of meritocratic principles at the highest level of public administration. Another concern is the last stage of recruitment, in which heads of state bodies choose one of a shortlist of candidates, a process that undermines the merit-based system.<sup>21</sup>

Parrado, who has extensively studied the Azerbaijani civil service and recruitment system, notes that the 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> grades of civil servants, who have been recruited through open competition, make up 31 percent of all vacant positions and those in the 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> categories make up 9.6 percent of all positions, amounting to a total of 2,838 staff members (as of 2014).<sup>22</sup> The latest State Statistics Committee figures, from 2016, indicate that Azerbaijan has a total of 30,090 civil servants. Of these, 1,214 civil servants occupy supreme-3<sup>rd</sup> category administrative positions. However, no separate statistics are publicly available on those working in supreme state bodies to identify the number of civil servants to whom open competition does not yet apply. There are separate statistics only on the number of deputy heads of local executive bodies (257), the recruitment of whom does not go through open competition. In addition, administrative positions in state bodies under local executive bodies and representatives of administrative territorial units do not go through open competition.<sup>23</sup>

### Performance Appraisal

Civil servants' performance is assessed according to the "Rules of Performance Appraisal of Civil Servants," adopted in 2014. The performance appraisal system seeks to evaluate the performance of civil servants within a year. Currently, performance-based assessment applies to the 3<sup>rd</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> classifications of civil servants. The civil servant is evaluated by his/her direct supervisor based on a list of measures, including professional skills and ethical values. The supervisor's remarks

are placed on the civil servant's "performance appraisal report," which affects promotions, demotions, bonuses, and future training.<sup>24</sup>

A recent changes to the Law on Civil Service<sup>25</sup> was the removal of the regular attestation exam every five years for civil servants, substituting it with SEC's certificate system. Hence, every civil servant who has been hired since 2018 is required by law to earn a valid certificate every five years. After receiving the certificate twice (for 10 years), civil servants receive the third certificate for an unlimited time.<sup>26</sup>

### Code of Ethics

The government of Azerbaijan has promoted ethical behavior in the civil service. The Commission on Combatting Corruption under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan was instituted in 2004. Since then, the "Law on Combatting Corruption" (2004), "Law on Rules of Ethical Conduct of Civil Servants" (2007), National Anti-Corruption Action Plan (2012-2015), and National Action Plans on Promoting Open Government (2012-2015, 2016-2018) have all been adopted to take steps against corruption.

The Law on Ethical Conduct Rules for Civil Servants (2007) provides the main guiding principles for the ethical behavior of civil servants. Previously, the now-abolished Civil Service Commission and head of the relevant state body monitored ethical behavior. The Commission studied public opinion of civil servants' behavior and raise public awareness as to which practices were ethical. It also prepared relevant recommendations for each state body to help it cope with corruption and violations of the Ethics Code. In addition, it delivered training courses on ethical behavior to civil servants, determined training needs, and gave suggestions to state bodies about the types of training that civil servants

<sup>21</sup> Parrado, "Civil Service Professionalisation," 46.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Presidential Decree 1474/2017, <http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/35877>.

<sup>24</sup> Parrado, "Civil Service Professionalisation," 54.

<sup>25</sup> "Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan about Changes to 'Law on Civil Service' of the Republic of Azerbaijan," No. 267- VQD, May 31, 2016, <http://e-qanun.az/framework/33482>.

<sup>26</sup> Law on Civil Service, article 28.1, <http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/4481>.

needed. On top of that, it was responsible for improving the adoption of legislation.

Presidential Decree 1008 (August 9, 2016) transferred all these functions and activities to the SEC. However, like the commission before it, the SEC has struggled to carry out all these functions in the face of limited resources and overburdened staff.<sup>27</sup>

### Why Is a Civil Service Job Not Attractive?

A cursory look at the SEC's website reveals that there is a considerable shortage of applicants for low-grade administrative positions. This shows that there is a lack of interest in civil service jobs. In addition, according to the head of the SEC's Board of Directors, more than 2,000 positions are filled by temporary government contractors, who fill the vacancies until a civil servant can be selected in a competitive process.<sup>28</sup> However, even these contract-based employees do not apply for consideration in open competition.<sup>29</sup> Most civil service vacancies have to be re-announced, and even then there is not enough interest to fill them.<sup>30</sup>

One of the reasons for this is the low salaries that come with civil service jobs. In 2016, the average monthly salary of a civil servant was 634 AZN (US\$372.90).<sup>31</sup> The Numbeo database indicates that living expenses for one person in Baku (before rent) are US\$386, while a four-person family would need US\$1,389 to cover living expenses exclusive of rent.<sup>32</sup> The current salaries, therefore, can hardly hope to attract the "best people" to the civil service. Even if the most qualified individuals are selected, meritocracy is hard to sustain, as skilled civil servants will likely find themselves with more lucrative offers. In addition, the underpaid civil servant will always

have financial incentive to take bribes, undercutting the government's potential anti-corruption drive. Thus, the compensation of civil servants, which currently lags far behind private-sector salaries,<sup>33</sup> must be made competitive.

### To What Extent Can Meritocracy Work in a Patronal System?

Public administration reform is progressing in Azerbaijan. As described above, meritocratic recruitment principles now apply to mid-level administrative positions as well as low-level ones. This is a positive step toward building meritocracy. Yet research on the impact of meritocratic recruitment to the 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> grades has found disappointing results. According to Weinmann's focus group analysis, conducted in Baku with civil servants and citizens in 2013, civil servants did not follow ethical rules and personal connections were still important to promotion.<sup>34</sup> Respondents did not seem to believe that there was a sincere effort to engage in merit-based recruitment.<sup>35</sup>

The question is whether individual-level meritocracy can be effective within a highly patronal system. The centralized examination system aims to avoid patronalism, and this method has been deemed effective at promoting meritocracy in other contexts where a high level of patronalism exists.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, given how rooted patronalism and rent-seeking are in the state administration, it is hard to institutionalize meritocracy. Moreover, Azerbaijan lacks the institutional strength to sustain meritocracy: neither independent civil society organizations (vertical accountability) nor autonomous parliament (horizontal accountability) exist to oversee bureaucrats' activities.

<sup>27</sup> Parrado, "Civil Service Professionalisation," 47.

<sup>28</sup> "Günün Nəbzı," YouTube video, 36:26, posted by "Dövlət İmtahan Mərkəzi," February 26, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqFmYJ8EEBU>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Average monthly nominal wage for all administrative positions in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Retrieved from the website of the State Statistical Committee of Republic of Azerbaijan, <https://www.azstat.org/MEsearch/search?departament=22&lang=az>.

<sup>32</sup> Numbeo "Cost for Living" data. Retrieved from <https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/in/Baku>.

<sup>33</sup> Parrado, "Civil Service Professionalisation," 52.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 49

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 49

<sup>36</sup> Baimenov and Everest-Phillips, "Meritocracy and Public Service Excellence," 7.

## One Stop-Shop Innovation: Parallel Public Services for Building Meritocracy?

ASAN (Azerbaijani Service and Assessment Network) was established by presidential decree in 2012 as a subordinate agency of the Public Service and Social Innovation Agency under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Its acronym—ASAN—means “easy” in Azerbaijani, and it has become a one-stop shop for various types of high-quality public services. The five principles of ASAN—transparency, efficiency, gentleness, responsibility, and comfort<sup>37</sup>—have shown themselves to be genuine values. ASAN was established to:

- “reduce extra expenses and loss of time on the part of citizens”
- “respect ethical rules and civilized behavior toward citizens”
- “upgrade the level of professionalism”
- “strengthen trust in state structures”
- “increase transparency and strengthen the fight against corruption”
- “ensure great use of electronic services”
- “expand the effectiveness of institutional reforms in this area”<sup>38</sup>

Currently, there are thirteen ASAN centers, five of which are in Baku. Since its launch, over 21 million people have used one of the more than 240 ASAN services.<sup>39</sup> These include: issuing IDs/passports, driving licenses, various other licenses, and an ASAN visa;<sup>40</sup> notarial services; registration of real estate issues; utilities; banking; insurance; fine-paying; legal services; migration issues; and so on. The ASAN Service makes substantial use of e-governance, with a particularly noteworthy service

being “ASAN Imza” (electronic signature obtained by mobile number), which allows citizens to sign documents digitally.<sup>41</sup>

With its clean, fast, and gentle service, ASAN has gained popularity both at home and abroad. Ninety-eight percent of users have expressed satisfaction with it.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, some international bodies, such as the OECD, World Bank, UN, and Transparency International, have positively appraised ASAN’s activities;<sup>43</sup> ASAN was given a UN Public Service Award for “Improving the Delivery of Public Services” in 2015. It has also obtained ISO 9001:2008 international certification for its quality management standards.

ASAN has brought new organizational standards to Azerbaijan’s civil service system, emphasizing transparency, integrity, and a corruption-free environment. Its contribution to curbing petty corruption in public administration has been positive. According to research done by ASAN (and therefore potentially biased), 71 percent of respondents believe that ASAN is an effective tool in fighting corruption.<sup>44</sup> ASAN has also boosted the business environment of the country by facilitating the issuing of licenses and reducing fees, which is welcomed by EU businesses.<sup>45</sup> It has also contributed to improving the country’s image on some international indexes, such as “doing business” and “perception of corruption.”

However, although ASAN underpins the public administration system of Azerbaijan, the majority of public services outside its scope remain inefficient and corrupt. In addition, the clans have largely monopolized economic areas of the country, including big state and private companies, export and import of main goods, etc., thus hindering open market competition.

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<sup>37</sup> State Agency for Public Services and Social Innovation under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, [http://vxside.gov.az/redirect/index/cat\\_id/81/MainOrNot/0](http://vxside.gov.az/redirect/index/cat_id/81/MainOrNot/0).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> “ASAN visa” is an electronic system issuing visas to foreigners traveling to Azerbaijan. Applicants can receive a visa online within three working days. See <https://evisa.gov.az/en/>.

<sup>41</sup> “What is ASAN IMZA?” ASAN IMZA, <http://asanimza.az/what-is-the-asan-imza-mobile-id/>.

<sup>42</sup> “Moving towards Citizens: The ‘ASAN Service’ Model: The Azerbaijani Service and Assessment Network,” Vision—The Think Tank, 2015, [http://www.visionwebsite.eu/UserFiles/Vision\\_ASAN\\_Report.pdf](http://www.visionwebsite.eu/UserFiles/Vision_ASAN_Report.pdf).

<sup>43</sup> Farid Osmanov, “Curbing Corruption in Azerbaijan: The Case of ASAN,” Building Integrity WP 2017/001, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Osmanov, “Curbing Corruption in Azerbaijan.”

<sup>45</sup> “EU Business Climate Report: Azerbaijan 2017,” German-Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce (AHK Azerbaijan), 2017, [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu\\_business\\_climate\\_report\\_azerbaijan\\_2017.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu_business_climate_report_azerbaijan_2017.pdf).

Moreover, ASAN has not altered the services offered by public bodies, but rather created a parallel system that includes the most-used public services. The government has not commented on why it chose to create a parallel one-stop shop rather than reforming the public bodies as a whole,<sup>46</sup> but it is clear that ASAN has left room for the elite to continue to benefit from patronage at the same time as the political leadership claims to have reformed its public service delivery.<sup>47</sup> That is, ASAN has supplemented, rather than altering, the patronal Azerbaijani bureaucracy.<sup>48</sup> Thus far, it is unclear which system will prevail: will ASAN's reformist model spill over to other public services or will it too be swallowed up in the corrupt system?<sup>49</sup>

All in all, the establishment of ASAN has been a tremendous innovation that has increased the efficiency of Azerbaijan's public service system, albeit only in certain areas. Its staff is young, highly skilled, and respectful of civil service ethics. However, the majority of the public administration is outside its scope and remains corrupted and non-meritocratic due to the prevalence of patronalism.

### **Theoretical Framework and Country Case Studies on Civil Service Reforms**

In order to build the rational-legal bureaucracy considered ideal by Max Weber, Azerbaijan needs to implement systemic changes that will weaken patronalism. Changing the patronal nature of the regime is unlikely in the near future, but there are still ways of improving the public administration system in order to achieve economic liberalization. In this section, I present some case studies of countries whose leaderships have successfully applied select principles of various theories of public administration to improve public governance

in their non-democratic regimes. I focus in particular on non-democratic Asian regimes that have professionalized their public administrations and achieved sustainable economic growth. My goal is to determine which measures they took can be usefully transferred to Azerbaijan.

There are two dominant theories of public-sector administration in non-democratic states: traditional Public Administration and New Public Management. (Elements of the latter are selected for the "best fit" model.) The traditional Public Administration model, influenced by the ideas of Max Weber, first emerged in the UK and Prussia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, based on two main principles: hierarchy and meritocracy.<sup>50</sup> Relying on centralized control and organizational hierarchy, public administration detached policymaking from implementation in order to build an effective and efficient public administration system.<sup>51</sup>

In the 1980s, the New Public Management theory, designed to respond to the limitations of traditional public administration and the demands of a competitive market economy, emerged in several OECD countries.<sup>52</sup> This theory suggests implementing private-sector management principles in the public sector, emphasizing cost management, "small government," performance management and audit, the decentralization of public administration, entrepreneurial leadership, etc.<sup>53</sup> There are also so-called "third wave" public administration theories (New Public Service; New Public Governance, including the whole-of-government approach), which emphasize a democratic approach to governance and respond to the limitations of traditional public administration and New Public Management. I also will touch on e-governance, which focuses on using new technology to improve the quality and efficiency of public governance.

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<sup>46</sup> Shahla Sultanov, "Azerbaijan Anti-Corruption Initiative Draws Decent Public Review," EurasiaNet, October 16, 2014, <https://eurasianet.org/s/azerbaijan-anti-corruption-initiative-draws-decent-public-reviews>.

<sup>47</sup> Sultanova, "Azerbaijan Anti-Corruption Initiative."

<sup>48</sup> Farid Guliyev, email to the author, 2018.

<sup>49</sup> Osmanov, "Curbing Corruption in Azerbaijan."

<sup>50</sup> Mark Robinson, "From Old Public Administration to the New Public Service: Implications for Public Sector Reform in Developing Countries," UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence, 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> X. U. Runya, S. U. N. Qigui, and S. I. Wei, "The Third Wave of Public Administration: The New Public Governance," Canadian Social Science 11, no. 7 (2015).

Below, I provide a brief overview of the approaches that three countries—China, Singapore, and Malaysia—have taken to achieve meritocratic public administration without implementing democratic changes in their political systems.

### The Case of China

Chinese good governance amounts to the “development effectiveness”<sup>54</sup> of the state. Good governance elements in China, such as transparency and accountability, do not really look like traditional good governance, but exist in another dimension. For example, top-down vertical accountability works within the Communist Party system, making civil servants accountable to their state bodies. Another important element of good governance is decentralization, which has aided in the effective management of state administration. By pragmatically selecting certain elements of decentralization to implement, the ruling party has maintained control and strategically enhanced governance. Local government bodies may enjoy administrative and economic independence, but they do not have political freedom.<sup>55</sup>

China has an authoritarian and patrimonial political system. These rules of the game are a great drawback in most developing countries, including most post-Soviet countries. However, the Chinese civil service is largely considered meritocratic.<sup>56</sup> Like politicians, civil servants are appointed, but they are allowed to rise up the hierarchical ladder of the state bureaucracy according to their merit.<sup>57</sup> Performance-based promotion—which aims at performance maximization—is applied in the Chinese civil service, with some exceptions at higher levels. It should be noted that this performance is primarily judged on economic indicators, in line with the Chinese government’s

focus on social stability, improving people’s livelihoods, and raising GDP.<sup>58</sup> Powerful sanctions are imposed on the state bodies if civil servants do not meet economic demands. Career development in the civil service also depends on political loyalty, creating a “political meritocracy.”<sup>59</sup> This has allowed China to achieve its development goals (economic growth, poverty reduction, and human development),<sup>60</sup> even as patronage and personal connections remain important to some degree.<sup>61</sup>

The training of civil servants has been a key objective in China. The Chinese government has invested heavily in enhancing the education and skills—and changing the mindset—of civil servants. Another important issue is states’ capacity and the political commitment of the ruling regime to tackling corruption. China has advanced a lot in this regard, though corruption in its civil service has not been systematically eradicated. Singapore, for instance, has been far more successful at building professional public administration while achieving huge economic growth under a single party system.

### The Case of Singapore

Singapore is a good example of how an authoritarian political elite can construct a professional public administration and achieve the desired growth. Public administration reforms in Singapore targeted institutional and attitudinal changes in the civil service, and today Singapore has one of the most effective civil service systems in the world.<sup>62</sup> Singapore took a pragmatic approach, using the “best practices” that fit its context.<sup>63</sup> The government first dissolved ineffective state entities and replaced them with new organizations. To change civil servants’ attitudes toward citizens, the government has invested heavily in training civil servants. The “retention and retirement” program

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<sup>54</sup> Li, Xiaoyun, Sanjeev Ahluwalia, and Dong Qiang, “Lessons In Public Sector Reform from China,” World Bank, 2013, 16, [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTGOVANTICORR/Resources/3035863-1289428746337/Lessons\\_PSR\\_China.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTGOVANTICORR/Resources/3035863-1289428746337/Lessons_PSR_China.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Li and Gore, “Merit-Based Patronage.”

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Jon S.T. Quah, “Administrative Reform: Singapore Style,” *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 57, no. 1 (1991): 85-100.

<sup>63</sup> Robinson, “From Old Public Administration.”

forced incompetent civil servants to retire while promoting competent ones.<sup>64</sup> The fired civil servants were replaced with new, more effective ones in open competition. To attract and retain competent employees, the government has raised salaries, making them competitive with those in the private sector. A performance-based awards and promotion system has also served to sustain meritocracy.

A Central Complaint Bureau was established to hear citizens' complaints about mistreatment by civil servants. The political leadership has been ruthless in combatting corruption. The Corruption Practices Investigation Bureau has been very effective in fighting corruption in both the public and private sectors. The existence of a corruption-free business environment has made it possible for the government of Singapore to attract foreign investment.<sup>65</sup> The Bureau's research division supports this progress by offering recommendations to different state bodies as to how they should fight corruption.

Reforms in Singapore have embraced the whole public administration in order to achieve effective and efficient governance. The government has carried out budget reforms to make the state's use of financial resources more efficient, a process that has seen state-owned companies largely privatized. The rule of law has been cemented in order to attract foreign investment. And the government has achieved public-sector reforms that have created high-quality healthcare, education, housing, and infrastructure, as well as providing financial security. Notably, these successful reforms have been driven by exceptional political will and facilitated by the country's small size.

## The Case of Malaysia

Malaysia is another interesting example. It was fully authoritarian when it began its public-sector reforms in the 1980s, but the government nevertheless managed to select context-appropriate principles of New Public Management and build a better public administration system.<sup>66</sup>

The government believed that an Asian model of good governance would be most suitable for Malaysia. With the goal of reaching sustainable economic growth, the Malaysian government undertook extensive privatization of its state-led companies, reducing the size of the public sector. This step enabled effective and efficient management of public-sector financing. One-stop public service shops were created to give businesses easy access to the government services they needed. The Malaysian government successfully promoted and incorporated Islamic values into civil servants' ethical code. All state bodies were required to have standards rated at ISO 9000 series<sup>67</sup> to improve service quality.<sup>68</sup> In addition, Malaysia invested heavily in e-governance, which boosted the quality of services while minimizing red tape and corruption. This approach to public service reform did not follow a single model of reforms, but drew on both Asian (Japanese) and Western (Australian, Canadian, British) practices to create a "best fit" model for its context.<sup>69</sup> Malaysia's strong, stable central government allowed for the success of reforms.

In sum, all three of the aforementioned countries used a "best fit" model to reform their civil service systems in a context-appropriate manner. This selectivity allowed incumbent political leaders to retain power. Evidently, therefore, even non-democratic regimes can successfully reform their civil service in order to improve the economy and people's livelihoods. In each case, we see that

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<sup>64</sup> Ballatore Benedetto Francesco, "The Reform of the Public Administration in Singapore: A Model to Follow in Italy?" MPRA Paper 52685 (2013), 6, [https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/52685/1/MPRA\\_paper\\_52685.pdf](https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/52685/1/MPRA_paper_52685.pdf).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>66</sup> Noore Alam Siddiquee, "Public Service Innovations Policy Transfer and Governance in the Asia-Pacific Region: The Malaysian Experience," JOAAG 2, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>67</sup> An internationally recognized certification of quality management standards for both public and private organizations.

<sup>68</sup> Siddiquee, "Public Service Innovations."

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

political will plays a key role in realizing reforms and economic liberalization.

### **What Lessons and Best Practices Can Azerbaijan Draw from Other Countries?**

The above case studies illustrate that it is possible to achieve meritocratic public administration without political democratization. Yet in selecting reforms, it is essential to consider the specific context of a country. Singapore's small size and favorable location were unique factors that contributed to the success of reforms. In addition, its state administration and political economy were not based on patronalism and rent-seeking.<sup>70</sup> The public administrations of Malaysia and China do have patronalistic patterns, however. Although Azerbaijan can hardly hope to simply copy-and-paste the methods of any of other countries, it can still draw lessons from each of these examples.

First of all, civil servants in all three countries are well paid. This is particularly true of Singapore. The aim has been to attract and retain skilled people, as well as reduce their incentive to take bribes. Related to this, all three countries have selectively employed principles of New Public Management to build efficient and effective public administrations. One element of this approach was reducing the size of state bodies and dissolving ineffective ones to reduce stress on the budget, thus freeing up funds that can be directed to improving the compensation of low-level civil servants.

Secondly, like the three countries discussed above, Azerbaijan can make extensive use of e-governance tools to increase the effectiveness of its public services and fight corruption. This will remove an impediment to economic investment and growth in Azerbaijan. The Commission on Combatting Corruption can establish a centralized online system to receive feedback from citizens and businessmen on the performance of public bodies

and continuously improve public services on basis of this feedback.<sup>71</sup> Such an approach has proven effective in curbing corruption in Singapore. Another effective digital tool for fighting corruption would be a mobile app like the one currently being used in China, which allows users to instantaneously report corrupt practices. Evidently, there is substantial scope to use e-governance to fight corruption and boost the effectiveness of public services.

Again, benefiting from Singapore's rich experience of public-sector reform, Azerbaijan has joined the Kazakhstan-based Regional Hub for Civil Services in Astana, a project conducted jointly by the UNDP and the Kazakhstani government that now involves 38 countries and several international organizations. The Hub is associated with the UNDP Global Center for Public Service Excellence in Singapore, and they have produced some joint studies discussing civil service system in the region. In the Hub, participant countries work to develop "best fit" practices for their public administrations by sharing their knowledge and experiences.<sup>72</sup> Whether through the Hub or bilaterally, Azerbaijan could work more closely with Singapore to take advantage of its expertise in public service improvement.

The case of China provides a positive example of how to professionalize public administration under an authoritarian regime. Like Azerbaijan, it is a highly patronal state in which political loyalty is required (unlike in Weberian variants of bureaucracy) but meritocracy remains important. In highly patronal systems, Li and Gore emphasize, patronage can be limited by the establishment of an effective system of checks and balances to oversee the activities of civil servants.<sup>73</sup> A centralized examination is essential but not enough; a comprehensive approach is needed to build a merit-based civil service system, including a transparent and merit-based promotion system, legal protection of whistle-blowers, and

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<sup>70</sup> Lan Hu, "One Party Dominance Survival: The Case of Singapore and Taiwan" (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 2011).

<sup>71</sup> Dana Al Emam, "Singapore Shares Experience in Public Sector Reforms," *The Jordan Times*, August 30, 2014, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/singapore-shares-experience-public-sector-reform>.

<sup>72</sup> Colin Knox, "Public Sector Reform in Central Asia and the Caucasus," *International Journal of Public Administration* (2017).

<sup>73</sup> Li and Gore, "Merit-Based Patronage."

independent and effective overseeing mechanisms (eg. China's vertical accountability). This system could be established in Azerbaijan, a recommendation I elaborate in the next section.

In conclusion, the success of reforms is dependent, above all, on the political will of the Azerbaijani ruling elite to implement them—and to curb corruption. As the political system is constructed to allow and strengthen executive power on the patronal ladder, reform is only possible once the regime itself is willing for change to happen. Top-down systemic reform is effective in authoritarian contexts—as the cases of Singapore, China, and Malaysia show—but popular detachment from politics means that only elite willpower can see reforms through. If political will is lacking, reforms alone will be ineffective: creating a centralized exam to recruit meritorious civil servants will alone do nothing to fight corruption in the civil service.

### Policy Recommendations

Given the patronal nature of the Azerbaijani regime, it is unlikely that systemic changes will take place any time soon. Ideally, the government needs to limit clients' exploitation of state assets and monopolization of the economy so as to reduce corruption at the highest level of public administration. However, this is unlikely in the short term, as it might create additional risks for the country's ruling elites, who share power with their clients and manipulate the main economic areas.

The appearance of ASAN was an outgrowth of Azerbaijan's patronal nature. The regime decided to create a parallel one-stop shop to take care of some public services rather than attempt reform of the state bodies themselves, thus simultaneously improving public service delivery and cementing patronalism.<sup>74</sup> This implies that the eradication of patronalism in Azerbaijan would be difficult, especially as it may be undesired.

Under these conditions, the following recommendations may help local and international public policymakers, academics, NGO leaders, and

other interested parties to improve Azerbaijan's public administration system:

*Recommendation for the SEC:*

- 1) Conduct a study to understand why contract-based employees working temporarily in civil service positions are not interested in applying to become civil servants in open competition. On the basis of these findings, the SEC could come up with recommendations for enhancing the prestige of civil service jobs and share these suggestions with the relevant state bodies.

*Short-Term Recommendation for the Central Government of Azerbaijan:*

- 2) Raise monthly salary of low- and mid-level civil servants. Competitive salaries will help reduce corruption by making civil servants immune to the temptations of bribery (Singapore has been particularly successful in this). This policy will also attract competent civil servants and encourage them to remain in their jobs rather than seeking more lucrative private-sector employment.

*Long-Term Recommendations for the Central Government of Azerbaijan:*

3) Send the very best senior bureaucrats to earn degrees in Public Administration at the best schools abroad, with the stipulation that they return, work for the government for five years, and propose positive changes. These individuals will learn the best international practices while studying abroad. In addition, the foreign atmosphere in the best schools (located in Singapore, the UK, the US, etc.) will affect their attitude toward the civil service. China has successfully used this approach to professionalize its civil service.<sup>75</sup>

4) Establish an independent accountability inspection within each state body to oversee the

<sup>74</sup> Farid Guliyev, email to the author, 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Kenneth Jarrett and Lie Huihan, "Understanding China's Changing Civil Service," Chinese Business Review, July 1, 2009, <https://www.chinabusinessreview.com/understanding-chinas-changing-civil-service/>.

activities of this state body (top-down vertical accountability). The commissions will assess the body's performance in relation to pre-determined benchmarks and report this information to the relevant higher-level institution at the end of each calendar year. This will help the state to achieve its development agenda and keep all state bodies accountable to the one above them in the hierarchy. It will also push out incompetent civil servants, which is particularly important in the superior-2<sup>nd</sup> grades, where there is currently no performance-based assessment. This method has inculcated accountability in China in the absence of non-state actors and an independent parliament, and could be similarly effective in Azerbaijan.

5) Promote e-governance in fighting corruption. Develop a comprehensive online form on the SEC or Commission on Combating

Corruption website in order to receive complaints from citizens and respond them quickly and effectively. Maintain confidentiality to protect citizens unless the cases turn out to be fake.<sup>76</sup> In addition, develop a smartphone app to report corruption, an approach already taken in India, China, and Russia, among other countries. This will encourage the reduction of corruption in public and private institutions alike.

6) Raise public awareness. Encourage citizens to report civil servants' misuse of power via online tools and mobile apps.

7) Require public institutions to have ISO 9000 series standards to improve their quality management. This strategy has helped Malaysian public organizations to boost their quality management.

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<sup>76</sup> This system has been used in the Corruption Practices Investigation Bureau in Singapore. See <https://www.cpib.gov.sg/>.

**Appendix 1 (categorization of state bodies)<sup>77</sup>**

<p>1<sup>st</sup> category state bodies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Supreme Mejlis of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic</li> <li>- Chief Prosecutor’s Office of the Republic of Azerbaijan</li> <li>- Chamber of Accounts of the Republic of Azerbaijan</li> <li>- Office of Judicial Legal Board</li> <li>- Office of an Attorney of the Republic of Azerbaijan for Human Rights (Ombudsman)</li> </ul>
<p>2<sup>nd</sup> category state bodies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Supreme Court of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic</li> <li>- relevant executive power body of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic</li> <li>- Military Prosecutor’s Office of the Republic of Azerbaijan</li> <li>- Prosecutor’s Office of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic</li> <li>- Office of an Attorney of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic for Human Rights (Ombudsman)</li> <li>- appeal courts of the Republic of Azerbaijan</li> <li>- Office of the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Azerbaijan</li> <li>- Secretariat of the Commission on Fight against Corruption of the Republic of Azerbaijan</li> <li>- relevant executive power bodies</li> <li>- Office of the National TV and Radio-Broadcasting Board</li> </ul>
<p>3<sup>rd</sup> category state bodies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- state agencies and state services established under the relevant executive power bodies</li> <li>- regional centers of the Office of an Attorney of the Republic of Azerbaijan for Human Rights (Ombudsman)</li> <li>- Office of the Central Election Commission of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic</li> <li>- relevant executive power bodies of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic</li> <li>- Office of the National TV and Radio-Broadcasting Board</li> <li>- courts on grave crimes</li> </ul>

<sup>77</sup> Dövlət Qulluğu haqda Azərbaycan Respublikasının Qanunu, № 926-IQ (2000), <http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/4481>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- administrative economic courts</li> <li>- military courts</li> <li>- Military Prosecutor's Office of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic</li> <li>- Baku City Prosecutor's Office</li> </ul>
4 <sup>th</sup> category state bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- relevant executive power bodies</li> <li>- regional divisions of relevant executive power bodies</li> <li>- bodies subordinate to/under relevant executive power bodies</li> <li>- city (region) courts</li> <li>- district (city) prosecutor's offices</li> <li>- military prosecutor's offices</li> </ul>
5 <sup>th</sup> category state bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- local divisions of state agencies and state services established under relevant executive power bodies</li> <li>- bodies under relevant executive power</li> <li>- representations of relevant executive power bodies in an administrative territorial district</li> </ul>

**Appendix 2 (classification of administrative positions in civil service)<sup>78</sup>**

<p>Supreme state bodies—the main executive, legislative and judiciary bodies of Republic of Azerbaijan:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Administration of President of Republic of Azerbaijan, including Administrative Department of the President, Special Medical Service of the President, and Cabinet of Ministries</li> <li>2) Milli Mejlis (Parliament)</li> <li>3) Constitutional Court</li> <li>4) Supreme Court</li> </ol>	
Supreme category of administrative positions in supreme state bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- head of the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Azerbaijan</li> <li>- head of the Administrative Department of the President</li> <li>- head of Special Medical Service of the President</li> <li>- head of the Secretariat of the First Vice-President of Republic of Azerbaijan</li> </ul>

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- head of Office of Milli Mejlis</li> <li>- head of Office of Constitutional Court</li> <li>- head of Office of Supreme Court</li> <li>- head of Office of Cabinet of Ministries</li> </ul>
First classification of administrative positions in the supreme state bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- deputy head of the Secretariat of the First-Vice President in the Presidential Administration</li> <li>- head of division in the Presidential Administration</li> <li>- assistant to the First Vice-President in the Administration</li> <li>- deputy head of Office of Milli Mejlis and Constitutional Court, Supreme Court, Administrative Department of the President, Special Medical Service of the President, Cabinet of Ministries, and heads of divisions in these state bodies</li> <li>- heads of the Office of the state bodies of the 1st category</li> <li>- advisors and assistants of head of the Office of Ministries of Cabinet, Supreme Court, Constitutional Court, and Milli Mejlis</li> </ul>
Second classification of administrative positions in the supreme state bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- deputy head of division in the Presidential Administration</li> <li>- deputy head of divisions in the Office of Milli Mejlis and Constitutional Court, Supreme Court, Administrative Department of the President, Special Medical Service of the President, and Cabinet of Ministries</li> <li>- deputy heads of the Office and heads of divisions of the state bodies of the 1st category</li> <li>- head of offices of the state bodies of the 2nd categories in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic</li> <li>- heads of state agencies and state services established under relevant executive power bodies</li> <li>- trade representatives in Embassies and Consulates of Azerbaijan in foreign countries</li> <li>- deputy heads of relevant executive bodies</li> <li>- assistants to the Deputy Chairman of Milli Mejlis and Deputy Prime Minister</li> <li>- assistant and advisor to the Chairman of the Supreme Mejlis of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- deputy head of the Baku City Executive</li> </ul>
Third classification of administrative positions in the supreme state bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- specialists in the Presidential Administration, Administrative Department of the President, Special Medical Service of the President, Office of Milli Mejlis, Office of Constitutional Court, Office of Supreme Court, and Office of Cabinet of Ministries</li> <li>- heads of divisions, their deputies and specialists of other state bodies directly supporting the head of the Azerbaijani state</li> <li>- deputy heads of state agencies and services under relevant executive bodies</li> <li>- deputy heads of division of the state bodies of the 1st category</li> <li>- heads of office and their deputies of state bodies of the 2nd category</li> <li>- deputy heads of office and heads of division of state bodies of the 2<sup>nd</sup> category in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic</li> <li>- deputy heads of state agencies and state services established under the relevant executive power bodies</li> </ul>
Fourth classification of administrative positions in the supreme state bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- specialists in the offices of state bodies of the 1<sup>st</sup> category</li> <li>- heads of division and their deputies in 2<sup>nd</sup>-category state bodies</li> <li>- deputy heads of division of 2<sup>nd</sup>-category state bodies in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic</li> <li>- deputy heads of relevant executive power bodies</li> </ul>
Fifth classification of administrative positions in the supreme state bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- specialists of 2<sup>nd</sup>-category state bodies</li> <li>- heads of office of 3<sup>rd</sup>-category executive power bodies in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic</li> <li>- heads of division and their deputies of 3<sup>rd</sup>-category state bodies</li> <li>- heads of local division of 4<sup>th</sup>-category state bodies</li> </ul>

<p>Sixth classification of administrative positions in the supreme state bodies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- specialists of 3<sup>rd</sup>-category state bodies</li> <li>- head of division and deputies of relevant 4<sup>th</sup>-category executive power bodies</li> <li>- deputy heads of local divisions of 4<sup>th</sup>-category state bodies</li> <li>- heads and their deputies of the local divisions of state agencies and state services (5<sup>th</sup> category)</li> </ul>
<p>Seventh classification of administrative positions in the supreme state bodies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- specialists of relevant executive power bodies – state bodies of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> categories, local divisions of relevant executive power bodies, bodies being under and subordinated to relevant executive power bodies, regional (city) courts, bodies subordinated to relevant executive power bodies, local divisions of state agencies and state services established under relevant executive power bodies, bodies being under and subordinated to such state agencies and state services</li> <li>- heads, deputy heads, and specialists of the bodies under relevant executive power bodies</li> <li>- representatives, their deputies and specialists on administrative territorial areas of relevant executive power bodies</li> </ul>

# Chapter 16.

## Urban Tourism and a Culture Clash: Understanding Anti-Arab Tourist Sentiment in Baku

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Sahib Jafarov<sup>1</sup> (2018)

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Following the fall in the global oil price and the economic crisis in Azerbaijan in 2015, the government turned to tourism to fill the economic gap, loosening visa restrictions for some Arab countries and welcoming wealthy Arab investors into its tourism, business, and real estate markets. The capital city, Baku, and its leisure attractions have become popular among tourists from Arab countries. Although Arabs make up only 10 percent of all tourists visiting Azerbaijan, their numbers have increased dramatically in recent years, from around 9,000 in 2015 to nearly 260,000 in 2017.<sup>2</sup> The government well understands what appeals to these visitors and has done its best to cater to them, launching five-star hotels, shopping malls, leisure centers, restaurants, entertainment, and therapy centers across the city. However, it has expended less effort on mitigating the cultural impact of the phenomenon, namely the culture clash between Baku residents and Arab tourists.

Residents of Baku have largely responded negatively to this new tourist wave, expressing their dissatisfaction on social networks and in public spaces. The economic impact of this tourism is indeed marked by a lack of transparency in property and land sales to Arab buyers, which significantly drives up property prices, increasing inequality and decreasing inclusiveness in Baku's downtown and districts. Social concerns also include rising levels of prostitution; the growing prominence of and demand for the Arabic language in service sectors as well as in public announcements; and the encroachment of religious sectarianism, which threatens the religious balance in the country. A question

examining Baku residents' preferences for tourists from different regions found that the most favored tourists were Europeans (65 percent in favor), Turks (45.8 percent), and Russians (44.6 percent), while the view of Arab tourists was the most negative (91.5 percent against) (see below).

This paper explores the cultural and ideological similarities that might unify Arabs and Azerbaijanis, as well as the differences that produce rifts between them. To do so, it examines Baku residents' attitudes toward Arab tourists and businesses, as well as exploring their causal mechanisms and outcomes. In the final section, it makes policy suggestions for curbing tensions between the groups while fostering engagement that will allow Baku to succeed in its tourism branding. Failing to integrate essential elements of local identity into the plans for developing Baku as a tourist destination limits long-term development, social cohesion, equality, and the city's inclusive and sustainable development of services and infrastructure.

### Methods

Pizam and Milman describe tourism as a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon that has a significant impact on public and individual behaviors, moral systems, collective routines, traditions, ceremony habits, and institutional forms.<sup>3</sup> This process, however, does not just happen when tourists appear in a destination; it depends to some degree on the development of the tourism industry and "tourist-host

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<sup>2</sup> State Statistics Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, "Number of Arrived Tourists By Travel Agencies and Tour Operators By Countries," 2018, <https://www.stat.gov.az/source/tourism/> (accessed September 18, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Pizam and Ady Milman, "The Social Impacts of Tourism," *Industry and Environment* 7, no. 1 (1984): 11-14.

interactions.”<sup>4</sup> That is, the influence of tourism is not one-sided: both locals and tourists experience diverse influences through interaction. In the case of Baku, it can therefore be expected that both Arab tourists and locals will significantly change their culture and public behavior as this process continues.

Butler’s Tourist Area Life Cycle model (TALC) also helps to explain the effects of Arab tourism in Baku.<sup>5</sup> This model predicts that a rise in the number of Arab tourists will fundamentally alter the local community, forcing it to change development trajectories in order to accommodate an influx of tourism. The local community, economy, and infrastructure will become primary suppliers of accommodation, transportation, and other services to support the tourism industry rather than developing in accordance with the needs of residents.

In order to understand how interactions between tourists and locals affect the perceptions and attitudes of Baku’s population, I employ a three-fold method: content analysis of news media, a systematic random sampling survey, and in-depth interviews with Baku residents. I use Content Analysis (CA) to examine the discourse of online local and national news media in August and September 2018. In particular, I focus on discourse among public institutional and non-institutional actors regarding ethnic and religious values, mores, and perceptions. This allows me to draw inferences about Arab social and cultural influence (see Appendix 1). The advantage of the CA method is that it is less subjective than direct interviews and allows for the analysis of various aspects of narratives, facts, and texts associated with a given phenomenon.

Along with three other field researchers, I conducted a survey of 200 respondents in September 2018 in the Binagadi, Khatai, Nasimi, Khazar, Sabail, Nizami, Surakhani, Sabunchu, Yasamal, and Narimanov districts of Baku (see Appendix 4). The sampling method of the survey was systematic random sampling, where the

sampling interval was every 10,000<sup>th</sup> respondent as listed on the last election list (before the 2018 presidential election), with the selected starting point being the 20<sup>th</sup> person on the list. This method significantly diminishes the risk of sampling bias. The refusal rate was 30 percent. I used SPSS software to aggregate all variables by gender. The mean age was 35, with the oldest 83 and the youngest 18. Slightly more than half of the respondents were married, and nearly half of them had undertaken post-secondary education. The inferential statistical analysis tested how gender, age, and educational level influence people’s perceptions of Arab tourists. I employed an independent samples T-test, Pearson’s Chi-squared tests, and Pearson Correlation analyses in the testing hypothesis.

Last but not least, I conducted 20 pre-survey and post-survey in-depth interviews to help elucidate the reasons for social opposition to Arab tourists. These semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with residents of Baku in May and October 2018. The interviews consisted of 18 questions (see Appendix 2). A convenience sample of 6 women and 14 men was selected. This sampling method focused on people who regularly visit the downtown area, whether for work or because they own property there: Arab tourists tend to cluster downtown, meaning that people who spend a lot of time there feel the effects of Arab tourism most strongly. A drawback of this sampling method is that the results are non-generalizable and the demographics of people represented in the downtown area create a sampling bias (see Appendix 3).

### **The Tourism Sector in Numbers**

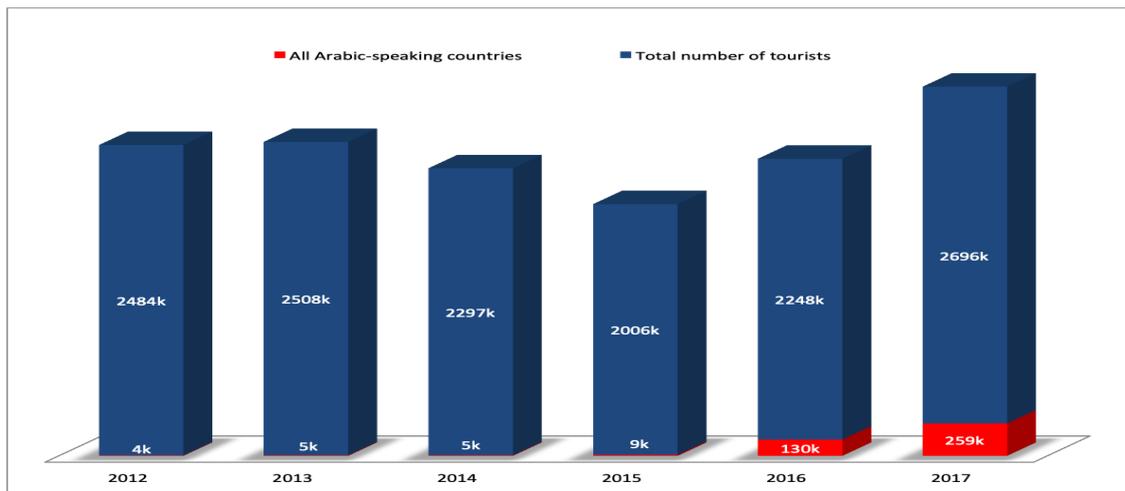
Since 2012, the number of tourists visiting Azerbaijan has been on a slow upward trajectory. According to the State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the overall number of tourists increased slightly from 2012 to 2017 (see Figure 1).

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Sharpley, *Tourism, Tourists and Society* (Huntingdon: ELM Publications, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> R.W. Butler, “The Concept of a Tourist Area Cycle of Evolution: Implications for Management of Resources,” *Canadian Geographer* 24, no. 1 (1980): 5-12.

Figure 1. Trends in international tourism: number of arrivals and Arab tourists as a share of the total

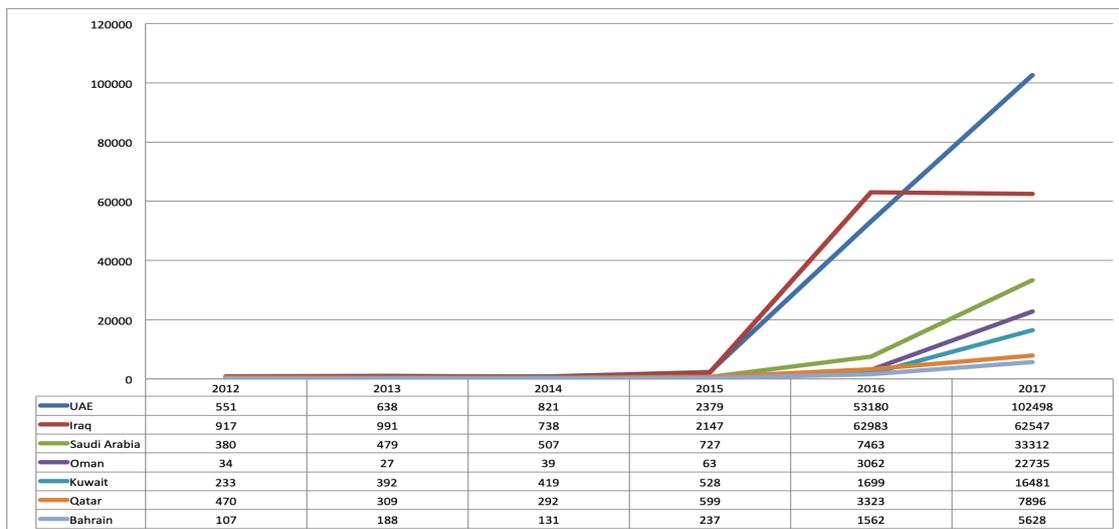


Source: Author's compilation based on State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan data (2018)

While this upward trend is modest overall, the proportion of tourists coming from Arabic countries has risen significantly. Whereas in 2015 tourists from Arabic-speaking countries

constituted 0.5 percent of all visitors (9,020 total), by 2017 their numbers had risen 28-fold, to 259,299, or 10 percent of the total number of visitors in that year.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 2. Number of tourists from select Arabic-speaking countries to visit Azerbaijan between 2012 and 2017



Source: Author's compilation based on State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan data (2018)

As Figure 2 shows, the vast majority of the increase in Arab tourism to Azerbaijan came from six countries: the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait. To take one example, 186 times more UAE citizens visited Azerbaijan in 2017 than in 2012. The share of tourists from other regions of the world did not

change anywhere near as dramatically in that period.<sup>7</sup>

### Understanding Media Trends and Perceptions of Arabs

As Arab tourists have flocked to Azerbaijan over the past three years, Azerbaijani media outlets

<sup>6</sup> State Statistics Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, "Number of Arrived Tourists."

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

have significantly misrepresented Arab identity, painting it as monolithic and failing to differentiate between linguistic dialects, religious doctrines, and other identity markers. Ridouani has argued that in international media outlets, Arabs' national identities are lost; "Arab" has become synonymous with a religious Islamic identity.<sup>8</sup> He goes on to explain that:

In the past, Arabs were recognized mainly by the media in the West as "erotic," "primitive," and "ignorant," among other many derogatory terms. Lately, the terms such as "terrorist", "fundamentalist" and "blood-thirsty" are the terms that are over-ascribed to the Arabs.

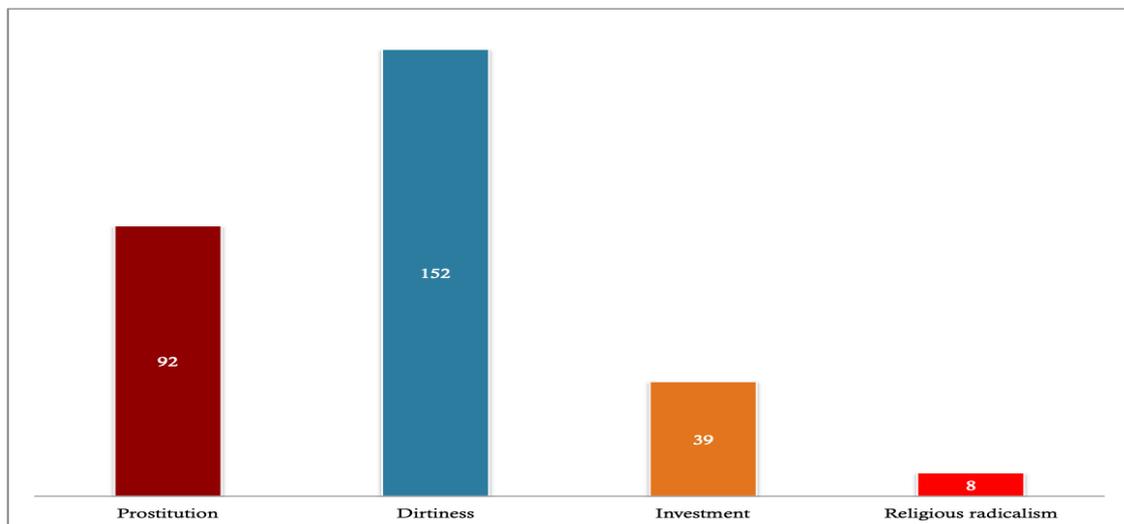
However, content analysis of local media in Baku finds that different stereotypes and conceptions of Arabs prevail in Azerbaijan. Instead of using the tropes of terrorism and fundamentalism, local media in Baku prefer to emphasize the predatory sexual practices of Arab tourists and characterize Arab men as "primeval" or "womanizers." The religious influence of Arab newcomers and tourists has thus far gone largely unaddressed in local media. Very few media organizations have echoed the discourse of a "terrorist threat" related to the increasing mobility of people from Arab countries. On the

contrary, experts who speak to the local media almost uniformly decline to describe Arab tourists as a terrorist threat.<sup>9</sup> Officials from the Caucasus Muslim Board and the State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan have, however, expressed some apprehensions:<sup>10</sup>

Some people who visit Azerbaijan as tourists stay here more than a week and assemble some people around them to promote their agidah actively...They pray in our mosques, disseminate their religious materials...and refuse to pray behind local imams during congregation (jamaat) praying.

Despite the official's concerns about the religious aspect of Arab tourism, media outlets generally do not present Arab people as a source of fundamentalism, terrorism, or radicalization. Furthermore, despite a sudden increase in the number of Arabs in Baku, local media have not presented Arabs as a threat to the city's ethnic balance. Instead, the prevailing trend is to describe Arabs as bringing with them a public culture that differs significantly from local norms. Figure 3 illustrates the leading discursive trends in local media.

**Figure 3. Discursive framings of Arabs in local media, by frequency of use**



*Source: Author's compilation based on online media sources*

<sup>8</sup> Driss Ridouani, "The Representation of Arabs and Muslims in Western Media," RUTA Communication 3 (2011): 1-15.

<sup>9</sup> A. Rais, "Bakiya gəlen ərəblər terror təhlükəsi yarada bilərmi?" Azinform, 2016, <https://azinform.az/gundəm/bakiya-gəlen-ərəblər-terror-təhlükəsi-yarada-bilərmimi/> (accessed August 15, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> "Bakiya niyə belə çox ərəb turistlər gəlir?" Azadlıq Radiosu, September 29, 2017, <https://www.azadliq.org/a/ereb-turistler-namaz/28763723.html> (accessed September 1, 2018)

My content analysis revealed that “dirtiness,” “prostitution,” and “investment” are crucial media catchphrases linked to Arab tourism. In my sample, approximately 300 articles (many of them republished) use these words to describe the behavioral discrepancy between Baku residents and Arabs.<sup>11</sup>

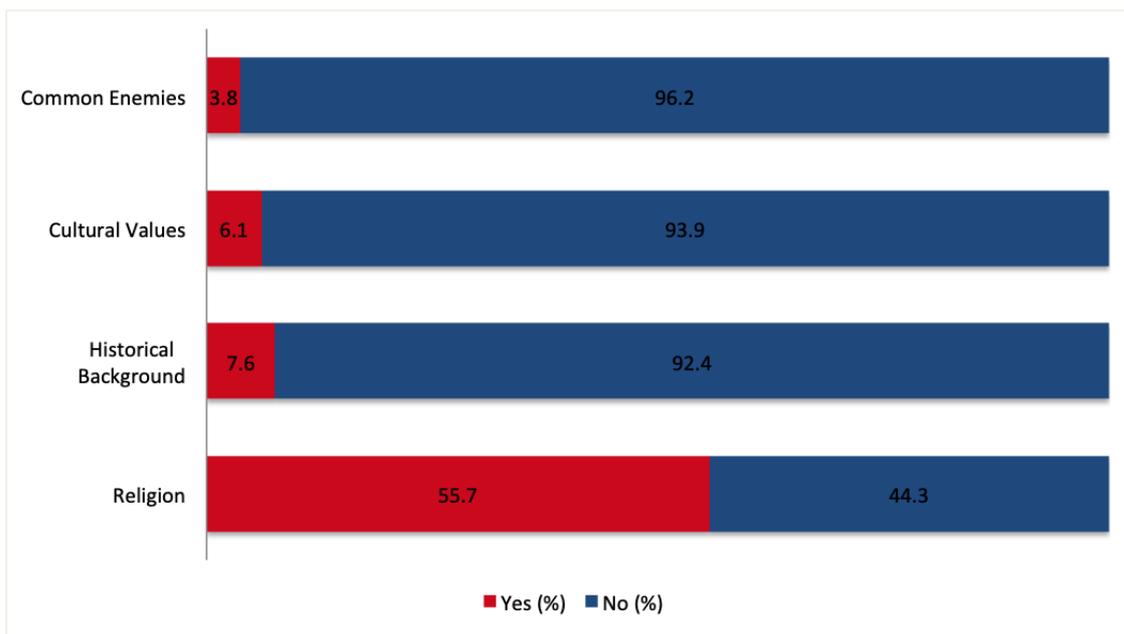
### Baku’s Residents’ Perceptions of Arabs: The Religious and Ethnic Prism

Although Arab tourists in Azerbaijan are not directly associated with religious influence,

religion is perceived as the only symbolic factor that may potentially unite residents of Baku with Arab tourists. In the survey, respondents were asked to find common ground between Arabs and locals. The survey revealed that 55.7 percent of respondents perceive religion to be the principal value shared by locals and Arab visitors. This was also borne out in interviews:

At least religion is worth mentioning as the only common ground that we share with Arab people. I cannot observe any other element that bridges us (Int. 9).

Figure 4. Could you define the common ground between residents and Arab tourists?



Source: Author’s survey

The T-test illustrates that the sense of sharing religious values is common to all age groups. However, gender does appear to have some influence. According to Pearson’s Chi-squared test, men are less likely than women to believe that Azerbaijanis and Arabs share religious values (p-value 0.023, 95 percent confidence level). The magnitude of difference is 15.3 percent, with 2 degrees of freedom. The Chi-squared test (X<sup>2</sup>) also indicates that there is some correlation between an individual’s educational attainment and his or her sense of having common religious values with Arabs (p-value = 0.041). People who have higher

education think that they have some level of common religious values with Arabs. The lower an individual’s educational level, meanwhile, the lower his or her perception of shared religious values with Arab tourists.

Some interviewees suggested that these perceptions of religious similarity with Arabs are rooted in history. Int. 8 explained:

Thinking about cultural similarities, I can only mention religion—Islam—because Azerbaijan was occupied by the Arabs historically and Islam was literally brought to our lands by them. I believe religion is the most important

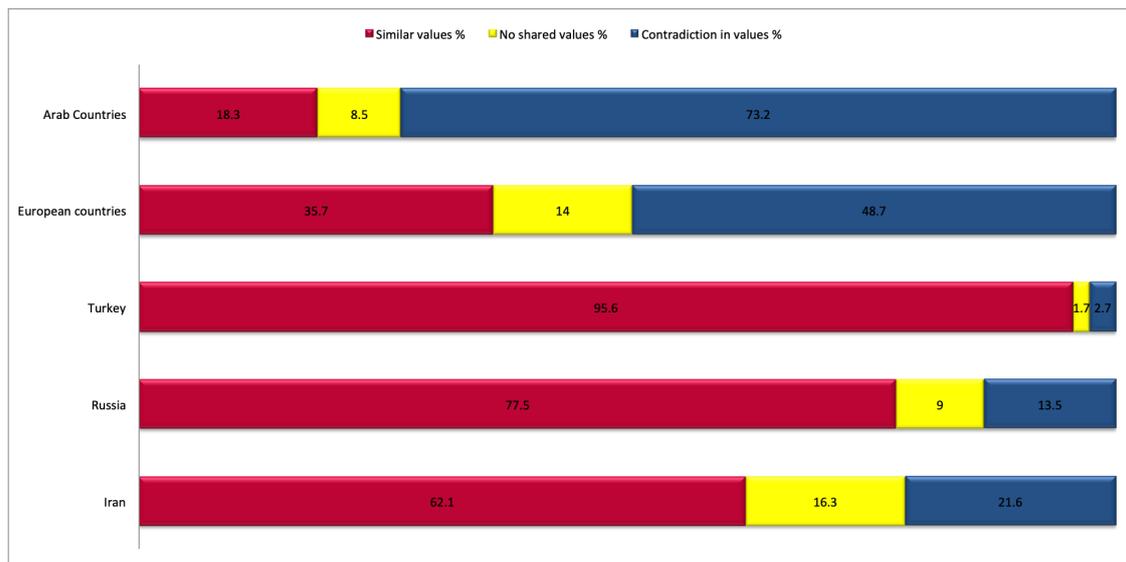
<sup>11</sup> “Ərəblər Azərbaycana bizim qızlara görə gəlir” — Qara Qura,” YouTube video, 11:46, posted by “Kanal13.az,” August 7, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYovJsX--lc&t=422s> (accessed September 3, 2018).

unifying factor between them and us. Perhaps Arab people are eager to visit Azerbaijan because of religious similarity, as they do not experience radical reactions to their religious identity...which happens [if they visit] Christian-majority communities.

Returning to the survey, the Pearson Correlation indicates that the association between religion and cultural values may be relatively weak among respondents in Baku, but it is still

statistically significant (-0.177\*\* and p-value=0.001). The survey results about shared moral and cultural values with visitors reveal different attitudes toward tourists from different regions. Residents of Baku consider that they share more moral and cultural values with tourists from neighboring countries such as Russia, Iran, and Turkey than they do with those from European and Arab countries (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Level of perceived shared cultural/moral values with tourists from different countries/regions



Source: Author's survey

Interviews help us elaborate on the reason for these attitudes, pointing to a shared recent history, ethnic similarity, and sectarian ties. Although Turkish people have the same religious affiliation (Sunni) as Arabs, residents of Baku emphasize the importance of the shared ethnic background (Turkic) over religious attachment. In the case of Russians, who share neither ethnic nor religious background with Azerbaijanis, the focus is on a shared Soviet history. Meanwhile, Iranian tourists, who are mainly ethnic Azerbaijanis living in Iran, enjoy a strong shared ethnic identity and some religious sectarian (Shia) association. Int. 20 emphasized the high number of Azerbaijani Iranians as central to attitudes toward these tourists:

There are 35 million Azerbaijanis in Iran, which puts Iranians in a unique position. I do not feel right calling them tourists. Also, Iranian

Azerbaijanis are Shias as we are. That makes us feel extra close to them in comparison to Arabs.

Analysis of local media discourse reveals a similar approach to Iranians. The promotion of ethnic and cultural similarity with Iranians and the positive attitude toward them as tourists is the dominant trend in media articles. One online source explained:<sup>12</sup>

The shared historical and cultural values (Novruz Holiday, language, religion/sect, and ethnicity) of Azerbaijanis and Iranians and their geographical closeness stimulate Iranians to visit Azerbaijan.

This analysis reveals that religion is far from being the only determining factor of a positive or negative reaction. A number of other factors related to history and ethnic links contribute to positive views of some "others."

<sup>12</sup> U. Ali, "Nazirlik: İrandan Azərbaycana turist sayı dəfələrlə artıb," Oxu.az, June 26, 2017, <https://oxu.az/economy/137241> (accessed September 2, 2018).

It is worth considering how respondents reacted to sectarian—Sunni vs. Shia—differences between locals and Arabs. When survey respondents were asked how they felt sectarian differences affected relationships and communication between Arabs and locals, 65 percent of respondents indicated that such differences were not necessarily an obstacle to establishing relations with Arabs, in comparison to 15.6 percent of respondents who said they did make a difference. A further 19.4 percent said that they were indifferent toward sectarian differences. Int. 3 clearly explained why sectarian differences are not a deal-breaker for people in Baku:

Now modern Azerbaijani people can understand what the fundamentals of the Sunni and Shia struggle were. The war happened as a result of the Western imperial interests to “divide and rule politics,” which aimed to fragment Muslim civilization. So for me—and, I believe, for others like me—it does not matter whether they are Sunni or Shia. It is not a hot topic anymore.

In an effort to further investigate this topic, we asked residents about their attitudes toward Arabs’ selection of their own imams for congregation prayers. We found that 57.8 percent of respondents had negative feelings about this, compared to 19 percent who saw it positively. The reasons for this negativity about Arabs’ refusal to pray with local imams were clarified during in-depth interviews. Int. 16 emphasized:

If Arabs refuse to pray with local imams, my reaction is negative, because it is a kind of discrimination against other Muslims. There is no need to set yourself apart from others. We have the same religion and sharia for everybody.

Even though there are some differences between the Sunni and Shia schools in terms of their interpretations of Islamic scripture, respondents generally did not see a disparity between the two tarigats. However, the Azerbaijani government and Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) officials see it differently, as reported in the local media. Deputy leader of the CMB Salman Musayev stressed, for instance, that:<sup>13</sup>

Arab tourists promote their religious ideology in our mosques. That could be very

hazardous for our community. If we fail to take preventive measures, people will suffer.

The deputy head of the State Committee on Religious Associations, Gunduz Ismayilov, has likewise expressed his disapprobation in the media:<sup>14</sup>

According to the information given to our Committee, Arab tourists try to conduct congregation prayer without local imams appointed by CMB [the Caucasus Muslim Board], which is prohibited by law and unacceptable to us.

Despite the government’s concern, sects are not considered by Baku’s residents to be a fundamental threat to religious harmony in the city today. The survey results also highlight that 88.3 percent of respondents do not perceive Arabs to be a hazard to their religious identity.

But another set of questions—looking at attitudes toward intermarriage between Arabs and Azerbaijanis—revealed the prevalence of stereotypes about Arabs. Among survey respondents, 98.3 percent responded negatively to the prospect of intermarriage with Arabs. This negativity stems mainly from the perception that Arabs practice polygamy, which discourages local women from intermarrying. Sharia law allows a man to have up to four wives, but this contradicts Azerbaijani secular and legal views on marriage, which dictate that monogamy is the only acceptable family structure. As Int. 18 put it:

I would not be fond of marrying an Arab. I would never agree to be a third or fourth wife of anybody.

Symptomatically, none of my female interview respondents reacted positively to the prospect of marrying an Arab. This stereotype was also borne out in online media: Mehriban Zeynalova, the head of an NGO called “Temiz Dunya,” told modern.az that:<sup>15</sup>

The one specific feature of Arab family structure is polygamy; only old, widowed Azerbaijani women or economically poor ones would agree to marry them....

Along similar lines, local women perceive Arabs as a threat to their secular lifestyle, since female Arab tourists wear very strict religious dress that conflicts with Baku secular urban

<sup>13</sup> “Qafqaz Müsəlmanları İdarəsi ərəb turistlərin nəzarətə alınmasını istəyir,” Azadliq.info, September 29, 2017, <https://www.azadliq.info/203287.html> (accessed August 24, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> G. Raufqizi, “Ərəblər azərbaycanlı qızlarla nikaha girirlər,” Modern.az, September 2, 2016, <http://modern.az/az/news/110654#gsc.tab=0> (accessed August 26, 2018).

culture. In general, Azerbaijanis are not considered to be as devout as Arabs in their practice of Islam. The majority of them do not practice namaz (prayers) during the day, treat women in a more equal way, and do not abstain from alcohol as textual Islam requires.

Another aspect of Azerbaijanis' reluctance to marry Arabs is their different ethnic backgrounds. Int. 8 explained:

Overall, I am not positive about marrying somebody from another ethnicity. It does not matter whether they are Arabs or anyone else. I am against mixing kinship, which results in future generations losing their ethnic identity.

Mehriban Zeynalova touched on similar themes in her interview with modern.az:<sup>16</sup>

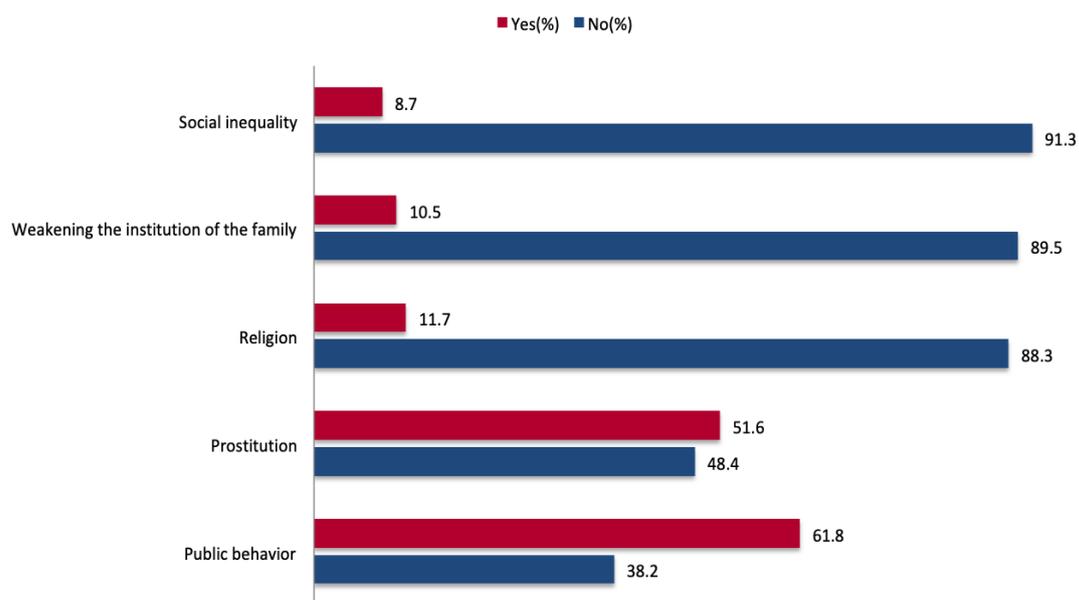
I am not against mixed marriage, but we have to think: what kind of citizens will appear after some years?

All in all, religious requirements and the fear of ethnic identity loss discourage locals from marrying Arabs.

### Baku Residents' Perceptions of Arabs: The Urban Behavioral Culture Prism

If religious and ethnic differences are not seen as significant issues for Baku residents, what is the basis for their negative reaction toward Arab tourists? My survey reveals that this stems from a perceived difference in urban cultural habits. The survey underlines, for instance, that 61.8 percent of respondents were concerned about Arabs' behavior disturbing public order. A significant proportion of media outlets and interviewees likewise cited Arabs' public behavior and their role in rising prostitution as the principal concern surrounding Arab tourists' presence in Baku (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Problems discursively associated with Arab tourists<sup>17</sup>



The in-depth interviews confirmed this perception of a gap in public behavior. Int. 4 explained:

We have some cultural differences with Arabs. Their behavior is different from locals'. We do not throw rubbish everywhere in the city center, but they do.

Said Int. 10:

There could be some cultural similarities, but it is hard for me to define any. However, I can easily count a couple of differences, like public behavior or tidiness in the streets. We know how to behave properly...

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Confidence interval is 95 percent, alpha level set at 0.05 and corresponding Z score is ±1.96. Sample size is 200. The interval estimate of population proportion is ±5 percent.

The perception of Arabs' lack of cleanliness in the downtown area, the most prestigious and historical part of the city, is a pivotal point of contention, fostering negativity on the part of the media and locals. Int. 17 compared the behavior of European tourists to that of their Arab counterparts:

European tourists usually behave and express their respect for our historic heritage. For example, when they visit Maiden Tower, they try to follow the rules and respect every single piece of art there. Arabs, meanwhile, leave rubbish there or scratch the historical stones with their initials.

Even though the notion of shehada (a martyr for religion, God, or the country) is considered to be a sacred symbol of Islam, people negatively assessed Arabs' behavior at Martyrs' Alley:

I have met Arabs at Martyrs' Alley. They acted up in there. They were laughing and shouting at each other and also showed other disrespect to our martyrs, which irritated me. They could at least copy other visitors' [behavior] during their stay in the Alley (Int. 13).

The perception that Arabs lack cleanliness and engage in unacceptable public behavior is the one negative aspect of Arab tourism that has been extensively and intensively presented in local media, even prompting a discussion in parliament. In that discussion, MP Araz Alizadeh indicated that:<sup>18</sup>

Arabs misbehave wherever they go. They are filthy and cannot control themselves in the streets, restaurants, and hotels.

According to the survey, the rise in prostitution in Baku is also associated with Arab tourists' arrival in the downtown area. The Pearson Correlation analysis of the results revealed that there is no statistically significant ( $p$ -value = 0.201, 95 percent confidence level) disparity between men and women in terms of their attitudes toward the prostitution problem: both genders point to the alleged role of Arabs in encouraging prostitution in the city. Int. 18 underlined that this is a new trend:

If prostitution was present in Baku [before Arab tourism], at least it was hidden. Now it has become easily accessible, since the Arabs have increased demand for it.

*Int. 7 expressed his concern:*

It is getting challenging to go downtown with your spouse or girlfriend. Six out of ten people there are Arabs and they feel no shame at approaching ladies on the street or calling out "habibi." That annoys me a lot.

A significant share of local media articles (152 out of 300) were devoted to this problem. One local media article explicated:<sup>19</sup>

I used to see this kind of thing abroad, but now I see the same in Baku. I was deeply shocked when I was in "Torqoviy" (downtown) yesterday. I witnessed an Arab man negotiating with a girl to have sex in a hotel for 100 euro.

Although residents link the arrival of Arabs in Baku to the rise of prostitution (see Figure 6), a sizable minority (48.4 percent) indicate that this rise is due not only to increasing demand from tourists, but also to social and economic problems, which create the background conditions for women's openness to this illegal way of earning money. Int. 1 commented:

The upsurge in prostitution is not directly correlated with the arrival of Arabs. The social and economic decline in residents' quality of life has had a negative impact on it, especially since the decline in the oil price and the devaluation of the manat in 2015. It does not matter if it is an Arab tourist or anybody else, if an individual cannot afford to buy essential things for a family and cannot find a relevant job, then the situation forces them to sell their body for some money.

However, media outlets are less likely to consider local economic factors, laying the blame squarely at the feet of Arab tourists. In one article, a journalist quoted a taxi driver as saying:<sup>20</sup> Since Arab [tourist] flows to Baku, most of the prostitutes are inclined to have sex with them, as they are more generous than any other [men]. I never knew where nightclubs, massage parlors, or

<sup>18</sup> A. Zahra, "Ərəblər çox pıncidirlər, özlərini apara bilmirlər" —Deputat," AzVision, August 3, 2017, <https://azvision.az/news/123160-erebler-cox-pincidirlər,-ozlərini-apara-bilmirlər--deputat.html> (accessed October 16, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> "Tarqoviy'da RƏZALƏT—Ərəb turistlər azərbaycanlı bar qızları ilə," Milli.az, September 3, 2016, <https://news.milli.az/country/466446.html> (accessed August 23, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> "Fahişəliyin leqallaşdırılması yenidən gündəmə gəldi," Sputnik.az, December 9, 2016, <https://sputnik.az/life/20161209/408027729/yungul-exlaqli-qadin-qiymet.html> (accessed October 28, 2018).

relaxation centers were in this city before Arabs' appearance here.

Symptomatically, my research did not find any articles linking social problems and prostitution. Instead, various opinion polls run in the media showed that respondents considered Arab men the main drivers of prostitution in Baku. Although prostitution is illegal in Azerbaijan, there are now more than five escort websites with phone numbers of prostitutes, a virtually unknown phenomenon before 2016.<sup>21</sup>

### **Baku Residents' Perception of Arab Tourists: The Economic Prism**

The government's recent policy of attracting Arab tourists to the country was designed to improve Azerbaijan's financial stability and reduce the economic impact of the decline in the oil price. It is therefore worth examining how economic factors have increased loyalty to Arabs despite their negative urban behavior, the rise in prostitution, and religious sectarian and ethnic differences.

The survey highlights that the vast majority of residents (93 percent) are not in favor of having business relations with Arabs. That being said, in-depth interviews reveal that for residents, the financial benefits of such interactions far outweigh the detrimental effect of ethnic, religious, and behavioral disparities between locals and Arabs. Int. 15 stated, for instance, that:

Although I do not like these people as a Muslim and a human being, I would incorporate a business with them for my commercial interests if that person invested in my business.

*Int. 4 asked:*

If there is a benefit, why not? Arabs are financially wealthy, and that is necessary for any commercial activity, but they are a bit unsystematic in some ways, as I have seen in my experience with them.

Some interviewees indicated that they would prefer to go into business with religiously devout Arabs than with secular Arabs. They suggested that Islam might prevent Arabs from engaging in misconduct in their business dealings.

However, the survey indicated that only 15.5 percent of respondents take this view. A further 11.1 percent of surveyed residents would prefer to have secular Arabs as their business partners, while the vast majority (73.3 percent) do not care whether Arabs are secular or religious as long as they have financial means. It should also be noted that respondents generally agreed that they would rather establish a business partnership with Europeans or Russians than with Arabs.

Another measure of willingness to do business with Arabs was property ownership and selling property to Arabs. Some interviewees shared that they would never sell property to Arabs, no matter the individual buyer's personality or devoutness. However, the vast majority of respondents said that they would sell to whoever was prepared to pay the most, regardless of ethnic or religious background. While interviewees may take an unfavorable view of Arabs' presence in Baku, they are willing to sell property to Arabs if they will pay more for it than locals would. Among my interviewees, only one indicated an unwillingness to sell to Arabs at any price.

The in-depth interviews confirmed that although residents are in favor of attracting Arab counterparts to their entrepreneurship activities, they harbor some concerns regarding Arabs' increasing participation in the economy and the business community. First and foremost, Arabs' spending habits drive up Baku prices for locals. Interviewees indicated that since Arabs began to show an interest in becoming property owners, the prices of houses and apartments in the historic downtown and surrounding areas have shot up.

*According to Int. 14:*

The property prices in Baku keep going up because of Arabs, and this factor affects the purchasing ability of locals. Soon, Baku residents will be the tenants of Arab landlords.

Another concern is that the rise in Arab tourism causes locals to be treated as second-class citizens by service providers such as restaurants, taxis, hotels, and shopping centers. Because Arab tourists are not as restricted in their spending as locals are, the service sector caters to their

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<sup>21</sup> "Bakıda ərəb turistlərə qız çağırmaq üçün yeni eskort xidmətləri açıldı: 'Bir zəngə iki qız qapıya gəlir' (FOTOFAKT)," *Azxeber.com*, March 14, 2017, <http://azxeber.com/az/bakida-ereb-turislere-qiz-cairmaq-ucu-yeni-eskort-agentlikleri-ise-basladi-bir-zenge-iki-qiz-qapiya-gelir-arasdirma-fotolar/> (accessed September 5, 2018).

demands rather than to those of local customers. In downtown Baku, many restaurants have menus and labels in Arabic and Azerbaijani, although this is against current law.

In sum, economic factors encourage people to go into business with Arabs, while cultural, religious, and ethnic factors discourage them from doing so. However, given Azerbaijan's current financial situation, economic factors tend to win out.

## Conclusion

Arab tourism has increased 28-fold in the past three years, and this number is expected to continue to rise. However, Arab tourism in Baku is not without side-effects on residents' perception of these newcomers. Islam is the only common ground between locals and Arabs, but the Soviet past and secular lifestyle of Baku residents curtail the potentially unifying power of religion. Locals do not tolerate the idea of Arabs leading prayers and other religious rituals; they view Arabs' demand for Arab imams as discriminating against locals. That being said, religion is not seen as a crucial factor in relationships between Arabs and Baku residents. Notably, local media also does not paint the religious component of Arab tourism as a source of anti-Arab sentiment. Ethnic differences are apprehended as an obstacle to intermarriage, but not to every form of interaction. Instead, the most disputed component of the Arab presence in Baku is their public behavior, which is considered incompatible with local cultural norms. Arab public behavior is associated with untidiness and a lack of respect toward local history. Yet economic considerations help mediate negative views of Arabs.

All in all, the influx of Arabs is having multifaceted effects on Baku. If the city follows the TALC model, despite its initial adverse reaction to Arab tourists, the community will eventually adapt and modify its attitude.

## Recommendations

The issue of Arab tourism in Baku requires governmental and parliamentary engagement. The Ministries of Culture, Economy, and Internal Affairs, as well as the State Tourism Agency, should actively participate in this process wherever their

administrative support is necessary. I recommend the following activities in order to improve Baku residents' perception of Arab tourists and increase the benefits of tourism to the population of Azerbaijan at large:

- The tourism sector should be developed not only in Baku but in the country's other regions in order to allow Azerbaijani citizens to benefit more inclusively from the tourism industry. There is a need for vocational education in the tourism sector in regions outside Baku.
- The government should stimulate investors, including Arab investors, to develop their businesses in various regions of the country, where there are recreational capacities not found in the city.
- The government should provide tax incentives to rent land in other regions of the country. This process will enhance national economic development and reduce the congestion of Arabs in Baku, thus limiting the culture clash and increasing acceptance of newcomers.
- The criminal law regarding prostitution should be amended to fine those who solicit sex. This policy will protect Azerbaijani locals from sexual harassment.
- An "Arab cultural week"—or specific events for different Arabic-speaking countries—should be organized in Azerbaijan in order to enhance cultural awareness of Arab culture.
- The Azerbaijani government should ease the visa procedure for developed countries in the European Union and beyond in order to balance the effects of urban tourism in Baku. If tourism from other countries increases, this will smooth the problems perceived to be created by Arab tourism.
- The media should engage in building cultural bonds between locals and Arabs. It currently behaves very negatively toward Arabs and taints the local perception of Arabs through the dissemination of hate speech and audio-visual materials; this role should be revised and used to build cultural awareness. The following activities could be carried out:
  - Preparing TV and radio programs to raise public awareness, which will improve dialogue about the cultural and sociological background of tourists;

- Taking a stance against all forms of xenophobia in media broadcasts about Arabs in order to change the current negative public perception of them.

### **Appendix 1. List of online media sources used in content analysis**

- [www.azinform.az](http://www.azinform.az)
- [www.azadliq.org](http://www.azadliq.org)
- [www.oxu.az](http://www.oxu.az)
- [www.azadlig.info](http://www.azadlig.info)
- [www.modern.az](http://www.modern.az)
- [www.azvision.az](http://www.azvision.az)
- [www.milli.az](http://www.milli.az)
- [www.sputnik.az](http://www.sputnik.az)
- [www.azxeber.az](http://www.azxeber.az)
- [www.trend.az](http://www.trend.az)
- [www.bbc.com/azeri](http://www.bbc.com/azeri)
- [www.daytube.az](http://www.daytube.az)
- [www.xezerxeber.az](http://www.xezerxeber.az)
- [www.atv.az](http://www.atv.az)
- [www.axar.az](http://www.axar.az)
- [www.aznews.az](http://www.aznews.az)
- [www.olaylar.az](http://www.olaylar.az)
- [www.sonxeber.az](http://www.sonxeber.az)
- [www.virtualaz.org](http://www.virtualaz.org)
- [www.istipress.com](http://www.istipress.com)

## Appendix 2. Interview questions for residents

- How often and where do you meet with Arab tourists?
- Have you ever heard of Arabs buying property in Baku? Are there any positive or negative features of Arabs' engagement in the property market?
- If a local and an Arab offered the same price for your property, which one you would prefer? If an Arab paid slightly more?
- Would you like to have an Arab business partner? Why? Would you prefer a devout Arab or a secular one?
- Would you prefer a European business partner to an Arab? Why?
- Are there cultural or moral similarities and differences between Arabs and locals?
- How would you react if you had an Arab neighbor? Why?
- Do you think that sectarian differences between you and Arabs might affect your attitude toward Arabs?
- How would you react if Arabs in Baku refused to pray with local imams during congregation praying?
- Would you prefer to have family relations with Arabs, like marrying an Arab man/woman? Why or why not? How would ethnic and religious factors influence your decision?
- How does your attitude toward Arabs from different regions of the world vary?

## Appendix 3. Demographic indicators of interviewees

ID	Age	Gender	Residency
Interviewee 1	55	Male	Nizami
Interviewee 2	18	Male	Nizami
Interviewee 3	50	Male	Nasimi
Interviewee 4	32	Male	Sabail
Interviewee 5	20	Female	Surakhani
Interviewee 6	28	Female	Surakhani
Interviewee 7	29	Male	Surakhani
Interviewee 8	22	Male	Yasamal
Interviewee 9	19	Male	Sabunchu
Interviewee 10	19	Female	Yasamal
Interviewee 11	20	Male	Narimanov
Interviewee 12	23	Male	Binagadi
Interviewee 13	23	Female	Binagadi
Interviewee 14	23	Male	Binagadi
Interviewee 15	21	Male	Yasamal
Interviewee 16	22	Male	Yasamal
Interviewee 17	36	Male	Sabail
Interviewee 18	22	Female	Binagadi
Interviewee 19	22	Male	Sabail
Interviewee 20	33	Female	Nizami

## Appendix 4. Survey Questionnaire

Good day, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ (interviewer name). I am conducting a sociological survey in different regions of Baku to study the impacts of Arab tourism. I ask you to participate in this survey. Your honest responses will help analyze the contemporary situation of tourism in Azerbaijan. Survey materials will be used in generalized terms, so your first name and last name will not be written anywhere and full confidentiality will be ensured.

Questionnaire code:  Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Region \_\_\_\_\_ Respondent: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of place \_\_\_\_\_ Interview date: \_\_\_\_\_  
day month year

1. **What is your attitude toward tourist flow to our country in recent years?** Please, evaluate on a 5-point scale (from 1- negative to 5 - positive).

<i>I do not like it</i>	<i>It does not matter</i>	<i>I like it</i>
1	2	3
4	5	5

2. **Which countries would you prefer for the largest share of tourists to come from?**
- |                            |                       |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| a. European countries      | e. Turkey             |
| b. Arab countries          | f. Russia and the CIS |
| c. Central Asian countries | g. Other _____        |
| d. Iran                    |                       |

3. **How do you think incoming tourists influence local traditions and values?** (from 1- negative to 5 - positive)

<i>I think negative</i>	<i>I do not know</i>	<i>Positive</i>
1	2	3
4	5	5

4. **You would feel disturbed if tourists from which region settled in your neighborhood?**

- |                       |                            |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| a. European countries | c. Central Asian countries |
| b. Arab countries     | d. Iran                    |
| e. Turkey             | h. None of them            |
| f. Russia and the CIS | i. Other _____             |
| g. All                |                            |

5. **With persons from which region would you prefer to engage in business relations?**

- |                            |                    |
|----------------------------|--------------------|
| a. European countries      | d. Iran            |
| b. Arab countries          | e. Does not matter |
| c. Central Asian countries | f. None of them    |
| g. Turkey                  | i. Other _____     |
| h. Russia and the CIS      |                    |

6. **How do you evaluate the flow of Arab tourists to our country on a 5-point scale?** (from 1- negative to 5 - positive)

<i>I do not like it</i>	<i>It does not matter</i>	<i>I like it</i>
1	2	3
4	5	5

7. **What kind of problems does the flow of Arab tourists to our country create?**

*(multiple responses can be selected)*

- a. Instability in religious matters
- b. Disturbance in public behavior rules
- c. Creation of social inequality among local population
- d. Weakening of family institution
- e. Other \_\_\_\_\_

8. **Do you think that you share religious values with Arab tourists?** *(from 1- negative to 5 - positive)*

<i>I think</i>		Maybe		<i>I do not think</i>
1	2	3	4	5

9. **Can you evaluate the public behavior of Arab tourists on a 5-point scale?** *(from 1- negative to 5 - positive)*

<i>I do not like it</i>		<i>I do not know</i>		<i>I like it</i>
1	2	3	4	5

10. **To your mind, what points of commonality does the local population have with Arab tourists?** *(several points can be selected)*

- a. Common religious values
- b. Common historical background
- c. Moral commonalities
- d. Politically common targets
- e. Other \_\_\_\_\_

11. **Can sectarian differences with Arabs create obstacles in communication?** *(from 1- I think to 5 - I do not think)*

<i>I think</i>		<i>It does not matter</i>		<i>I do not think</i>
1	2	3	4	5

12. **How would you react if Arab tourists refused to pray with local imams?**

<i>I would not react positively</i>		<i>It does not matter</i>		<i>I would treat it as normal</i>
1	2	3	4	5

13. **From the list below, with persons from which regions would you react positively to forging marriage ties?**

- a. European countries
- b. Arab countries
- c. Central Asian countries
- d. Iran
- e. Turkey
- f. Russia and the CIS
- g. None of them
- h. It does not matter
- i. Other \_\_\_\_\_

14. **How would you rank the tourists listed below with regard to sharing the same moral values?** (from 1 – close to 8 – far)

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	European countries	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
2	Arab countries	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
3	Turkey	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
4	Russia	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
5	CIS countries	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
6	Central Asian countries	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
7	Iran	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
8	Other_____	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

15. **Sex of respondent:**

- a. Female b. Male

16. **Age: .....age**

- a. 18-29 age group; d. 46-55 age group;  
 b. 30-35 age group; e. 56-65 age group;  
 c. 36-45 age group; f. 66 and above

17. **Marital status:**

- a. Single d. Widowed  
 b. Married e. Refuse to answer  
 c. Divorced

18. **Nationality?**

- a. Azerbaijan f. Tat  
 b. Tatar g. Avar  
 c. Jew h. Talish  
 d. Russian i. Other  
 e. Lazgin

19. **Education level?**

- a. I did not have any education e. Vocational education (special secondary)  
 b. Elementary level f. Incomplete higher  
 c. Incomplete secondary g. Higher  
 d. Secondary h. Scholar

20. **Main occupation?**

- a. Qualified professional (engineer, teacher, doctor, lawyer, computer programmer)  
 b. Entrepreneur  
 c. Middle or lower-level worker (secretary, nurse, etc.)  
 d. Engaged in household production/housewife  
 e. Worker  
 f. Unemployed retiree  
 g. Military or police officer  
 h. Individual activities  
 i. Farmer  
 j. Student  
 k. Unemployed  
 l. Other (define)\_\_\_\_\_