
Civic Engagement and Democratic Consolidation in Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract: Two political geographers survey Kyrgyzstan's increasingly less democratic trajectory over the 12 years since independence in 1991, despite initial promises of fair government, open media, and a liberal economy accessible to all groups within the country. Although Kyrgyzstan is increasingly racked by poverty as well as regional, ethnic, and religious rivalries, the paper demonstrates that the country has some of the most active and dynamic social movements in Central Asia. The authors examine the level and type of non-governmental organizations as an index of civic engagement, one of the foundations of sustainable democracy. Their survey of NGO activists revealed a group that strongly supported democratic norms but also revealed significant distrust of many governmental institutions. *Journal of Economic Literature*, Classification Numbers: D63, H10, Z13. 2 figures, 12 tables, 90 references.

The wave of democratization from about 1975 to the early 1990s swept across more than two dozen countries on the Eurasian continent, removing Communist regimes from power. The events of the past decade, however, have shown that democratic transition is not a linear and smooth process, and the initial establishment of democracy does not guarantee its success over the long term. For many of the new democracies, the process of transition is proving too challenging, as the democratization wave has given way to stagnation and even reversal, producing authoritarian or pseudo-democratic regimes especially in Central Asian states (Zakaria, 1997, 2003).

Definitions of democracy vary greatly (O'Loughlin et al., 1998), but for the purpose of this study we follow Dahl's equation of democracy with polyarchy, the rule by many but not by all the people. It is a representative system with an inclusive adult electorate. Dahl (1971) identified eight key institutional elements that underlie such a system: freedom to form and join associations, freedom of expression, right to vote in elections, eligibility for public office, right of political leaders to compete for support/votes, alternative sources of information, free and fair elections, and dependence of government policy-making institutions on votes and other expressions of preference. These elements represent three main democratic dimensions—participation, competition, and political and civil liberties (Sorensen, 1993). Consolidation requires that the eight key democratic elements become ingrained in the political culture of a society. For consolidation, the role of civil society is paramount. Civil society, a sphere of voluntary associations situated between the state and the market, can

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serve as a promoter of democratic values, providing models of active citizenship, and tempering the power of the state.

In this paper, we examine the role of civil society, particularly the informal NGO sector, in facilitating the consolidation of democratic institutions in Kyrgyzstan. Post-Communist studies of democratic consolidation are concentrated in the countries of Eastern Europe and the European parts of the former Soviet Union, primarily Russia and Ukraine. Relatively few studies have touched on the prospects of development of civil society in Central Asia, a region that shared a totalitarian legacy with other former Communist countries but, at the same time, developed unique socio-political features that distinguish the region. Having neither independence or distinct national identity prior to Soviet rule, Central Asia's other great post-independence challenge is state and nation building. The social structure of Central Asian societies still revolves around loyalty to kinship networks, including clans and tribes, which inevitably figures in the distribution of political power. Apart from these commonalities, the five Central Asian states vary in political regime type, the speed and degree of economic reforms, and the emergence of elements of civil society (Lambert, 2003). Kyrgyzstan presents an interesting case. Of the Central Asian republics, it had achieved the greatest political liberalization by the mid-1990s, but recent years have seen a reversal toward authoritarianism in the second and third terms of President Askar Akaev.

What is the nature of civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan? This key question underlies this research study, which aims to explore the terrain, patterns, and density of networks of civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the attitudes of NGO activists. We chose to look at civic engagement, rather than social capital, because the concept of civic engagement can be more clearly defined and measured than that of social capital. We base our analysis on the belief that civic engagement not only represents a medium for the reproduction of social capital but also constitutes the most tangible manifestation of social capital. We accept the definition of civic engagement used previously in O'Loughlin (2001) as participation in, and knowledge of, formal and informal modes of political and social interaction. Gibson (2001) has argued that formation of weak ties in the form of social networks is of crucial importance for societies undertaking democratic transition, where civic/democratic values are alien to the existing political culture, and strong ties to family and friends tend to be a prevalent form of association. In this milieu, social networks (NGOs can be conceptualized as weak social networks) "may contribute to the development of democratic values through processes of diffusion *and* through practice at democratic discussion" (Gibson, 2001, p. 54).

Another reason we chose to use NGOs is the ease of empirical measurement that it permitted. NGOs have previously been used in post-Soviet studies as a measure of civic engagement.² Although we acknowledge that NGOs do not represent the entire range of possible forms of civic engagement, nor do they always connote democratically oriented forms of social capital, their significance for democratization in the post-Communist context is undeniable. In order to explore the nature and patterns of civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan, a multi-tiered research design, which utilized both primary (survey) and secondary data sources, was implemented.

CIVIL SOCIETY, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Contributors to democratic theory have argued that civil society plays a pivotal role in the consolidation of democracy (Nichols, 1996; Diamond, 1999; O'Loughlin and Bell, 1999;

²See, for instance, O'Loughlin and Bell (1999) for Ukraine and Shomina et al. (2002) for Moscow.

Henderson, 2000; Marsh, 2000; Paxton, 2002). Civil society has long been identified as a correlate of democratic governance. Alexis de Tocqueville (1835–1840) first articulated a theoretical correlation between civil society and democracy in America, seeing flourishing associational life as an essential factor conditioning the triumph of American democracy. Involvement in formally organized voluntary associations provided a basis for citizens' participation and the learning and practice of civic virtues and other forms of behavior. Barber (1998, p. 8) echoed Tocqueville in his argument that "Civil society is . . . the free space in which democratic attitudes are cultivated and democratic behavior is conditioned."

While there exist multiple definitions of civil society, the general consensus on the theoretical delineation of civil society is that it is an autonomous voluntary sphere that lies between the individual and the state (Skidmore, 2001). As such, linkages within civil society are formed around diverse groups, including trade unions, professional associations, interest groups including sport and hobby societies, and traditional kinship and social networks. The boundaries between civil society and other spheres are not permanent but permeable, as activities of organizations in one sphere can spill over into others. Civil society is concerned with common public, rather than parochial, ends and operates through the public sphere, where individuals have an opportunity to come together and collectively deliberate and articulate their interests. Civil society nourishes democracies by keeping state power in check (Gellner, 1994; Diamond, 1999). In many countries, civic groups monitor elections, press for greater transparency and fight against corruption, and push for institutional reforms.

Civil society also promotes "institutional and ideological pluralism" (Gellner, 1994, p. 3). Civil society can cut across existing social cleavages and embrace the natural pluralism exhibited in broader society by allowing representation of those diverse sets of interests through voluntary channels. In turn, this can allow for a more inclusive and tolerant model of citizenship and safeguard against political extremism. Civil society can also teach the fundamental values of democratic political culture and cultivates democratic habits and skills; in other words, it teaches individuals how to become full-fledged citizens and provides them with tools necessary for deeper civic engagement. Participation in civic groups allows the development of an internal microcosm of trust, public spirit, solidarity, reciprocity, and cooperation (Putnam, 1993; Diamond, 1999; Newton, 2001)—which, by extension, translates into trust in and willingness to cooperate with more formal structures at larger scales (Henderson, 2000).

Another function of civic society is one of "structuring multiple channels, beyond the political party, for articulating, aggregating, and representing interests" (Diamond, 1999, p. 243). These channels allow for involvement in the political process of typically marginalized groups such as ethnic minorities and women, and advocate agendas that otherwise would not be represented in the traditional political spectrum. Of course, not all social movements are progressive or oppose authoritarianism, as the example of the Nazi movement in 1930s Germany shows (Berman, 1997; Encarnacion, 2000).

Democratic culture is mainly associated with horizontal communal ties with underlying generalized reciprocity and "thin" trust (Gibson, 2001).³ Such societies are assumed to possess significant social capital, "the features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1993, p. 167). In horizontally structured relations, such as those that embed voluntary associations, members enjoy more or less equal status and opportunities to contribute. On the other hand, a vertically structured hierarchy of power and interests makes the exchange less symmetrical and reinforces patron-clientelistic relations. Networks of civic engagement, by definition,

³As opposed to the "thick" trust that dominates close interpersonal relations.

transcend the individualistic parochial tendencies through the establishment of “thin” trust and generalized reciprocity, one where the benefits of the exchange are not necessarily instantaneous but can be generated over a period of time. Thus, civic engagement, by way of reproducing social capital, enhances cooperation and interdependence among citizens and prevents fragmentation and atomization of the public sphere. In theory, the denser and more pluralistic these networks are, the better the prospects for democracy. These prospects are especially bleak in the countries of the former Soviet bloc, where the “totalitarian rule abused even that limited stock of social capital” (Putnam, 1993, p. 183).

A general consensus is that most post-Communist civil societies are weak and fragmented, with low levels of civic engagement and deficits of social capital (Gray, 1993; Nichols, 1996; Stoner-Weiss, 1997; Marsh, 2000; O’Loughlin, 2001; Howard, 2002). Results of an empirical comparative study conducted by the New Europe Barometer Surveys, which rated trust levels in various political and civil institutions, show low levels of trust across the post-Communist bloc, although Eastern European countries ranked higher than those of the former Soviet Union (Mishler and Rose, 2001). Based on the results of the World Values Survey, which rates membership (or civic engagement) in different voluntary organizations in countries across the world, Howard (2002) made comparisons between three groups of countries based on their prior regime: older democracies, post-authoritarian, and post-Communist. The evidence demonstrates that levels of organizational membership in the post-Communist countries (mean of 0.91) are significantly lower than those of the older democracies (2.39) and post-authoritarian countries (1.82).

The Soviet party-state assumed a very paternalistic role toward its citizens. The state was “omnipotent and ubiquitous” (Tismaneanu and Turner, 1995, p. 4) and its grip penetrated every single sphere and aspect of people’s lives, from politics to art. The only public discourse circulated through the media was one set by the party. The totalitarian state, equipped by the Communist ideology, demanded institutions’ participation in the “collective task of building socialism” (Rose, 1994, p. 18). Collectivism reflected the spirit of unity, equality, solidarity, and altruism, whereas individualism threatened deviance. Individual idiosyncrasies and initiatives had to be sacrificed in the name of the collective. The “Leviathan-state” “assaulted, paralyzed, and destroyed all forms of visible social autonomy as part of their project engineering a ‘new socialist man’ and eliminating all class distinctions” (Garcelon, 1997, p. 311). The state efforts to cultivate collectivism were so successful that many citizens, especially among the older generations, still express nostalgia for collective values after the demise of the regimes (Shlapentokh, 2001). In order to create a sense of associational diversity, the state sanctioned a hierarchy of mandatory associations, which recruited individuals of different age groups and occupations. The party also nurtured a tradition of imposed voluntarism through participation in such associations as trade unions, various clubs, and societies. Individuals were recruited into such “voluntary” organizations *dobrovol’no-prinuditel’no*—on a “voluntary-coerced basis. The state had also organized communal activities, such as *subbotniks*—neighborhood cleaning and maintenance projects held on Saturdays, agriculture-related work in the field, etc. Thus, the associations that existed under Communism were merely the marionettes of the party-state (Rose, 1994).

The outcome of this imposed voluntarism was social atomization in the public sphere and a lasting widespread antipathy to and distrust of formal institutions and organizations—an attitude that extends to the present day and helps to explain reluctance to join any social organizations (Howard, 2002). Rose (1994) observed that under Communist rule, public opinion was transformed into private opinion. For fear of being punished for openly expressing their opinions, individuals retreated into the private sphere. “Kitchen circles” (Gibson,

2001), or circles of relatives and friends, who gathered in the privacy of their kitchens to discuss a variety of topics ranging from daily experiences to politics were very common. "In this way, face-to-face primary groups became a substitute for civil society rather than an integral part of it" (Rose, 1994, p. 22). Thus, the closed nature of networks consolidated thick trust. Some of these personal networks were vertical, characterized by patron-clientelistic relations. "Soviet politics was horizontal politics, a constant struggle among different elites, institutions, and interests for bigger shares or the power, wealth, and prestige to be had from the state" (Rose, 1994, p. 21). *Blat*, or personal connections/networks, became popular as a shortcut to access scarce resources, such as imported consumer goods, housing, subsidized vacation plans, etc., and to get things done without having to wait in queues (Ledeneva, 1998).

A more vibrant associational life in the former Soviet Union became a tangible prospect only with Mikhail Gorbachev's reformist policies of *perestroyka*, *glasnost*, and democratization. In the second half of the 1980s, loosening of the state grip on power and newly gained political and civil freedoms and rights quickly resulted in the expansion of the civil society sphere, marked by the emergence of a myriad of social and various national movements, associations, citizens' committees, and non-governmental organizations. However, the initial euphoria quickly subsided and was replaced by popular disillusionment. The whole idea of civil society in Eastern Europe was based on opposition to the repressive state, and with the eventual disintegration of "the other," the premise of a moral antipolitical civil society became weakened as well (Smolar, 1996). The explanation for this apathy is that "many postcommunist citizens feel that they have been let down, even cheated, by the new system that quickly replaced the old one" (Howard, 2002, p. 163). Hopes and excitement evaporated, once a new harsh economic reality set in, and concerns of everyday survival took precedence over political involvement. This disenchantment, along with lingering distrust of organizational life and retreat to the private sphere, continue to be the main denominators of the post-Communist reality.

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The past few decades have truly witnessed an "associational revolution" (Salamon, 1994, p. 109), marked by the exponential proliferation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) across countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North and Latin America. According to Salamon (1994), pressures from three different directions can account for this development. First, pressure comes from "above." For example, the perceived crisis of the welfare state pressures governments to relieve the burden by shifting the initiatives from the state to the voluntary sector. Second, pressure from "below" is reflected through local voluntary initiatives in various spheres. In mainstream thinking, it became increasingly evident that the dominant economic development orthodoxy failed to solve, and in some cases contributed to, the mounting problems of the developing world. Third, the influence of the external factor in the expansion of the voluntary sector cannot be underestimated. Initiatives stemming from various Western public and private voluntary and philanthropic organizations, institutions of faith, and formal aid agencies have provided additional incentives for the emergence of NGOs where they have never existed before. The role and philosophy of the official aid agencies in subsidizing non-profit organizations deserves particular mention in the emergence of the "New Policy Agenda" (NPA), a Western development policy agenda "driven by beliefs organized around the twin poles of neo-liberal economics and liberal democratic theory" (Hulme and Edwards, 1997, p. 5).

NGOs are perceived to be the building blocks of civil society that promote a democratic culture by employing a participatory approach in working with constituencies. Participation in grassroots NGOs in the countries of the Third World is seen as promoting a bottom-up model of development, one that is more participatory for traditionally marginalized groups, such as women, minorities, and the poor. A participatory scheme, guided by a belief that “development is done *by* people, not *to* people” (Clark, 1990, p. xi), incorporates voices of those affected in project design and implementation. People are likely to have more confidence in and loyalty to the project at hand if they have an input in the decision-making and management. The role of an NGO in this scenario is that of a moderator who needs to ensure social equity and avoid perpetuation of existing or potential power relations in the outcomes. By bridging individuals from various backgrounds, NGOs also facilitate acceptance of civic values and build up stocks of social capital necessary for sustaining democracy and economic development.

Another advantage of NGOs is their immediate connectedness with their constituencies. Grassroots NGOs, in particular, are located in the same areas where they implement their operations and are more likely to reach out to the remote and poorest communities overlooked by external agencies. Finally, NGOs are seen as more flexible, experimental, and innovative in their fields than their higher ups in the government and aid camps, restricted by the “straightjacket of development orthodoxy” (Clark, 1990, p. 51). However, O’Loughlin and Bell (1999) have warned that NGOs in transitional democracies threaten to add to the existing divisions if they fail to transcend the existing ethnic or regional cleavages. Most NGOs target people that hold some kind of assets and have some degree of literacy and skills, for it is easier to help them get started and reap benefits relatively soon (Clark, 1990). In many cases, NGOs see each other as competitors, for funds and success stories, and fail to establish horizontal links among themselves. As a result “there are both overlaps and gaps” in their coverage of issues (Streeten, 1997, p. 198).

An increasingly large proportion of NGO budgets comes from donor funding. According to World Bank statistical estimates, in the early 1970s approximately 1.5 percent of development NGOs’ income came from donors, yet by the mid-1990s, donor funding accounted for 30 percent (cited in Hulme and Edwards, 1997, pp. 6-7). The non-governmental sector is still in its infancy in many of the former Soviet states and is largely dependent on foreign assistance. The question remains—can the non-profit sector generate and sustain itself in the absence of outside financial assistance? Henderson’s (2000) empirical findings based on a study of Russian NGOs reveal that foreign aid aimed at strengthening Russia’s infant civil society through support of local NGOs may actually be counterproductive to the very sustainability of its civil society. She found that the most successful NGOs were ones that were truly grassroots, organized around specific issues, and directly linked with their constituencies. Those organizations that were funded from the outside tended to be more elitist, top-down, and visibly detached from the clients they were supposed to represent. The lesson of the foreign aid experiment is that civil society cannot be transplanted from the outside. A truly autonomous and self-sustainable civil society needs to be nourished through indigenous civic initiatives and needs to cultivate “a significant base of financial support among a broad and indigenous constituency” (Diamond, 1999, p. 257).

CHALLENGES TO CIVIL SOCIETY—BUILDING IN KYRGYZSTAN

Democratic Impulses Following Independence

In October 1990, the Supreme Soviet of the republic elected the country’s first non-Communist president, Askar Akaev, who demonstrated loyalty to Soviet President Mikhail

Gorbachev's policies of reform. Akaev came from a relatively politically detached background.⁴ During the August 1991 coup against the Soviet leadership, Akaev was the only one of the presidents of the Soviet republics to openly condemn the coup initiators and support Gorbachev. Immediately after the coup was crushed, Akaev declared the independence of the Kyrgyz Republic on August 31, 1991, months before the official break-up of the USSR in December 1991. In the succeeding elections, Akaev won the popular presidential elections with 95 percent of the vote (Capisani, 2000). The final version of the new constitution, adopted on May 5, 1993, proclaimed Kyrgyzstan as "a sovereign, unitary, democratic republic built upon the basis of a legal, secular state" (Anderson, 1999, p. 26).

In a speech in December 1991, the president argued, "the only way forward was through 'the development of private interest, private life, and private property' based upon a strong civil society, guarantees of civil and political rights, ethnic harmony, and social protection for those likely to find the transition period difficult" (Anderson, 1999, p. 24). Encouraged by the liberal rhetoric of its leadership, the country embarked on the synchronized quest for democratization and a market economy. A series of progressive reforms soon led to increasing political and economic liberalization, and civic pluralism. Bolstered by newly gained civil and political freedoms, independent media, political parties, and various social and civil society support organizations proliferated at an unprecedented rate. Criticism of government was not uncommon, but was tolerated by authorities.

During this period, the percentage of respondents supporting democracy as the best form of government in Kyrgyzstan (61 percent) was about the same as in Latin American countries and higher than Russia. But conversely, 64 percent of Kyrgyzstani respondents also endorsed a reversal to the former Communist regime, because of the economic collapse and resulting decline in the standard of living. The main explanation for such divergent attitudes is level of education (the higher, the more supportive of democracy), age (younger more supportive), level of optimism about the future (more optimistic more supportive) and ethnic affiliation (Kyrgyz more supportive).⁵

Democratic Reversal

Events of the latter half of the 1990s indicate democratic reversal in Kyrgyzstan, as Akaev began to stray from his initial commitment to democratic reform and increase his personal rule. Kyrgyzstan's positive image as an "oasis of democracy" has been tarnished, as the country's regime has gone from being one of the most liberal and tolerant in the region to one more and more resembling those of its neighbors and increasingly featuring repression and corruption (Handrahan, 2001a, 2001b).⁶ In the December 1995 presidential election, Akaev won the election with 71.6 percent of the vote and was re-elected in 2000 with nearly 75 percent of the vote.

A number of independent observers reported irregularities during the 2000 election, including a restrictive process of candidate registration. The controversial language law, according to which each candidate had to pass a Kyrgyz language proficiency exam

⁴Akayev's training was as a physicist, and his highest positions prior to being elected president was as head of the Kirgiz Academy of Sciences and of the Department of Science, Schools, and Higher Educational Establishments in Central Committee of the Kirghiz SSR Communist Party (see Carlson, 1992; CSCE, 1995, p. 4).

⁵The figures and analysis are those of Rose (1994). See also Pryde (1994).

⁶Freedom House ratings of political and civil rights feature a seven point scale in which scores of 1–2.5 signify a free country, 3–5.5 partly free, and 5.5–7 not free. Kyrgyzstan's ratings ranged from 4.2 to 5.5 during the period from 1992 to 2000, after which they increased to 6.5 for each year in the 2001–2003 period (Freedom House, 2003). The trend is clearly toward less democracy.

(requiring not only advanced fluency in Kyrgyz but also extensive knowledge of the Kyrgyz history and heritage) resulted in the exclusion of a number of prominent opposition leaders from the election. Furthermore, pressure was exerted on a leading independent monitoring organization, the NGO Coalition for Civil Society and Democracy. Other violations of fair elections included biased media coverage in favor of Akaev; harassment of opposition candidates; a failure of the Central Election Committee to reflect the interests of all candidates equally; and irregularities during the tabulation process, which raised questions about the accuracy of the reported results (OSCE/ODIHR, 2000 quoted in Graybow, 2001).

Although a multi-party system was in place after independence, most of the political parties remain relatively weak and marginalized, and are at best “pseudo-parties,” “largely shifting coalitions of individuals” (Ishiyama and Kennedy, 2001, p. 1177). The parties have failed to develop coherent identities and programs, and to gain influence over the political process in the republic (Islam, 1999). Detachment of political parties from the general population became evident in polling conducted prior to the 1995 parliamentary elections, in which nearly 50 percent of respondents said they were hesitant in choosing a party to vote for, and 20 percent did not intend to vote at all (Anderson, 1999, p. 37). With the legislature under the tight control of the president, there are no incentives for individuals to affiliate themselves with political parties that have no influence in policy-making (ibid.).

In the 2000 parliamentary elections (voter turnout 65 percent), the six leading parties split the votes as follows: Communist Party—27.9 percent; the pro-government Union of Democratic Forces—18.6 percent; Democratic Party of Women of Kyrgyzstan—12.6 percent; Party of Veterans of the Afghanistan War—8 percent; the Socialist left wing party *Ata-Meken*—6.5 percent; and the right wing party *Moya Strana*—5.8 percent (Osorova, 2000). The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) concluded that the elections “did not comply with OSCE commitments” (quoted in Graybow, 2001, p. 22). Reportedly, the authorities deregistered some of the candidates and barred several parties, including the three most prominent opposition parties Ar Namys (Honor), El Bei Bechara (Party of Poor People), and the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan (DMK) on the grounds of violation of the election law, leaving the Party of Communists of Kyrgyzstan as the only major opposition party in the elections (Graybow, 2001).

Opposition in Kyrgyzstan has become more radical in light of events surrounding the arrest of parliamentary deputy Azimbek Beknazarov on January 5, 2002; the arrest was widely viewed as a politically motivated case, as Beknazarov was one of the most outspoken advocates for presidential impeachment on grounds of treason.⁷ The resulting demonstrations and hunger strikes brought to the surface many of the political and socioeconomic tensions that have been brewing for a long time (e.g., see *New York Times*, November 17, 2002, p. A13). These include deteriorating living standards amidst the ongoing economic crisis, usurpation of all branches of power and domination of economy by a narrow circle of the ruling elite, north versus south representation, and violation of human rights (ICG, 2001).

Nation Building

Independent Kyrgyzstan faces a challenging task of nation building, as national consolidation remains fragile and fragmented. Despite the official line of creating a civic state, independence uncovered many repressed inter- and intra-ethnic cleavages. Ethnicity issues in

⁷Akaev had ceded part of Kyrgyz territory to China to settle a border dispute, an act considered treasonous by some opponents (see Dubnov, 2002).

Kyrgyzstan are “at the center of a complex web of economic, social and political relations” (Handrahan, 2001a, p. 470). A successful consolidation will require the state to accommodate vested interests and grievances of nationalist and ethnic minority groups alike. In the 1999 census, 64.9 percent were ethnic Kyrgyz, 13.8 percent Uzbek, 12.5 percent Russian, with 5.4 percent other nationalities (see Rowland, 2002, p. 552). Preservation of inter-ethnic accord in the country has been among the top priorities on President Akaev’s agenda since independence. He has advocated a civic model of citizenship, making the motto “Kyrgyzstan is our common home” the basis of his ethnic policy and the 1995 electoral campaign.

Kyrgyz identity “has been one that in large part has been created, or is at least heavily influenced by the Soviets . . . only a modern twist of Soviet-influenced fate provided a political homeland that the Kyrgyz neither fought for not particularly desired” (Handrahan, 2001a, p. 472). But by the end of 1980s, nationalist sentiment among the Kyrgyz became more vocal than ever, crystallized as a result of “a volatile mixture of economic and demographic frustration” (Huskey, 1993, p. 404), which in effect marginalized the titular group within its own republic. The majority of Kyrgyz reside in rural areas (e.g., see Rowland, 2002), and prior to 1989, ethnic Kyrgyz comprised less than 10 percent of the capital Bishkek’s population, and less than 23 percent by 1999. Outside the capital, Russians and Ukrainians accounted for 45 percent of the urban population, whereas Uzbeks constituted a substantial minority of in the south, particularly in Osh Oblast (31.3 percent), Jalal-Abad (24.4 percent), and Batken (14.4 percent) oblasts (Huskey, 1993; Rowland, 2002).

During the Soviet era, Russian was used as a primary medium of socialization and education, and remained the language of the elite and urban population. In 1989, that was to change—at least *de jure*—as the new law promoted Kyrgyz to the status of state language, while recognizing Russian as the language of inter-ethnic communication. The policy was met with mixed reactions. On the one hand, it “inspired among the ethnic Kyrgyz a new sense of ownership of the republic” (Huskey, 1993, p. 407). On the other, it was resisted not only by the Slav but also by the bulk of the Russified indigenous population, especially in the predominantly Russified urban areas. Since independence, state political institutions have been increasingly indigenized, serving as preserves for the ethnic Kyrgyz.⁸ The indigenization process has led to a serious under-representation of other ethnic groups in political institutions, such as in the *Jogorku Kenesh* (parliament). In the 1995 parliamentary elections, 85 percent of the deputies were Kyrgyz, representing slightly over half of the total population of Kyrgyzstan. Of 14 non-Kyrgyz deputies elected, 7 were Uzbeks, 5 Russians, 1 was German, and 1 Karachay (Capisani, 2000). In response to their increasing alienation, minority groups have shown a considerable degree of activism, engaging in the formation of various organizations and lobbying for their rights.⁹

Thus, a combination of economic, inter-ethnic, and linguistic factors has alienated minority groups, inducing a stable exodus of ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, and Germans from the country (Kangas, 1995; Razgulyayev, 2001). Emigration of Europeans has negatively affected the republic, impoverishing its human capital pool, as migrants were among the most qualified and highly skilled professionals. According to the 1992 survey conducted by Anderson (1999), among the top factors for Russian migration were worsening of ethnic relations (59.7 percent), adoption of the new language law perceived to discriminate against

⁸An example of this is the centralized administrative *akim* system. *Akims*, or the local regional governors appointed directly by the president, are mostly of Kyrgyz origin.

⁹For instance, the Slavic Fund was formed to represent and advocate the interests of the Russian community in Kyrgyzstan.

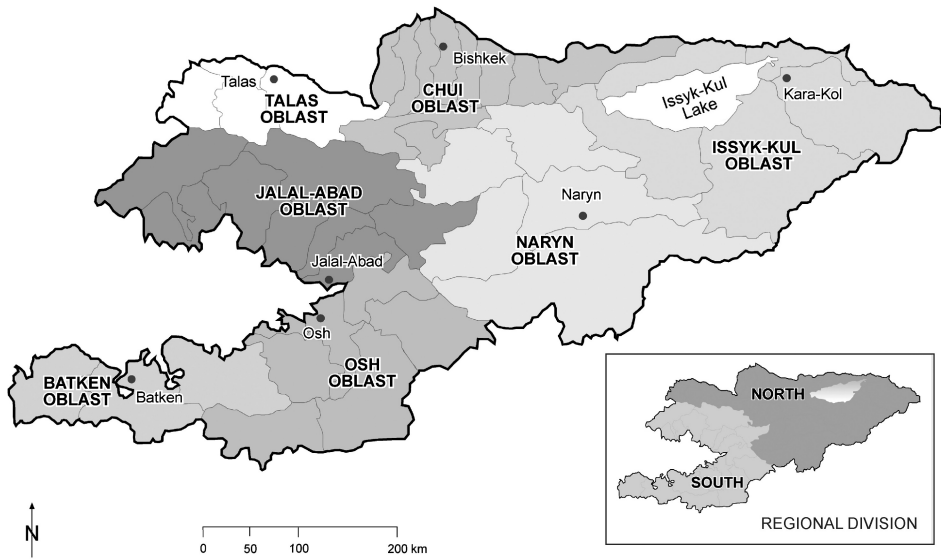


Fig. 1. Oblasts and rayon boundaries in Kyrgyzstan.

Russians (29.4 percent), deteriorating economy (13.5 percent), fear of unemployment (7.6 percent), rising prices (6.6 percent), fear of violence (13.2 percent), and concern for their children's prospects of getting a good education (16.5 percent). In 2000, in an effort to address some of these concerns, President Akaev signed a law passed by the parliament, guaranteeing the protection of the Russian language (see Chernogayev, 2000).

Intra-Kyrgyz Cleavages

The problem of national consolidation also can be attributed to the lack of national consciousness and cohesion among the titular group itself. Formation of the Kyrgyz national identity is ongoing and is challenged by fragmentation into localized identities (Huskey, 1993; Achylova, 1995; Rudenshiold, 1999). The most visible fragmentation is along regional lines. The republic's five major valleys (Fergana, Talas, Chui, Issyk-Kul, and Naryn) gave rise to subgroups with distinct speech, dress, and cuisine (Huskey, 1993). But the main distinction is between the north and south. The two regions are separated by the Tien Shan mountain range, sometimes impassable in winter due to heavy snowfall, and differ in demographic, economic, and political orientation. Historically, the predominantly mountainous northern region, which includes Chui, Issyk-Kul, Talas, and Naryn oblasts (see Fig. 1), gave rise to nomadic culture; during the Soviet period, the region became more industrialized. In contrast, the lowland southern region, Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Batken, is characterized by sedentary agricultural lifestyle sustained by the fertile soil of the Fergana Valley. In the mid 19th century, the north was more receptive to annexation by Russia and to this day, has a greater diversity of ethnic groups and a large Slavic minority.¹⁰

¹⁰The exception is Naryn Oblast, where Kyrgyz comprise over 98 percent of the population.

Khanin (2000) has observed that ethno-regional allegiances can usually be translated into broader political identities. For instance, the “modernized, urbanized and Russified elite of the northern clans” (Khanin, 2000, p. 124) supported liberal democratic elites, like Akaev himself. On the other hand, the pre-independence Communist leader of the republic, Absamat Masaliev, enjoyed wider support from the southern constituencies. The dichotomy persists with southern resentment toward Akaev’s perceived favoritism of allies in the north, resulting in widespread protests (Khamidov, 2002).

Related to the regionalism is tribalism among the Kyrgyz. Tribes conceived during the early history of the Kyrgyz proved to be tenacious and adaptable structures that survived even the failed Soviet rule and carried on to the present day. Achylova (1995) argued that fragmentation into smaller compact units has been fundamental to the day-to-day security of individuals and families and even to the survival of the nation itself throughout periods of war and foreign conquest. On the other hand, tribal affiliations have impeded the rise of democratic institutions and procedures. Tribalism, based on blood rather than civic ties, can be detrimental to civil society, as it pursues narrowly defined particularistic aspirations, preventing dissemination of thin trust. In addition, tribalism produces unequal gender relations through reinforcement of traditional patriarchal attitudes and limitation of women’s participation, mobility, entitlement, and advancement.

Clans, more compact personalized networks of people based on kinship or personal relations, have also been used as a political instrument for advancement of interests of one group vis-à-vis others. Ultimately, patron-clientelistic relations inherent to both tribes and clans permeate the larger political structure, influencing elections and key governmental or local administrative appointments, as well as distribution of resources. The pervasive nature of clans in contemporary politics has been acknowledged by state press spokesman Kamil Bayalinov: “It is no secret that top-ranking officials usually come from a clan. This is the truth of the matter. In our small republic, wherever you turn, you will always find somebody who is somebody’s person” (quoted in Khanin, 2000, p. 126). In particular, the *akim* system of regional governance is notoriously associated with clan networks.

Excesses of economic restructuring that accompanied transition to an open market economy produced a new phenomenon of social stratification in a previously relatively egalitarian society (Abazov, 2002). The observed polarization pattern is consistent with that in Russia, where the older, less educated, and rural strata of the general population ended up in the impoverished “loser” category, whereas the younger, more educated residents of urban communities emerged as “winners,” able to better adjust to and benefit from the new distribution of resources (O’Loughlin, 2001). As of 2000, 52 percent of Kyrgyzstan’s population is reported to live below the poverty line [<http://nsc.bishkek.su/>]; the actual proportion could be much higher. According to 2000 national poll (SGWECMA, 2000), 62 percent of the population assessed the economic situation as very bad, 34 percent found it fair, and only 2.5 percent considered the national economy to be in good condition. Only 25.8 percent were very satisfied with their personal income, 30.6 percent were partially satisfied, and 42.3 percent were totally unsatisfied. Moreover, among respondents asked to evaluate their well-being in relation to the living wage (commensurate to the cost of a basic consumer basket) a little over 50 percent evaluated their living standard to be within the living wage, 15 percent acknowledged their well being to be above the living wage, and almost 30 percent below the living wage.

Finally, geography may factor into the country’s difficulties with the democratic experiment. Kopstein and Reilly (2000) have suggested that Kyrgyzstan, more liberal relative than its neighbors, has fallen victim to the perils of location. The country’s geographic position—

isolation from the West and insulation by its despotic Central Asian counterparts—may have obstructed its initially progressive attempts to emulate the Western liberal democratic models.

NGOs IN KYRGYZSTAN

Kyrgyzstan's NGO sector has been rapidly growing since the early 1990s. Accurate estimates of the number of existing NGOs are not available and vary from source to source. According to some sources, more than 800 NGOs emerged between 1991 and 1996 (Kasybekov, 1999; Li, 2002). Nearly 3,000 NGOs were registered with the Ministry of Justice by the end of 2000 and currently, their number exceeds 4,000 (Bortsova, 2002; Kasybekov et al., 2002). However, for a number of reasons, the actual number of functioning NGOs differs from estimates provided by officials. Because of the complications and expenses of the formal registration procedure, many of the NGOs opt not to register with the Ministry of Justice. The Ministry, in turn, does not have a way of tracing and updating an NGO's status. NGO numbers can also be obtained from various international donor organizations (e.g., Counterpart Consortium) and local NGO support organizations (e.g., InterBilim). It is likely that there are no more than a few hundred active NGOs in the country. Despite these limitations in the data, it is clear that the level of NGO development in Kyrgyzstan surpasses those of other Central Asian republics.¹¹

How are NGOs perceived among the general population of Kyrgyzstan? A 1996 national survey¹² asked, "In your opinion, do the citizens of Kyrgyzstan have the possibility to unite into groups or form organizations without the participation of the government?" Fifty-four percent replied that it was possible, whereas 37 percent indicated that it was not possible. Furthermore, 13 percent of respondents believed that such organizations were essential, 39 percent considered them necessary, 29 percent not very necessary, and 12 percent not necessary at all. Only 33 percent of respondents indicated their awareness of NGOs existing in their communities, and 61 percent said they did not know of any NGO activity. Asked whether they would volunteer to work for an NGO, 42 percent answered "yes" and 53 percent answered "no." Most respondents (67 percent) were interested in joining organizations striving to assist people in need, followed by organizations with environmental concerns (59 percent), and education organizations (46 percent). Women's and youth organizations scored 38 percent each.¹³

The Counterpart Consortium's NGO directory was a point of departure for gathering information on NGOs in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁴ The NGO database compiled by the Counterpart Consortium [available at <http://www.cango.net.kg>] features profiles of over 1,000 NGOs, including such information as NGO name, date of foundation and registration, type of activity, names of leaders and staff, and organization's contact information. Geographically, NGOs are unevenly distributed across the 40 rayony of the country (see Fig. 2). They are

¹¹As of 2001, the updated Counterpart Consortium's Kyrgyzstan NGO database lists 1001 NGOs; in comparison, the same directory lists 699 NGOs for Kazakhstan, 465 for Uzbekistan, 595 for Tajikistan, and 138 for Turkmenistan (Cooper, 1999).

¹²All figures cited in this paragraph are derived from a 1996 nationwide public opinion survey of Kyrgyzstan (Olds, 1997).

¹³All figures are from Olds (1997).

¹⁴Counterpart Consortium is a subsidiary of the international parent organization Counterpart International, Inc. that attempts to empower people by providing support in such areas as civil society, humanitarian assistance, environment and conservation, enterprise and development, health and child survival, and food security.

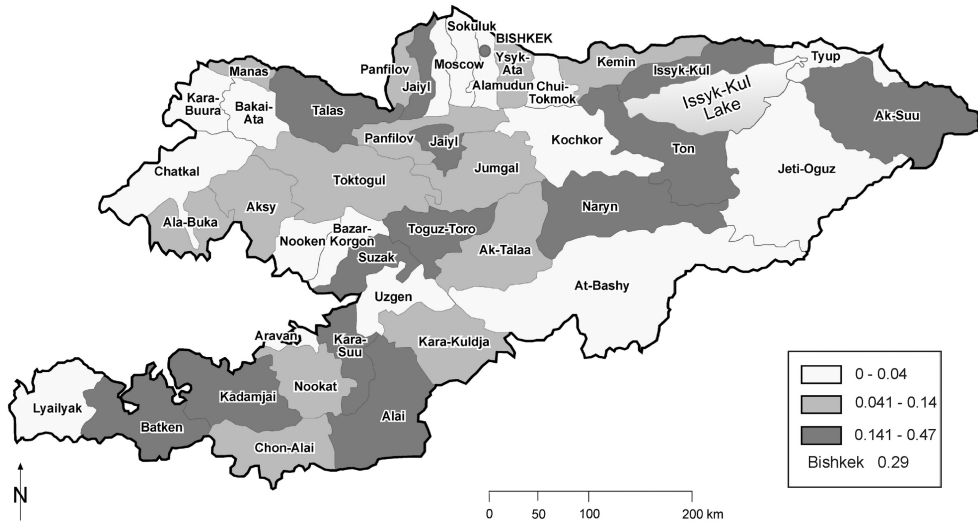


Fig. 2. Distribution of NGOs by rayon in Kyrgyzstan, per 1,000 population.

most densely concentrated in Bishkek and predominantly urban rayons, notably ones where oblast capitals are located (Ak-Suu, Talas, Naryn, Batken, Kara-Suu, and Suzak) and less densely in peripheral, rural rayons. Although in absolute terms the highest number of NGOs is in Bishkek (224), the highest number of NGOs per 1,000 people (0.47) is found in Ak-Suu rayon (Fig. 2).

NGO Survey

In order to obtain more information about NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, we designed a mail survey. The survey contained closed, category, list/multiple choice, scale, and complex grid types of questions, for a total of 36 questions. These questions fell within three broad categories: (1) NGO characteristics (such as date of registration, membership, funding sources, and scale of operation); (2) socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (standard questions regarding age, gender, ethnicity, educational level, and position within the organization); and (3) political attitudes of respondents (confidence levels in various institutions, attitudes toward democratic values, etc.). The survey replicated other survey designs; questions on NGO properties were modeled after Sarah Henderson's (2000) survey of women's NGOs in Russia, and some of the questions on political attitudes were modeled after those featured in the *Public Opinion in Kyrgyzstan 1996* survey, published by the International Foundation for Election Systems (Olds, 1997).

A mail questionnaire was sent in January 2002 to NGOs in the Counterpart Consortium directory with full mailing addresses; organizations with missing and incomplete addresses or with double entries were omitted from the sample, bringing the final sample size to 600. In the course of one month (January 2002), 166 completed surveys were received, while 37 were returned due to incorrect addressee information. The adjusted response rate was equivalent to nearly 30 percent, a high return for a postal survey.

Table 1. Survey Sample Representation, in percent

Region	Counterpart sample	Survey sample
NGO distribution by region		
North	61	62
South	39.0	38
NGO distribution by oblast		
Chu	32.1	34.3
Osh	25.4	13.9 ^a
Issyk-Kul	14.3	14.5
Jalal-Abad	14.1	10.2
Talas	7.0	3.0
Naryn	6.5	9.6
Batken	— ^b	4.8
NGO distribution by comparable type of activity		
Children and youth	12.4	39.8
Women	9.7	47.0
Education and science	8.6	29.5
Human rights	5.9	40.4
Agriculture	5.2	22.9
Disabled	5.1	31.9
Ecology/environment	4.9	32.5

^a18.7 percent with Batken.

^bIncluded in Osh Oblast.

Sources: Counterpart data from <http://www.cango.net.kg>; NGO survey by authors, 2002. Percentages of activity total to more than 100 because many respondents listed multiple entries.

Our sample distribution mirrors the larger sample from the Counterpart Consortium database (see Table 1). We received a higher response from Bishkek-based NGOs than from any other place, but the regional (north-south) representation and types of activities by NGOs are similar to those in the larger sample. Of the 166 NGOs in the sample, 95 percent are registered. Of the remaining 5 percent of unregistered NGOs, all but one is headquartered in places other than Bishkek. Most organizations (60 percent) have been in existence for a period of 5–10 years, their founding coinciding with the immediate post-independence period of the early 1990s.

NGO Membership Features

NGOs vary in terms of membership size, ranging from organizations that have a small staff of a few people to ones that boast over 1000 members. Most are small, localized organizations with the preponderance (57 percent) of organizations having less than 30 members. Although there are instances in which an organization has full-time paid personnel, in nearly half of the cases (48 percent), volunteers constitute an overwhelming majority, accounting for almost all members.

Table 2. Funding Sources of NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, 2002

Funding source	Percentage
Membership fees	52.4
Funding from foreign governments and funds	47.0
Other funding sources ^a	33.1
Funding from foreign NGOs	21.1
Funding from local administration (municipal, rayon, or oblast)	11.4
Funding from national branch	7.8
Funding from Kyrgyz government	6.0
Funding from international parent organization	5.4

^aSales of souvenirs, support from local businesses, etc.

Source: NGO survey by authors, 2002. The numbers add to more than 100 because respondents were asked to indicate all sources of funding.

NGO Funding. Funding is by far the most common obstacle that restricts the capacity and viability of NGOs in Kyrgyzstan. Many of the non-profit organizations owe their existence to assistance from international donors. The donor category encompasses a mix of various multilateral agencies, private foundations, and other Western NGOs (see Table 2). Unfortunately, against the backdrop of general impoverishment and limited social spending, the newly introduced grant culture has, in some cases, been counterproductive to the development of sustainable and efficient NGOs. Grants have become a primary motivation for and encouraged the rise of many opportunistic NGOs with no genuine constituencies (Cooper, 1999; Horton and Kazakina, 1999, Handrahan, 2000). Among these are numerous government-oriented organizations (GONGOs), or quasi-NGOs (QUANGOs), organizations staffed by government officials that existed prior to independence and have been transformed to take advantage of the sudden wealth with almost no strings attached (Handrahan, 2000).

Another problem with some aid agencies is that they are not very democratic in their approach. Asiya Sasykbaeva, director of the NGO support organization InterBilim, noted that donor organizations are often motivated by the success of their own agendas and projects.¹⁵ As a result, they tend to fund short-term projects in the areas they see as desirable and on their own conditions. Sometimes, however, the problems that NGOs are working toward resolving are deeply embedded and require long-term sustainable solutions, and this sort of conditionality has naturally led many NGOs to conclude that their needs and the needs of their constituencies are overlooked by the donors. This experience confirms the broader set of asymmetric relations between Northern NGOs and those in the developing world outlined by Huddock (1999). Fortunately, Sasykbaeva added, more recently some of the donor agencies have begun to address the criticisms leveled by NGOs and to steer their policies toward greater sensitivity to local contexts and needs. Cooper (1999) also pointed out that some aid agencies do not serve as good role models for local NGOs and, in fact, resemble the Soviet organizations in their top-down management structure and detachment from the people.

Based on the survey results (Table 2), most NGOs (slightly over half) receive their funding from membership fees. The next most common source of funding is foreign governments

¹⁵Personal interview conducted on January 15, 2002.

Table 3. Issue Foci of NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, 2002

Issue	Percentage
Protection of poor	63.9
Protection of women	47.0
Protection/advocacy of human/civil rights	40.4
Protection of children	39.8
Protection of the environment	32.5
Protection of disabled	31.9
Education/research/science	29.5
Economic development	25.9
Agriculture	22.9
Culture	20.5
Protection/advocacy of rights of workers within a certain profession (e.g. family doctors)	13.3
Other	10.8
Development of the political system	9.0
Protection of ethnic group rights	8.4
Development of the legal framework	8.4

Source: NGO survey by authors, 2002. Percentages total to more than 100 because multiple foci could be listed.

and foundations. Other foreign NGOs also constitute a significant source of funding. One-third of NGOs receive support from other sources, and some of them mentioned that these include support from local businesses, profits made from sales of souvenirs, etc. In contrast, NGOs receive only marginal support from the central government and its local administrations. In addition, a few NGOs receive transfers from either their international or national parent organizations. And while it is apparent that many of the NGOs have an advantage of being funded from several different sources, a few NGOs pointed out that they receive no funding at all and survive on the “raw enthusiasm” and determination of their members.

NGO Activities. Most NGOs are related to some sort of specific advocacy cause, or social service delivery. Multiple issue-oriented NGOs are more common than single issue-oriented ones, and sometimes these issues are related to each other and at other times they may be diverse. Table 3 summarizes the distribution of sample NGOs by issue focus. The survey asked respondents to check all relevant issues.

From the results presented in the table, one can obtain a picture of spheres and social groups in greatest need. Not surprisingly, nearly 64 percent of all NGOs target poverty alleviation as part of their mission. Since 60–70 percent of the population in the country is reported to be living below the poverty line, and with curtailed government social spending, there is a great need for alternative ways to promote social stabilization. Related to protection of the poor are concerns for economic development (26 percent) and agriculture (23 percent). Children, the disabled, and women also stand out as groups in need of the greatest assistance as a result of marginalization inflicted by transition to the market economy. Protection of civil/human rights also scores comparatively high on the NGO agendas. Issues related to education, research, science, and culture are secondary, whereas concerns pertaining to development of legal and political systems lag.

Networking among NGOs. The survey results revealed that an overwhelming majority of NGOs (91.6 percent) cooperate with other NGOs, and less than 10 percent stated that they do not. While it is not clear what degree and scope this collaboration entails, the trend may be indicative of the formation of overlapping horizontal ties essential for a vibrant civil society. Evidence from other sources also indicates that NGOs in Kyrgyzstan are not atomized units. Many of them network and build partnerships and alliances in order to achieve various ends. Perhaps the best-known example of such collaboration is the NGO Coalition. Initially founded in 1996 as the Forum of NGOs, and renamed in 1999, the Coalition is an umbrella organization spanning over 100 NGOs from various parts of the country. Its mission is to facilitate incorporation of citizens in the civil sphere and to conduct advocacy in social, economic, and political issues, to provide favorable conditions for the activity of non-governmental organizations, to work on strengthening democracy, and to build civil society in the Kyrgyz Republic.

NGO Activist Characteristics. The survey was addressed to the NGO leader whenever a name was provided in the Counterpart Consortium directory of NGOs. Women outnumber men by 2:1 among respondents. Indeed, women have played an active role shaping the informal sector throughout Central Asia. Handrahan (2000) has argued that although women's visibility is related to donor policies welcoming women's NGOs, the "gendered nature of civil society also represents a negative trend of lack of female access to authentic decision-making positions." Women resort to the informal, and less prestigious NGO sector to channel their voices and initiatives, because they face major stumbling blocks in the formal political sphere. Handrahan's research also revealed that the government encouraged women's involvement, as they were "perceived to be 'better' than men at social responsibility, and civil society work was perceived to be difficult and undesirable social service tasks that the state was unable and unwilling to provide" (Handrahan, 2000).

On a more optimistic note, women's empowerment in the sphere of civil society could translate into a stronger voice in the political arena. For example, one of the leading women's NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, Women's Congress, has been actively involved in facilitation of women's integration into the political and economic spheres. In 1995, the Congress organized a seminar "Women in a Transitional Society" that proved to be very fruitful, as it influenced the Kyrgyz parliament to sign certain international conventions on women's issues and produced constructive recommendations to the government, which were later incorporated in a national program directed at improving women's socioeconomic status, and led to the establishment of a women's business center in Bishkek.

Most of the respondents in the survey are highly educated, with college graduates comprising almost 73 percent. Representatives of the Kyrgyz nationality dominate the upper echelons of NGO management, making Russians the least active population, in third position (9 percent) after "other" ethnic groups were combined. In terms of the generational characteristics, almost 40 percent of respondents are aged 45–54 and 24 percent are aged 35–44. It appears that most (almost 60 percent) respondents perceive their personal material well-being as average, and 46 percent perceive their status to be equivalent to that of the rest of the population; 21 percent reported their well-being as poor, although in terms of relative well-being only 2.4 percent perceived it to be much worse than that of the rest of the population.

Although the economic transition has rendered pensioners the most vulnerable social stratum, it has also prompted their mobilization. One of the successful organizations founded and run by pensioners is the Social Protection of Population (SPP). The organization's mission is social justice and improvement of living standards for pensioners, as reflected in their working principle: "We are surviving and helping others to survive." The organization came

Table 4. Confidence in Governments and Institutions by NGO Activists, 2002, in percent

Individual or institution	Very confident	Fairly confident	Not very confident	Not at all confident	Missing
President	7.8	47.6	33.7	9	1.8
Parliament	2.4	32.5	48.2	15.1	1.8
Courts	—	13.3	52.4	33.1	0.6
Neighbors	9.6	60.8	26.5	2.4	0.6
Citizens	6.0	58.4	33.7	1.2	0.6
Media	3.0	28.3	57.8	9.6	0.6
Akimiats	4.2	28.9	50.6	15.7	0.6
Parties	1.2	13.9	50.0	32.5	0.6
Elections	0.6	27.1	42.2	28.9	1.2

Source: NGO survey by authors, 2002.

into existence following mass pickets in 1996, when thousands of pensioners showed up in front of the White (Government) House with empty cooking pots, symbolizing their hungry existence, and seeking a meeting with authorities. At the end of 1996, the SPP registered with the Ministry of Justice. The organization relies on volunteers (358 in total). Within five years of its existence, the SPP helped over 10,000 pensioners and opened eight branches across the country (Zhiteneva, 2002).

Attitudes of NGO Activists

Confidence in Individuals and Institutions. An increasing number of surveys are conducted to gauge levels of trust in various institutions and individuals (e.g., Newton, 2001) across countries, and the questions in this section were modeled after them. After consideration of the potential sensitivity of the questions, we replaced “trust” with “confidence,” but the terms will be used interchangeably for the purpose of this analysis. The summary findings are presented in Table 4.

When the results are aggregated into two broader categories for convenience of comparison, “confident” (comprised by “very confident” and “fairly confident”) and “not confident” (“not very confident” and “not at all confident”), it appears that the NGO leaders are more confident in individuals than in political institutions. Neighbors and fellow citizens score the highest confidence level, with 70.5 percent and 64.5 percent, respectively. Slightly over half are confident in the President (55.4 percent), slightly over a third in parliament (34.9 percent), and a third in the media (31.5 percent) and akimiats (33.1 percent). Elections garner 27.7 percent “confidence,” followed by political parties with 15.2 percent, while courts score only 13.3 percent. The fact that interpersonal or “thick” trust, such as trust in neighbors, features more dominantly than “thin” trust, or trust in formal institutions, such as parties, is not surprising, as it is a characteristic of the post-Soviet states in general (Gibson, 2001). The trend is a residual of the Soviet era with its alienation from, and distrust of, Communist Party activity and subsequent retreat into private circles comprised of personal networks of friends, family, and neighbors. An indication of the high confidence in fellow citizens, which can be presumed to be a more abstract form of trust, is a very positive one, as thin trust is a necessary component of democratically oriented social capital. Confidence in the institution of the

Table 5. Comparison of Trust Levels in Political Institutions among General Population and NGO Activists, in percent

Institution	Complete trust	Partial trust	Complete distrust	Missing cases	Institution	Complete trust	Partial trust	Complete distrust
	Pop.	NGO	Pop.	NGO		Pop.	NGO	Pop.
President	32.4	7.8	35	81.3	28.4	9.2	4.2	1.8
Parliament	22.2	2.4	38.7	80.7	33.9	15.1	5.2	1.8
Courts	0	0	48.7	65.7	48.9	33.1	2.4	1.2

Sources: http://www/kyrgyzinvest.org/en/analytic/nov1000_monitor.htm and NGO survey by authors, 2002.

presidency over other political institutions presents an interesting, and somewhat puzzling, observation. One of the possible explanations for this may be that the president is seen as an individual not entwined with the government. But at the same time, the president has been increasingly consolidating his personal rule over other state branches, so it is not as clear why he is trusted among the more educated NGO leaders.¹⁶

Arguably, attitudes of this particular sample of respondents—social and political activists, who, in some respect, represent the elites—would differ from ones drawn from a sample of the general, more diversified, population of Kyrgyzstan. A comparable survey of the general population on trust in selected political institutions in the 2000 nationwide poll (sample size 1,200) (SGWECMA, 2000) allowed comparisons in three of the overlapping categories—trust in the president, the parliament, and the courts. Since the national survey featured only three levels of trust, we had to modify the data respectively; thus “complete trust” corresponds with “very confident”, “partial trust”—which joined “fairly confident” and “not very confident” categories, and “complete distrust”—with “not confident at all” (see Table 5).

Evidently, NGO activists are less likely to have either complete trust or complete distrust in the institutions than the general population. A majority fall into the nuances of the middle category of partial trust. Interestingly, no respondent in either sample expressed complete trust in the court system, and one-third to one-half expressed complete distrust. This finding is worrying, for it indicates that the rule of law has not been ingrained in the political culture of the country.

Political Ideology. Respondents were asked to rate their attitudes on a variety of issues to estimate the degree to which various democratic values have diffused among the NGO activists. The results are reassuring (Table 6). Most respondents believed that liberal democracy is the best form of government (48 percent).¹⁷ Over half of the respondents (58 percent) believed that a market economy is the best form of economy for Kyrgyzstan, in contrast to the 1996 public opinion survey (Olds, 1997), where only 31 percent favored limited state control, and 51 percent supported full state control of the economy.

When asked whether Kyrgyzstan is a democracy, 59 percent considered it more or less democratic, and 37 percent considered it undemocratic. For comparison, in the 1996 nationwide survey (Olds 1997), 60 percent considered Kyrgyzstan primarily as a democracy, while

¹⁶It should be kept in mind that the survey was conducted before the political crisis of March 2002. It would therefore not be surprising if the rating of confidence for President Akaev has declined considerably, as his legitimacy seems to have been slipping following the Aksu event (Lambert, 2003).

¹⁷Compare this figure to 61 percent of the population in the Kyrgyz Republic reported in Rose (2002).

Table 6. Political Attitudes of NGO Respondents in Kyrgyzstan

Questions/responses	Percentage
Does voting influence decision-making?	
Completely agree	17.5
Somewhat agree	63.9
Completely disagree	18.1
Missing cases	0.6
Is Kyrgyzstan a democracy?	
Democracy	47.6
Partial democracy	11.4
Not a democracy	37.3
Missing cases	3.6
What is the best form of government for Kyrgyzstan?	
Liberal democracy	48.2
Present form of democracy	24.1
Communism	7.8
Other	10.2
Missing cases	9.6
What is the best form of economy for Kyrgyzstan?	
Market economy	57.8
Mixed economy	13.9
Centralized planning	23.5
Other	1.8
Missing cases	3.0

Source: NGO survey by authors, 2002.

27 percent thought it was primarily not a democracy. Thus, although nearly the same percentage of NGO activists as that of the general population found the country's regime to be democratic, a slightly higher proportion of them consider it be non-democratic.

A majority of respondents also believed that their participation in elections has some kind of effect on decision-making in the country: 17.5 percent completely agreed, 63.9 percent somewhat agreed, and 18.1 percent completely disagreed with the statement. This distribution nearly mirrors one generated by the 1996 survey (Olds, 1997) in which 17 percent completely agreed, 64 percent somewhat agreed, and 13 percent completely disagreed with the statement: "Voting gives people like me a chance to influence decisions made in our country." Thus, there is no tangible difference between ordinary citizens and NGO activists with regard to attitudes about voting effectiveness. An overwhelming majority of respondents, close to 90 percent, believed that their involvement in NGOs in some ways contributes to democracy.

Questions about civil and political rights were designed after those asked in the Freedom House surveys and were set up in a matrix. The respondents were asked to rate the importance of various political and civil rights and freedoms on the scale of "very important" to "not important." The complexity of the matrix may have been responsible for the missing cases, as some respondents chose to rate only some of the options and not the others, whereas

Table 7. Importance of Political and Civil Rights for NGO Activists, 2002, in percent

Right	Very important	Important	Not important	Not sure	Missing
Right to private property	52.4	33.7	—	—	13.9
Right to regular and fair elections	63.3	25.3	1.2	—	10.2
Freedom to form parties	15.7	26.5	16.9	5.4	35.5
Freedom to form NGOs	45.2	36.7	1.2	0.6	16.3
Right to criticize government	26.5	36.7	10.8	1.2	24.7
Minority rights	27.1	35.5	1.8	3.0	32.5

Source: NGO survey by authors, 2002.

others just put checkmarks next to the choices and failed to mark the degree of importance.¹⁸ Overall, it seems that all of the democratic rights and freedoms are supported as either very important or important (Table 7). In particular, the rights to hold regular and fair elections and right to own private property are seen as important. Freedom to form NGOs was perceived as more important than freedom to form parties. In comparison, the 1996 survey (Olds, 1997) of the general population revealed that 79 percent considered the right to private property to be very important, 62 percent thought the right to openly criticize the government was very important, and 66 percent believed protection of minority rights was very important.

Problems in Kyrgyzstan. In the 2000 nationwide poll (SGWECMA, 2000), unemployment (49 percent), decline in production (11.2 percent), Batken events¹⁹ and terrorism (10 percent), corruption (9.8 percent), instability in Central Asia and breaches of territorial integrity (6.5 percent), and rising poverty (5.2 percent) were identified as the most pressing issues. Our survey results likewise indicate that economic issues are of foremost concern to the respondents. Almost 82 percent were concerned with the poor economy; related to this concern were unemployment (72 percent), poverty (64 percent), and lack of social protection (42 percent). Corruption, foreign debt, violation of human rights, low spirituality, and weakness of political parties are next on the list, and security issues come last.

EXPLAINING THE ATTITUDES OF NGO ACTIVISTS

Modeling the survey results to understand variation in attitudes toward democratic values among NGO activists in Kyrgyzstan allows us to identify the common key denominators that influence the choice of democratic values. The modeling procedure was carried out in three phases. First, five key civil/political rights and freedoms were identified as dependent variables: (1) right to participate in regular and free elections; (2) freedom to form political parties; (3) freedom to form NGOs; (4) right to criticize government; and (5) ethnic minority rights. Each of these variables was converted into a dummy variable. For example, if a respondent answered "very important" or "important," it was coded as 1, as it was the expected response, and "not important" and "not sure" responses were coded as 0.

¹⁸In the latter case, we assigned "important."

¹⁹This refers to an armed incursions by Islamic insurgents from Uzbekistan into westernmost Kyrgyzstan in the summers of 1999 and 2000.

Table 8. Modeling the Importance of the Regular and Fair Elections^a

Predictor	Odds ratio	Coefficient	Std. error	Signif.
Membership fees	2.747	1.011	0.451	0.025
Confidence in fellow citizens	0.347	-1.059	0.503	0.035
Liberal democracy is the best form of government	3.091	1.129	0.453	0.013
Unemployment is a problem	2.461	0.900	0.483	0.063
Low spirituality is a problem	5.622	1.727	0.540	0.001

^aFinal model: Pseudo $R^2 = 0.20$ ($n = 133$). Pseudo R^2 is shown to indicate goodness of fit of the model. R^2 cannot be computed the same way in logistic regression as OLS regression. The pseudo R^2 in logistic regression is defined as $(1 - L_1/L_0)$, where L_0 represents the log likelihood for the “constant-only” model and L_1 is the log likelihood for the full model with constant and predictors.

For the independent variables, the survey questions can be ordered into three categories: NGO characteristics, socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, and their attitudes, or political ideology. We hypothesized that variation within the dependent variables would be most strongly influenced by the respondents’ ideology and NGO characteristics rather than respondents’ socio-demographic background. There is little variation within the latter category, as the population in the sample size is rather homogenous (for example, most respondents are Kyrgyz, aged 34–55, and have a college-level education); the picture would have been very different if the sample were drawn from the general population, since there would have been more socio-demographic variation among the cases.

The modeling procedure contained several steps. Each dependent variable was regressed on each set of independent variables; thus three regressions were run for each dependent variable. Significant relationships (cut-off threshold for the significance value = 0.10) were then singled out and incorporated in the preliminary models. The next step involved constructing integrated parsimonious models encompassing significant variables from each preliminary subset. The model was constrained to eliminate insignificant and collinear variables, and the resulting significant variables were incorporated in the final model (see Tables 8 through 11). We discuss only the final models; details on the full modeling and the questionnaire are available from Kuchukeeva (2002).

Model 1: Regular and Fair Elections

The final model consists of five variables (Table 8) that explain 20 percent of variation in the model. All variables but “confidence in fellow citizens” are positively correlated with the importance of the right to hold regular and fair elections. Free and fair elections, in which at least two candidates or parties compete, is expected to be present in any definition of democracy, be it minimalist or institutional (e.g., Dahl’s definition described above). Therefore, it is only natural that support for liberal democracy is consistent with support for regular and fair elections. Elections may also be seen as a mechanism for putting an end to existing social problems, in this case unemployment and low spirituality (or lack of ideals), through election of competent leaders.

As an example of the importance of fair elections, consider the Party of Communists in Kyrgyzstan, which has been an important contender for political power in elections. Its leader, the former First Secretary Masaliev, garnered nearly 25 percent of the vote in the 1995 presidential elections, and the party received the largest number of seats after the 2000

Table 9. Modeling the Importance of the Freedom to Form Political Parties^a

Predictor	Odds ratio	Coefficient	Std. error	Signif.
Lack of independent media is a problem	3.714	1.312	0.487	0.007

^aFinal model: Pseudo $R^2 = 0.06$ ($n = 106$).

parliamentary elections. The party still enjoys a broad base of support consisting mostly of elderly pensioners, workers and peasants, and conservatives who are nostalgic for the Soviet period. Alienated and dissatisfied by the market reforms, they wish to restore state control over the economy. Although only 8 percent of respondents in our survey believed that Communism is the optimal political regime for Kyrgyzstan, 37 percent favored either centralized planning or a mixed economy. While that may not translate directly into support for a Communist candidate, it implies that these individuals are likely to vote for a candidate advocating some kind of social welfare program.

Confidence in fellow citizens is negatively correlated with support for elections; this finding can be explained by developing the dual meaning of trust. In our view, confidence in fellow citizens is an indicator of “thick trust” and confidence in elections an indicator of “thin” trust. Respondents seem to regard them as separate realms and hence do not expect to reinforce each other. In fact, they expect thick trust to increase as thin trust decreases and vice-versa. Finally, membership fees as a funding source are positively correlated with support for elections, but an explanation for this relationship is not immediately evident. If, however, membership fees are an indicator of relative wealth, the relationship is consistent with others in these tables.

Model 2: Freedom to Form Political Parties

In the final model, only one independent variable, perception of lack of independent media as a problem, stands significant and is positively correlated with support for organization of political parties (Table 9). The two variables are undeniably linked with each other and are key elements of the concept of liberal democracy that embody the joint freedoms of expression and association. Independent media and a multi-party system represent “institutional and ideological pluralism” (Gellner, 1994, p. 3) that prevents monopoly of power and truth by the government. Totalitarian regimes typically differ from liberal democracies in their state censorship on media. Diverse political parties need media to highlight the interests and grievances of diverse constituencies. Parties also rely on media to make their platforms known to the general populace and to gather support for their election campaigns. Media coverage is essential to fairly representing candidates’ agendas and establishing their competence. A strong media coverage bias in favor of President Akaev was reported during the 2000 presidential elections, as the government allowed very little press and television coverage of opposition candidates’ campaigns, some of whom were relatively new and unknown to the public.

Model 3: Freedom to Form NGOs

In the final model, five variables, most of which are related to the NGO respondents’ political attitudes, are significant and explain 15 percent of variation (Table 10). All but one (foreign debt) are positively correlated with the dependent variable. Most of these

Table 10. Modeling the Importance of the Freedom to Form NGOs

Predictor	Odds ratio	Coefficient	Std. error	Signif.
Protection of ethnic group	5.359	1.679	0.866	0.052
Unemployment is a problem	4.464	1.496	0.508	0.003
Liberal democracy is the best form of government	2.384	0.869	0.412	0.035
Foreign debt is a problem	0.276	-1.286	0.489	0.009
Lack of independent media is a problem	3.356	1.211	0.492	0.014

^aFinal model: Pseudo $R^2 = 0.15$ ($n = 126$).

Table 11. Modeling the Importance of the Right to Criticize Government^a

Predictor	Odds ratio	Coefficient	Std. error	Signif.
Confidence in fellow citizens	0.404	-0.907	0.411	0.027
Lack of independent media is a problem	2.969	1.088	0.421	0.01

^aFinal model: Pseudo $R^2 = 0.07$ ($n = 123$).

independent variables fit expectations about support for NGO formation. For example, if respondents support liberal democracy, they are likely to support freedom of speech, including independent media, and freedom of association, without which the emergence of NGOs would be impossible. NGOs are also used by ethnic minorities, as well as some Kyrgyz groups, as a vehicle for promoting diverse cultural heritages and political and civil rights for minorities. For instance, Russian associations were involved in lobbying for the adoption of Russian as the official language, while the Uzbek minority has demanded greater representation in the parliament. People may also turn to the informal sector in search of alternative solutions to unemployment and a shortage of income-generating opportunities in the formal sector of the economy. Micro-credit schemes are increasingly becoming popular in the countryside (Frantz, 2000), where the unemployment rate is highest and access to credit is limited. The negative correlation between foreign debt and support for NGOs makes less sense. The relationship would be expected to be positive: increasing foreign debt is typically associated with declining economic conditions and living standards, which would, in turn, be expected to encourage emergence of NGOs aiming to offset the imposed hardships. The possible explanation of this apparent contradiction is that the respondents did not understand the economic theory underlying the issue of foreign debt.

Model 4: Right to Criticize the Government

In the model of the right to criticize the government, only two variables, confidence in fellow citizens and perception of the lack of independent media as a problem, maintained their significance. These two variables explain 7 percent of the model's variation (Table 11). Lack of free and independent media as a problem is positively correlated with the dependent variable, the importance of the right to criticize the government. In liberal democracies, the media serve as outlets for public opinion and can exert pressure on the government. In authoritarian countries (and Kyrgyzstan is an example of an increasingly authoritarian state), the media are co-opted as an extension of the state apparatus and serve to promote the official

Table 12. Modeling the Importance of Ethnic Minority Rights^a

Predictor	Odds ratio	Coefficient	Std. error	Signif.
Foundation span	1.976	0.681	0.346	0.049
Funding from the government	2.411	0.880	0.433	0.042
Protection of ethnic group	4.299	1.458	0.784	0.063
Economic development	0.251	-1.381	0.655	0.035
Development of political system	12.148	2.497	0.991	0.012

^aFinal model: Pseudo $R^2 = 0.14$ ($n = 111$).

ideology and to cover up the government's transgressions. It is not surprising that this criticism is leveled by NGO leaders, who, on average, are more educated and informed about political events in the country and abroad. They may have better access to alternative sources of information, both domestic and external, and realize the limitations of the state-controlled media (i.e., a "monopoly of truth") for the development of a vibrant and pluralistic civil society. Confidence in fellow citizens is negatively correlated with the importance of the right to criticize the government, suggesting that for NGO activists, the less confidence that they have in their fellow citizens, the more the right to criticize the government becomes important.

Model 5: The Importance of Ethnic Rights

The last model (Table 12) is the only one in which a socio-demographic indicator, rayon characteristic (urban or rural), was significant in the preliminary mode, although it was dropped in the final model. None of the political ideology variables, except for concern for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism that was marginally significant in the preliminary model, is correlated with the dependent variable. Only NGO characteristics appear in the final model. The importance of minority rights is positively correlated to a NGO leader's commitment to development of the political system, while the importance of economic development is negatively correlated with the dependent variable. As most respondents adhere to the view that liberal democracy or the present form of democracy is the best form of government, it is likely that respondents advocate a political framework that would provide for equal treatment of all citizens regardless of their ethnic background. The implication of these results is that NGO leaders fear that the pursuit of economic development by the Kyrgyz state would be at the expense of the rights of all populations, the majority Kyrgyz and the various ethnic minorities. NGOs are most likely to be formed by representatives of ethnic minorities themselves, who probably feel relatively deprived and not empowered after the break-up of the Soviet Union that promoted the resurgence of the ethnic factor (indigenization) in the formal political system. The political elites of the republic are predominantly of Kyrgyz background, and even the largest ethnic minorities—Uzbek and Russian—are disproportionately underrepresented in the parliament. It seems that the causality here can be reversed—those who believe in the importance of the ethnic minority rights are more likely to be advocates of their protection, and engagement in NGOs is one of the outlets to channel that concern.

Summary of Models

It is the political outlook and ideologies of the respondents and not their socioeconomic characteristics that influence their stance on the importance of various democratic values. Support for liberal democracy and related democratic elements, such as independent media, are good predictors of support for some of the democratic values. In other cases, there is a close correlation between the type of activity an NGO pursues and a related political/civil right—for example, NGOs with an ethnic orientation tend to support ethnic minority rights. Analysis of variation within the same variables among the general population would most likely reveal different outcomes, and predictably socio-demographic characteristics would play a greater role in influencing attitudes toward these democratic values.

CONCLUSION

Despite various social, economic, and political challenges weakening development of a sustainable framework for, and preventing development of, a vibrant full-fledged civil society in Kyrgyzstan, there is hope, at least as it concerns the NGO sector. It is too early to make conclusions, as consolidation of democracy is far from complete in Kyrgyzstan, but the sneak preview afforded by this study reveals that NGOs do certainly contribute to the democratization process, as they appear to uphold democratic values and thus democratize the political culture and institutions. By their very nature, NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, denote a new form of voluntary civic engagement that embodies and reinforces all institutional components of democracy, reflecting participation, competition, and civil and political liberties. NGOs provide spaces for their constituencies to actively exercise their citizenship rights and to engage other public and private institutions on a variety of issues of concern.

For the most part, the NGO leaders surveyed in this study are democratically inclined in their political attitudes. They embrace liberal democracy as the optimal political regime, and there is a reflected consistency between respondents' support for liberal democracy as an ideal and support for its institutional elements as a practice. The overwhelming majority of NGO activists themselves are confident that their organizational activities contribute to democracy, although opinions are split on what constitutes democracy and whether Kyrgyzstan is a democratic state. Furthermore, participation in NGOs, as our survey results revealed, is also associated with higher levels of generalized social trust represented by "trust in fellow citizens." NGOs may act as crucial agents of social change promoting "weak" ties and transmitting innovative information and values pertaining to democracy to the general populace.

The survey has been useful in providing a generic snapshot of the existing NGO sector in Kyrgyzstan, but while it may have shed light on some issues, it also only scratched the surface and raised a set of new broader questions and caveats. For example, whereas we have established that the respondents' political ideology provides the best explanation for variation in their attitudes to what has been broadly conceived as democratic values, the relationship between NGO membership and individuals' political views and attitudes is less clear. Does participation in NGOs result in politicization of its members, or are certain individuals drawn to NGOs because they are influenced by their political ideology? Similarly, do NGOs facilitate thin trust via socialization, or are individuals joining NGOs in general more trusting of their surroundings? Questions also remain about the nature of NGOs as social networks. Do NGOs indeed represent networks of a new type and quality? Or do they displace,

integrate with, or reinforce existing social networks? Answers to these and similar questions are important for understanding the prospects for democratic consolidation in Kyrgyzstan and other post-Soviet societies of Central Asia.

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