Rethinking Urban Activism and Civil Society: Insights from Analysis of Bishkek Civic Networks

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). With her colleagues from Urban Initiatives PF, she has conducted various studies of social capital, public spaces, and quality of life in Kyrgyz cities. She developed an agenda of the Forum of Cities (2017) and a methodology for the multi-disciplinary study of four regional cities. She also worked as a local consultant for the World Bank's Urban Development Project and helped draft policy recommendations for the Green Urban Growth Policy Note and recommendations for lawmakers regarding the law on Integrated Urban Planning. Key areas of her current work include placemaking, civic engagement, and the use of urban data for better governance.

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"[1] 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.

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.[2] The city's economy relies mainly on services: trade, transportation, communication, finance, etc.[3] 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.[4]

A recent survey of Bishkek residents[5] 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 ten 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,[6] but these are not communities per se, because relations between 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.[7]

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*.[8] 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."[9]

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.[10] 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.[11] 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 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,[12] 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.[13] 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.[14] 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.[15] 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.[16] 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;*[17] they challenge the current state of affairs and typically employ bottom-up mobilization.[18] 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."[19] Taking the network metaphor one step further, Diani proposes that various relations formed between citizen 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.[20] 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,[21] 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.[22] The following section provides details about data collection and the social network analysis measures used in this study.

Box 1. Key Definitions and Measures in Social Network Analysis

Social network is a collection of actors and the connections between them.[24] 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.[25] 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

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).[23] 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 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).

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.[26]

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.

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.[27]
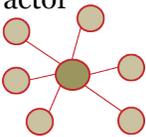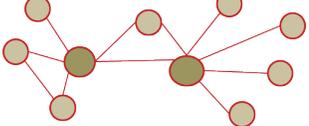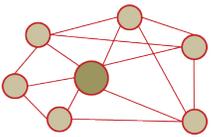
If we look at this general structure in terms of the issues on which actors work, we can see that the dense central subnet includes communities and NGOs working on gender, women's rights, education, and social inclusion. Communities working on narrow topics or in a specific target area (like condominiums), 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
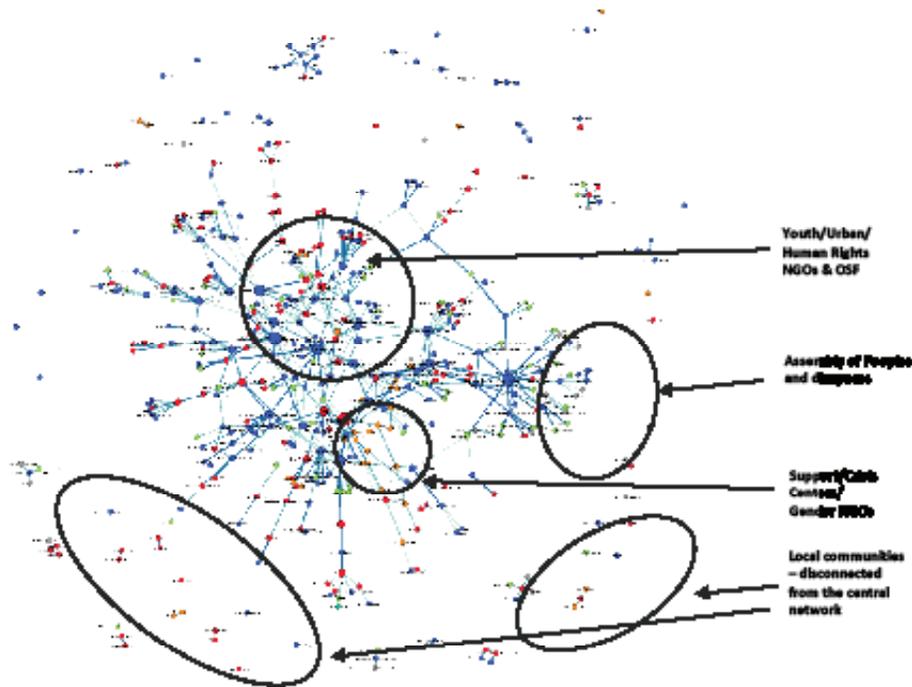
Source: Author's visualization of SNA data

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.

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

Figure 2. Sociogram of city-oriented communities and organizations in Bishkek
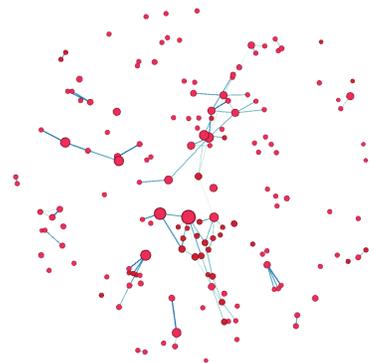
Source: Author's visualization of SNA data

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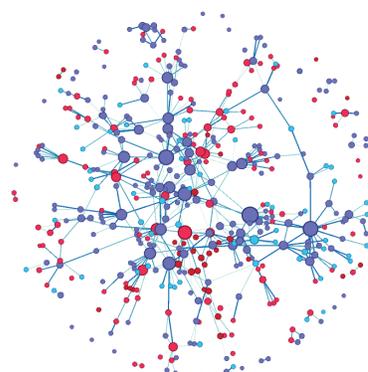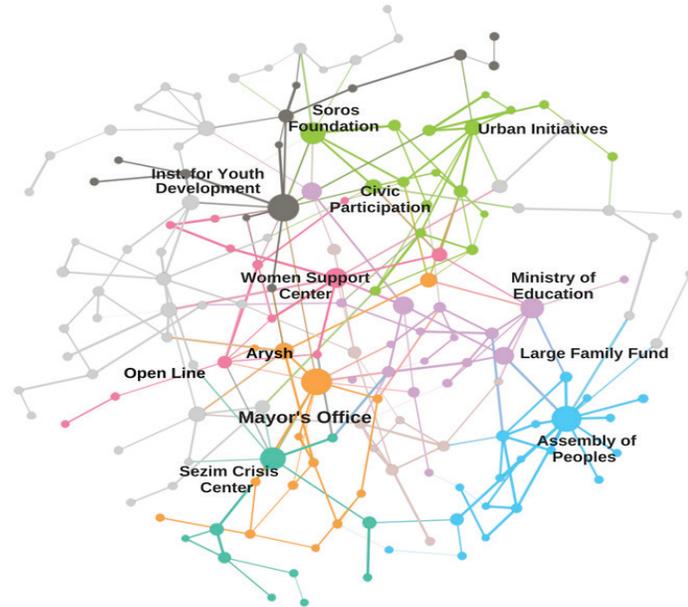

Source: Author's visualization of SNA data

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.

These actors are central to the network and connect remote communities with the central

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

Source: Author's visualization of SNA data

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.[28]

"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.[29]

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*].[30]

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 "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"[31] (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,"[32] and the failure of the law on chemical castration of rapists.[33] 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.[34]

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 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.[35]

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.[36]

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.

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.[37] 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.[38] 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 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.[39] 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 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

Team leaders	• Emil Nasritdinov, American University of Central Asia (AUCA) • Gulnara Ibraeva, Laboratory of Opinion Studies • Raushanna Sarkeyeva, Urban Initiatives PF
Data Collection part 1: Surveys, interviews and case studies	• Nargiz Abdyrakhman kyzy, AUCA • Nurgiza Rustambek kyzy, AUCA • Elnura Kazakbaeva, AUCA • Zarina Urmanbetova, independent researcher • Asel Umarova, independent researcher • Ane Genvarek, independent researcher • Aikanysh Derbisheva, Urban Initiatives PF
Data Collection part 2: Semi-structured interviews, second round	• Zarina Urmanbetova, independent researcher • Diana Ukhina, independent researcher

Appendix 2. List of interviewees and case studies

1st round—data collected through interviews for case studies

#	Name	Issues	Year founded	Scale of activities (target area)
1	**Mutakalim—association of progressive Muslim women**	Domestic violence, family planning, HIV/AIDS, peacebuilding, social exclusion, economic empowerment	2000	Kyrgyzstan, including Bishkek
2	**Our Right PF**	Managing urban commons, preservation of parks, illegal construction, civic engagement in urban planning	2008	Bishkek exclusively
3	**Woman Support Center**	Gender equality, political and economic rights of women, violence against women and girls	1996	Nation-wide; worked with informal settlements of Bishkek
4	**Door Eli**	HIV/AIDS, residence permits for internal migrants, access to social services for internal migrants, prevention of drug addiction	2004	New settlements of Bishkek
5	**Pro KG professional club**	Education and professional opportunities for young people, scholarships for rural youth	2009	Kyrgyzstan

6	Ittipak—Public Union of Uighurs in Kyrgyzstan	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)

2nd round—for explanation of structural patterns, etc.

#	Name	Issues		Scale of activities (target area)
1	UNiTE KG—network "Let's end violence against women and girls"	Gender-based violence, women's rights	2011	Kyrgyzstan
2	Open Line PF	Women's rights	2009	Kyrgyzstan
3	EKOIS	Environment, climate change, and ecology	2001	Kyrgyzstan
4	Institute for Youth Development	Youth empowerment, social entrepreneurship	2011	Bishkek, Chuy, and Issyk-Kul regions
5	IDEA Central Asia	Branch of international debate education association, development of critical thinking and civic engagement among young generation	2001 (IDEA US)	Kyrgyzstan
6	Arysh	Local infrastructure and economic problems in underserved neighborhoods of Bishkek, migration, economic empowerment of internal migrants	1999	Bishkek mainly
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 a few other cities
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

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

Current activities of the community
• What is the community doing? What goals and objectives does it have?
• How do you work with members of the community, or the beneficiaries of your work?
• What problems and challenges do you face?
• 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?

About support and partners
• Who are your supporters? How have you come to know and cooperate with them?
• Who are your primary partners? What is the value of your partnerships with them?
• How do you understand your role in developing partnerships with other communities/ organizations?

About the city
• What associations does Bishkek bring to you? How can you describe the city?
• In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing Bishkek today?
• How do the civic sector (and NGOs) attempt to solve these problems? How would you assess their contribution?
• What changes would you like to see in the city? Do you want to be part of these changes personally?

Endnotes

1 "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_chto_doroga_nyjna.html.

2 "Otchet po itogam sotsialno-ekomicheskogo 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.

3 Ibid.

4 Emil Nasritdinov et al., "Integratsiia novostroek 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.

5 For more detail, see the "Data, Methods, and Measures" section of this paper.

6 Azamat Usubaliev 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.

7 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.

8 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.

9 Graham Day, *Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 11.

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

11 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 issledovanii* (Moscow: MISKP, 2014).

12 Viktor Vakhshtain, "Proizvodstvo soobchshestv: sobytie, iazyk, kommunikatsiia," *60 Parallel* no. 2, 41 (2011), http://intelros.ru/pdf/60_paralel/41/13.pdf.

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

14 Knox and Pinch, *Urban Social Geography*, 191-193.

15 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.

16 Day, *Community and Everyday Life*, 140-141.

17 Kerstin Jacobsson, "Grassroots in the City: Urban Grassroots Movements in Central and Eastern Europe and Post-Soviet Space," (paper presented at the CBEES annual conference, Södertörn University, Stockholm, December 4-5, 2014).

18 Day, *Community and Everyday Life*, 142.

19 Mario Diani, *The Cement of Civil Society: Studying Networks in Localities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

20 Giuffre, *Communities and Networks*, 156-159.

21 Diani, *The Cement of Civil Society*, 12-25.

22 David J. Marshall and Lynn Staeheli, "Mapping Civil Society with Social Network Analysis: Methodological Possibilities and Limitations," *Geoforum* 61 (2015): 56-66.

23 See Appendix 1 for the complete list of researchers.

24 Giuffre, *Communities and Networks*.

25 Ibid.

26 See Appendix 3 for the questionnaire used in the second-round interviews.

27 The SNA measure of this network density is 2.113.

28 Kalicha Umuralieva, director of "Our Right" PF, personal interview with the author, August 2017.

29 BIOM staff member, personal interview with D. Ukhina, December 2017.

30 Arysh manager, personal interview with Z. Urmanbetova, January 2018.

31 The last word of this motto became the nickname of the campaign and the movement— Soobsha in Russian, or "Unite(d)."

32 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/.

33 Ryspek Toktonaliev, "Kyrgyzstan: Aktivisty uvereny, chto khimicheskaia kastratsiia ne effektivna," *Golos.kg*, July 26, 2013, http://golos.kg/?p=11041.

34 UNiTE member, personal interview with D. Ukhina, December 2017.

35 UNiTE coordinator, personal interview with D. Ukhina, December 2017.

36 Ibid.

37 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.

[38] 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).

[39] 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.