Women, the Parliament and Political Participation in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

This paper explores women's participation in parliamentary elections in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Using various methods, it offers an interdisciplinary perspective on factors that affect the likelihood of women participating successfully in parliamentary elections. This study supports the general literature on the effects of gender quotas and proportional representation, but its results on other factors are mixed. The factor of financial resources is significant, though its impact has been reduced with the introduction of gender quotas, while other factors—such as social status—may not be particularly important. The public perception of a woman in politics is not the greatest obstacle to women's representation, and a female candidate's professional status may often be attractive to party leaders.

Keywords

women – electoral politics – parliament – post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan – political participation

Introduction

Women's participation in elections is the norm worldwide. Even Saudi Arabia, one of the last countries to allow women to stand for public office, agreed in

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2015 that women could be elected to local councils. Yet despite considerable advances in formal electoral rights, there remain obstacles to the exercise of these rights throughout the world.

In the post-Soviet countries of Central Asia, women's participation in elections is still an issue. Despite formal opportunities enshrined in constitutions and other laws, and the Soviet legacy of engaging women to some degree in public life, there are still considerable obstacles to women's engagement in politics, and especially in electoral processes. These obstacles include (but are not limited to) the revival of cultural traditionalism and male-centered politics, which downplay the role of women in political life, and women's lack of the financial capital and social networks necessary to be successful in politics. Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan has confronted these same challenges, but the peculiarities of its political system—which mostly relate to the relative openness and competitiveness of its political processes—have created a different set of factors enabling or impeding women's participation in elections. Kyrgyzstan's most recent parliamentary elections took place on October 4, 2015, with around 20 percent of the candidates returned to parliament's 120 seats being women. These were the seventh parliamentary elections in the post-Soviet history of Kyrgyzstan (which dates back to the elections of the Kyrgyz Republic's last Supreme Soviet in 1990); tracking the particularities of women's participation in elections in these twenty-odd years highlights the gender dynamics of elections in this post-Soviet country.

Although scholars have studied women's participation in politics extensively, across various countries and regions, the Central Asian region has not been a particular area of focus, especially as regards electoral politics. There have been a number of studies on the general status of women in the region and its countries.[1] There have been also some studies[2] on the gender aspects of political processes, as well as on the transition from the socialist practice of engaging women through organizations loyal to the Communist Party[3] and the impact of democratization on gender relations.[4]

1 Saima Ibrahim, "Status of Women in Uzbekistan," *Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 10, no. 3 (2013): 47–55; Ayşegül Gökalp, "Gender in Central Asia," *International Relations* 18, no. 1 (2004): 91–107.

2 Christa Hämmerle, ed., *Gender Politics in Central Asia: Historical Perspectives and Current Living Conditions of Women* (Wien, Köln, and Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2008), 18; Lori M. Handrahan, "Gender and Ethnicity in the 'Transitional Democracy' of Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 20, no. 4 (2001): 467–96.

3 Stanley Rosen, "Women and Political Participation in China," *Pacific Affairs* 68, no. 3 (1995): 315–41.

4 Georgina Waylen, "Women and Democratization: Conceptualizing Gender Relations in Transition Politics," *World Politics* 46, no. 3 (1994): 327–54.

Women's role in politics has sometimes been studied from a historical perspective.5 Studies of women's political participation have often observed their active engagement in civil society,6 which arguably provides an entry-point for women to engage in political life. Some studies have highlighted gender aspects of nation building,7 while others have looked at the phenomenon of obon—*otriyad bab ososobogo naznacheniya* (an all-female mob for hire)8— and discussed how these groups of women participate in contentious politics using their symbolic capital. The external dimension has also been covered in some literature, with a focus on development interventions.9 Furthermore, local and international scholars alike have observed that there is increasing contestation between women's political activism, on the one hand, and the pressure of patriarchy, on the other. Even dress, they note, is becoming a signifier of gender nationalism. As Kandiyoti puts it, "In discussions of women's rights, …we often revert to a world of unchanging tradition and cultural stasis,"10 a remark that accurately captures the political context of Kyrgyzstan.

5 Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender & Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Elizabeth A. Constantine, "Soviet Policy and Ideology for Gender in Central Asia and Contemporary Reversal," in *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present*, ed. Jeff Sahadeo and Russell Zanca (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 115–26.

6 Rebecca A. Blackburn, "Women of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: Historical Legacies Impacting Contemporary Involvement" (ma thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011); Meghan Simpson, "Local Strategies in Globalizing Gender Politics: Women's Organizing in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2006): 9–31; Handrahan, "Gender and Ethnicity."

7 Nick Megoran, "Theorizing Gender, Ethnicity and the Nation-State in Central Asia," *Central Asian Survey* 18, no. 1 (1999): 99–110.

8 Elmira Satybaldieva, "Loud Rebels: Politics of 'Revolutionary Women' in Kyrgyzstan" (paper presented at the xviii ISA World Congress of Sociology, Yokohama, Japan, July 13–19, 2014).

9 Joanna Hoare, "Development and Gender in Kyrgyzstan," Social Research Centre Re- search Report, Bishkek, 2009; Marina Safarova, Anjelika Abdurakhmanova, and Rano Kasymova, "EU Gender Watch: A Gender Analysis of EU Development of Instruments and Policies in Tajikistan. Representing Central Asia," The Network of East–west Women, Dushanbe, 2007, http://www.neww.org.pl/download/EU_GenderWatch_Tajikistan.pdf; Armine Ishkanian, "Gender Mainstreaming in the Context of Europe, Central Asia and the cis: Regional Challenges," in *Gender Mainstreaming in Practice: A Toolkit*, ed. Nadja Dolata (Bratislava: UNDP, 2007).

10 Denis Kandiyoti, "Old Dilemmas or New Challenges? The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan," *Development and Change* 38, no. 2 (2007): 169–99.

Scholars have used a number of methods and relied on various sources of data to study women's political participation. In this study, we bring together numerous studies on gender and politics in the region as a whole and Kyrgyzstan in particular. We also use an original data set on the political elite (developed by one of the co-authors) to track women's participation in the cabinet of ministers and in the parliament. In-depth interviews about the processes and results of the 2015 parliamentary elections were conducted with eight people who appeared on party candidate lists, four of whom became MPs. Additionally, we analyze some laws and documents published on the website of the State Election Commission of the Kyrgyz Republic and draw information from local newspapers and internet resources.

The article first discusses the political processes in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan that shape the general environment for women's participation. It then looks into the general trends in women's electoral participation throughout the post-Soviet period and identifies various factors that could potentially explain variations in women's participation in the 2015 elections, such as culture and financial capital. Finally, it discusses the processes of women's participation in the most recent parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan, with a particular focus on ethnographic perspectives.

Women and Power in Post-Soviet Central Asia

Since its independence, post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan has been consciously constructing itself as a state with a comparatively more liberal environment for political participation than those of its neighbors. Influential politicians' ability to mobilize people to protest has often been seen as a unique element of politics in Kyrgyzstan;[11] the popular revolts of 2005 and 2010, which toppled the Akaev and Bakiyev regimes, manifested the contentious nature of the country's political processes. Overall, the early liberalization of the political system has created path dependency, and the regime has been sustained by the interplay between the modestly powerful center and a number of fluid— but still influential—semi-autonomous groups of politicians.

If we look at female political participation (which includes participation in community decision-making, participation in private arenas, access to positions of political authority, and the existence of active civic female organizations), it can be said that women in Kyrgyzstan are quite active. For instance,

11 Scott Radnitz, *Weapons of the Wealthy: Predatory Regimes and Elite-Led Protests in Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

in 2014 there were 300 NGOs advocating for women and their initiatives.12 That being said, the existence of a large number of women's organizations does not in itself guarantee the improvement of women's rights, and especially their position in politics and business. In the business sector, there are 30 percent fewer women than men, and women manage just 2 percent of big private companies and enterprises.13 Although women have gained political positions, there are still few women at the highest levels of public decision-making.14 Women comprise 53 percent of the country's population, but they are scarcely represented as political leaders in parties and as high state officials. This situation is analogous to that in many other countries in the world, a cause for concern for such organizations as the National Democratic Institute, which notes that "democracy cannot truly deliver for all of its citizens if half of the population remains underrepresented in the political arena."15 Equitable representation of women in politics in Kyrgyzstan is vividly decreasing in electoral terms: fewer women were elected to parliament in 2015 than in either 2007 or 2010. This may be due to personality differences between male and female candidates,16 the challenge of being a female in a male-dominated society,17 or socialization factors (such as sexual stereotyping) that impact voter choice.18

The question of to what extent women form part of influential political groups may not necessitate any special studies, since there are few signs of such activity. In this paper, however, we discuss various factors that contribute to women's varied roles in electoral politics. While politics in Kyrgyzstan is generally more open to participation than is that of its Central Asian neighbors,

12 In Kyrgyzstan in 2014, there was a project that aimed to create a statistical mapping of NGOs focused on women's issues. See more at "reach—Informirovanie dlia bolee effektivnoi gumanitarnoi deiatel'nosti," http://ru.reach-initiative.kg/.

13 For more on the presence of women in the private sector, see "V Kyrgyzstane dolia zhenshchin v biznese sostavliaet menee 30%—issledovanie," *For.kg*, October 8, 2012, http://for.kg/news-191019-ru.html.

14 Women constitute 40 percent of the administration of Kyrgyzstan's government; the General Prosecutor of the Kyrgyz Republic is a woman.

15 Melinda Haring and Joshua Foust, "Who Cares How Many Women Are in Parliament?" *Foreign Policy*, June 25, 2012, http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/06/25.

16 Emmy E. Werner and Louise M. Bachtold, "Personality Characteristics of Women in Politics," in *Women in Politics*, ed. Jane S. Jacquette (New York: Wiley, 1995), 146–62.

17 Wilma Rule, "Electoral Systems, Contextual Factors and Women's Opportunity for Election to Parliament in Twenty-Three Democracies," *Western Political Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (1998): 64–75.

18 Laurie E. Ekstrand and William A. Eckert, "The Impact of Candidate's Sex on Voter Choice," *Western Political Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1981): 78–87.

it is unclear that this openness extends to including women. Before proceeding to discuss women's participation in the parliament, we will provide an over- view of their participation in the political life of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan.

Overall, we found the representation of women in political institutions other than the parliament to be quite modest. This is potentially problematic, because it limits the possibilities for women to rise from lower levels of politics to national-level government. Though local *keneshes* (councils) in rural areas and towns are not necessarily powerful institutions, they play a huge role in engaging local-level politicians and they may invoke socio-cultural factors that determine the likelihood that an individual will be elected in various localities. There is no available longitudinal data, but various studies indicate that women are underrepresented at the local level, with women heading up just 3 percent of the country's 459 *ail okomty* (local governments).19 Women's representation on the local councils (*aiyl* and city *keneshes*) is also steadily declining—whereas in 2004 women comprised 14.53 percent of council members, by 2011 this share was 13.29 percent.20 Few women stand for office at the local level, and the proportion of women who win these elections is corre- spondingly low. In 2012, for example, just 13 percent of candidates at the *raion* (district) level throughout the country were women.21 Once women emerge as candidates, however, they stand a good chance of being elected.

Though Kyrgyzstan has already had more presidential transitions than its neighbors have, presidential elections have rarely been competitive (with the notable exception of 2011). The first woman did not run for president until 2005, when 2 of the 22 initial candidates were women. In 2010, a woman was elected interim president for the first time, and during the referendum on the new constitution, that woman—head of the Interim Government Roza Otunbaeva—was elected uncontested as president. This may not have been a formal competitive election, but it marked the first time that a woman be- came president of Kyrgyzstan—or, indeed, of any Central Asian country. In 2011, several women were nominated as presidential candidates, but none of them reached the point of final candidate registration.

19 "Human Development Report—2013," UNDP, http://hdr.undp.org/en/2013-report.

20 "Human Development Report—2013," 64.

21 "Violations of Political Rights of Women in Electoral Processes in Kyrgyz Republic—2013," Women Support Center, http://wsc.kg/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Narusheniya-politicheskih-prav-zhenshhin-PPZH-v-vybornyh-protsessah-v-Kyrgyzskoj-Respublike.-Otchet-issledovaniya.-Avtor_-ZH.ZHeenbaeva.pdf.

Women have been under-represented in the cabinet in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Of the 10122 individuals who have held ministerial positions since the 1990s, only 7 have been women (8 percent of all cabinet members). These women have held the positions of minister of foreign affairs (1), social welfare (1), justice (3), finance (1), and education (2). Only two women served as ministers more than once, and as of November 2011, there was only one female minister, the Minister of Social Protection. Of the 20 cabinet heads in the post- independence period, only one—Roza Otunbayeva—has been a woman, and only due to the exceptional circumstances that led to her serving as Chair of the Interim Government in 2010. (Otunbaeva acquired this position because she had been appointed leader of the opposition in a rally in March 2010, a month before Bakiyev's government collapsed during the popular revolt.)

The only politically significant institution where women have long played an important role is civil society, an informal arena where women have exercised authority since the early 1990s. This arena for collective action represented a space where women had limited competition from men, who—generally speaking—were more inclined to find work in public institutions or private business. One of the highest manifestations of the women's movement's engagement with politics was their initiation of a draft law on tackling domestic violence. Following the constitution, initiating this law required the women behind it to gather 30,000 signatures; the law was successfully adopted in 2003. Women's participation in the civil service, meanwhile, is quite low, particularly at the higher levels. In 2003, the share of women at the national level was 37.8 percent, and at the *raion* (district) level 28.5 percent, whereas 73.5 percent of women in the civil service served as low-ranking bureaucrats and technicalspecialists.23

Women and Electoral Participation—Post-Soviet Dynamics

Previous studies have looked at the presence of women in various political institutions in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Some of these studies24 suggest that

22 The data collected by the Department of International and Comparative Politics of American University of Central Asia includes 101 cabinet ministers and is based on their official biographies.

23 "Replies of Member Countries on Realization of Beijing Platform in Actions (1995)," UNDP, 2004, http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/Review/responses/KYRGYZSTAN-Russian.pdf.

24 E.V. Kochkina, "Predstavlennost' zhenshchin v rossiiskikh organakh vlasti," http://www.owl.ru/win/books/policy/kochkina.htm.

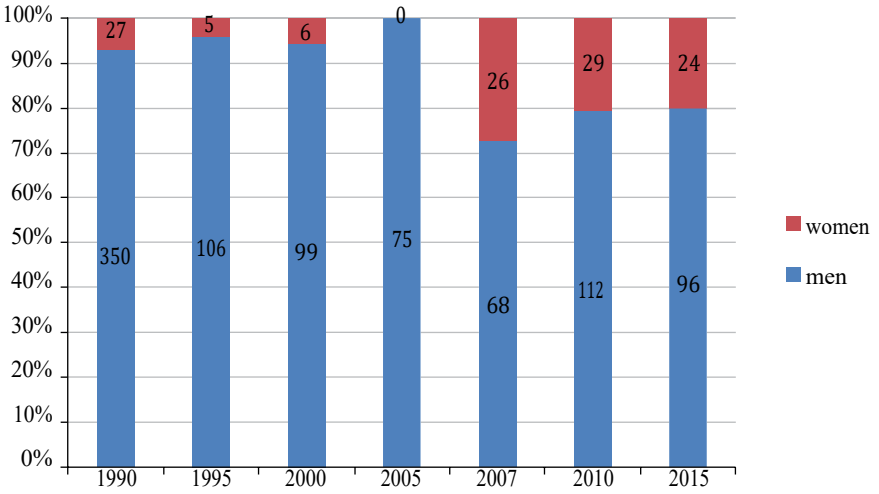

Figure 1 *Proportion of Women among Elected MPs, 1990–2015*
Source: Based on data collected by the Department of International and Comparative Politics at the American University of Central Asia.

presence of Soviet women in representative institutions (*Soviets*) was nominal and they were not well represented there. Our study likewise suggests that women had a limited presence in the representative institutions of the late *perestroika* period. The data on the post-Soviet Kyrgyz parliament25 shows that women made up just over 7 percent of deputies to the last Supreme Soviet of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, elected in 1990 (see Figure 1). In light of this, women's performance in the first post-Soviet elections to the *Zhogorku Kenesh* (the parliament), where they won less than 5 percent of seats, is not so much a drastic decline as a continuation of an established trend. The 2000 elections saw a few more women returned to office, but this was countered by the 2005 elections, which resulted in a parliament without any women at all.

It should be noted that there were a number of women candidates for the 2005 elections, and three of them received seats in the parliament in the February elections. However, all three—including Bermet Akaeva, the daughter

25 The data collected by the Department of International and Comparative Politics of American University of Central Asia includes 1025 MPs (some of them were MPs more than once, so the database contains fewer individuals) for the period 1990–2015 and is based on their official biographies. The data incudes not only those MPs who came to parliament after elections, but also those who came after rotation.

of the first president—lost their seats in a court ruling that followed the popular revolts in March.

As the figure shows, significant change in the representation of women has occurred since 2007; since then, it has been at a much higher level. This is due to the fact that the electoral system was changed from single member districts to proportional representation based on party lists. Gender, ethnic and age quotas imposed several constraints on these lists with the goal of increasing diversity; these included the stipulation that every fourth candidate should be a woman. The resultant increase in women's representation put Kyrgyzstan far above the average for the region: in Eastern Europe and the cis in 2009, around 15 percent of parliamentary seats were held by women,26 compared to
27.7 percent in Kyrgyzstan as of 2007.

The impact of gender quotas has gone beyond electing more women to parliament. It has also seen women taking on key parliamentary positions they have not historically held, such as vice-speakers or chairs of committees.

The marked change in 2007 coincided with the change to the electoral system and the introduction of quotas, but it also resulted from opportunities created by the second president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who sought societal support to advance his attempts to consolidate power. These two processes occurred concurrently and were mutually reinforcing. The change of electoral system came with the referendum of October 21, 2007, which changed the constitution for the third time in less than a year. (Changes had previously occurred in November 2006 and January 2007.) In anticipation of change, the women's movement had organized a forum to discuss the need for quotas, which were ultimately incorporated into the new electoral legislation. Where- as acceptance of gender quotas in various countries has been largely the result of policy diffusion,27 in Kyrgyzstan the favorable environment for adoption of quotas was created by active women's organizations and the particularities of the regime transformation that was underway at the time.

Bakiyev's regime was becoming increasingly authoritarian and the 2007 constitutional amendments rolled back some of the power decentralization achieved by the two previous constitutional changes, focusing instead on building a dominant party system (which was already a feature of many post-Soviet systems). While outplaying the political opposition in these constitutional

26 "Povyshenie roli i rasshirenie uchastiia zhenshchin v politicheskikh protsessakh,"UNDP, Bratislava, 2009, http://www.un.org/ru/development/surveys/docs/women_polit _participation.pdf.

27 Mona Lena Krook, "Reforming Representation: The Diffusion of Candidate Gender Quotas Worldwide," *Politics & Gender* 2, no. 3 (2006): 303–27.

changes, Bakiyev was seemingly vying for the support of at least part of civil society: the introduction of quotas served to put a democratic gloss on the otherwise increasingly autocratic substance of the constitutional changes.

However it came about, the quota system resolved the issue of women's non-representation in parliament. The 2007 elections produced a record proportion of women elected to the *Zhogorku Kenesh*. That being said, party leaders adversely affected women's actual representation in the parliament by abiding by gender quotas during the campaign, then using legal loopholes to change candidates on the party list after the fact. Institutions play an indisputable role in women's representation, but what are the other factors that facilitate or hinder their participation in elections?

Women in Elections—Factors

Various factors that affect women's level of political participation have been discussed in the literature. There are arguments about the effect of oil resources, Islamic influence,28 social upbringing,29 culture and social structure,30 the professionalization of politics,31 and other factors that may affect women's odds of being elected.

In this section, we single out three sets of factors. One of them is tentatively referred to as social factors, a second relates to the role of the electoral system, and the third is the role of money in politics. This is not an exhaustive list of potentially significant factors in the politics of Kyrgyzstan, but these three seem to be essential to scholarly discussions as well as to observations of the country's electoral politics.

28 Michael L. Ross, "Oil, Islam, and Women," *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 1 (2008): 107–23.

29 Sidney Verba, Nancy Burns, and Kay Lehman Schlozman, "Knowing and Caring about Politics: Gender and Political Engagement," *The Journal of Politics* 59, no. 4 (1997): 1051–72.

30 Pamela Paxton and Marie M. Hughes, *Women, Politics, and Power: A Global Perspective* (Thousand Oaks, ca: SAGE Publications, 2007).

31 Pippa Norris and Drude Dahlerup, "On the Fast Track: The Spread of Gender Quota Policies for Elected Office," *Harvard University Kennedy School Faculty Research Working Papers Series* rwp15–14, July 2015.

The Cultural Factor

Cultural factors, be they the role of the family32 or the potential effect of social orientation,33 are often considered important in the literature. Politics in Central Asia has been sometimes viewed as being based on clan relations,34 which implies a lesser role for women.

Society's overall perception of women's political participation is not necessarily negative. In one survey conducted in Kyrgyzstan, just 15 percent of respondents had a negative attitude toward women's participation in local government.35 In a UNFPA survey,36 respondents did not see gender differences in the qualities politicians expressed; according to the same survey, 73 percent of male and 64 percent of female respondents thought that women contributed significantly to the country's politics.37

Thus, public perception, per se, may not be hindering women's political participation. Instead, it may be a lack of access to social networks, coupled with the immediate social-cultural environment, that impedes women's participation in elections. One example of the variability of cultural contexts is the lack of ethnic diversity among female members of the parliament. As Figure 2 suggests, for the majority of the post-Soviet period women MPs have come from just two ethnic groups—Kyrgyz and Russians—though these two groups rep- resented less than 80 percent of the population in the 2009 census.

The fact that women from the Uzbek community (which comprised 14.3 percent of the population as of the 2009 census) have not been represented in the parliament since 1995 is an example of a cultural factor. Khulkarposho Sabirova, the only Uzbek woman to get close to being elected to parliament, was removed from the list of candidates in 2015 due to her alleged Russian citizenship. Her position as the wife of Alisher Sabirov, a longstanding Uzbek MP (he served until 2010), also points to women candidates' lack of autonomous status in national elections; they often rely, as in this case, on a power base created by male politicians. Patron-client relations in some ethnic communities

32 Birte Siim, "Engendering Democracy: Social Citizenship and Political Participation for Women in Scandinavia," *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 1, no. 3 (1994): 286–305.

33 Verba, Burns, and Schlozman, "Knowing and Caring about Politics."

34 Kathleen Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

35 "Human Development Report—2013."

36 "Gender in Society Perception Survey," UNFPA, Bishkek: 2016, http://kyrgyzstan.unfpa.org/en/publications/gender-society-perception-study.

37 "Gender in Society Perception Survey," 153.

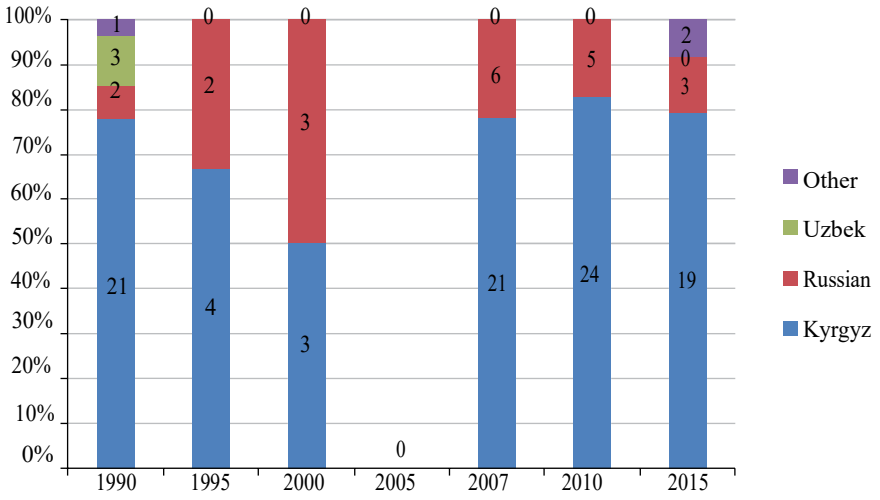

Figure 2 *Ethnic Origin of Women MPs, 1990–2015*
Source: Based on data collected by the Department of International and Comparative Politics at the AmericanUniversity of Central Asia.

in Kyrgyzstan38 promote male dominance to mobilize political resources, an approach that impedes women from being active in electoral politics.

The proportion of Kyrgyz women in the parliament is also small relative to the demographic size of Kyrgyz as an ethnic group (70.9 percent of the population in the 2009 census). Few women were elected under the single member districts electoral system that existed until 2007. In a situation where a woman had to run as an individual, she was less likely to be elected than a man. During the 2000 elections, which were held under the mixed electoral system, a number of women were elected to represent the Democratic Party of Women, which garnered 12.68 percent of the vote.

The Electoral System Factor

The electoral system is one of the most obvious factors impacting women's representation, and it has evidently had an impact (as Figure 1 shows). In 2007, constitutional changes resulted in the change of the electoral system and the call for early parliamentary elections in December of that year. The introduction of list-based proportional representation was accompanied by gender,

38 Matteo Fumagalli, "Informal Ethnopolitics and Local Authority Figures in Osh, Kyrgyzstan," *Ethnopolitics* 6, no. 2 (2007): 211–33.

ethnicity, age, and—later—disability quotas. The new law stipulated that every fourth candidate on the party list should be a woman.

By the time Kyrgyzstan introduced quotas, they were already a globally used mechanism to ensure gender representation in legislatures. In total, 118 countries and territories were using some sort of quota to elect their parliament.[39] In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the absence of women from the parliament elected in 2005 served as a backdrop for discussing the introduction of quotas.

Nevertheless, women continue to be underrepresented compared to the legal requirement that a quarter of deputies should be women. As Figure 2 shows, this occurred only in the 2007 parliamentary elections. In the two subsequent elections of 2010 and 2015, approximately one-fifth of MPs were women. The inadequacy of the law was often blamed: it requires every fourth candidate to be a woman during the election campaign, but for a long time did not regulate how parties changed candidates after elections. It was not until June 2017 that changes to the law were introduced requiring replacements to be made with candidates of the same gender. This change exemplifies how gender quota pol- icies[40] improve with policy learning.

If we were to look at local council elections, where proportional representation was introduced to city councils in 2012 (*aiyl keneshes,* or village councils, were elected under a different electoral system), we would see the same trend. This trend has held true despite the introduction of even stricter gender quotas (every third candidate should be of another sex) to city council elections in 2012. Figure 3 highlights the decline in women's representation in local councils between 2004 and 2012.

The graph presents aggregated data on both city councils and *aiyl keneshes*, but it is clear that women's representation is declining overall, and especially between the 2008 and 2012 electoral cycles. In the capital city, Bishkek, one of the winning parties in the 2012 elections became a no-women faction in the city council.

All in all, the formal institutional arrangements created by the quota system helped to increase women's representation, but the institutions were subject to the whim of party leaders, who re-arranged party lists after elections and circumvented legal requirements.

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39 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (idea), *Atlas of Gender Quotas*, 2013.

40 Pippa Norris, *Passages to Power: Legislative Recruitment in Advanced Democracies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

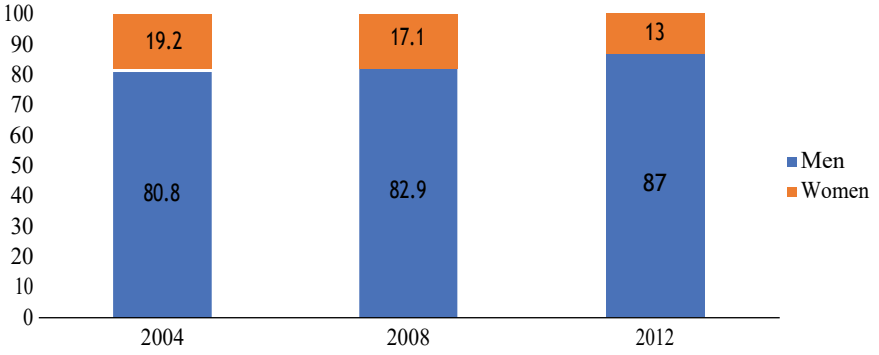

Figure 3 *The Gender Ratio among Members of Local Councils, 2004–2012*
Source: Based on figures from the Central Election Committee.

The Money Factor

In developing a resource model of political participation, Brady, Verba, and Schlozman41 emphasize time, civic skills, and money. Access to financial resources has often been viewed as an essential element of a candidate's ability to be elected.

In analyzing MPs, we also looked at their official biographies to determine whether they had any experience of working in business. A stark difference between men and women deputies on this variable emerged in 2007, as Figure 4 shows.

Before 2005, however small the overall number of women in the parliament was, an equal share of women and men had business ties. In fact, the share of women MPs with a business background exceeded that of men in the 2000 elections. The situation changed with the 2007 parliamentary elections, which brought about a drastic decline in the number of businesswomen in parliament (even taking into account the abrupt end to political careers that a 2005 no-women parliament may imply). Though party leaders continued to seek candidates with financial capital, they also had to meet quota requirements. Moreover, leaders looked for candidates who could offer other valuable assets: public image, social connections, etc.

The proportional representation system likewise affected businessmen in politics: after the new electoral system was introduced, the proportion of male MPs with a business background stopped increasing. Yet the increasing discrepancy between the shares of male and female deputies with a business

41 Henry E. Brady, Sidney Verba, and Kay Lehman Schlozman, "Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation," *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 2 (1995): 271–94.

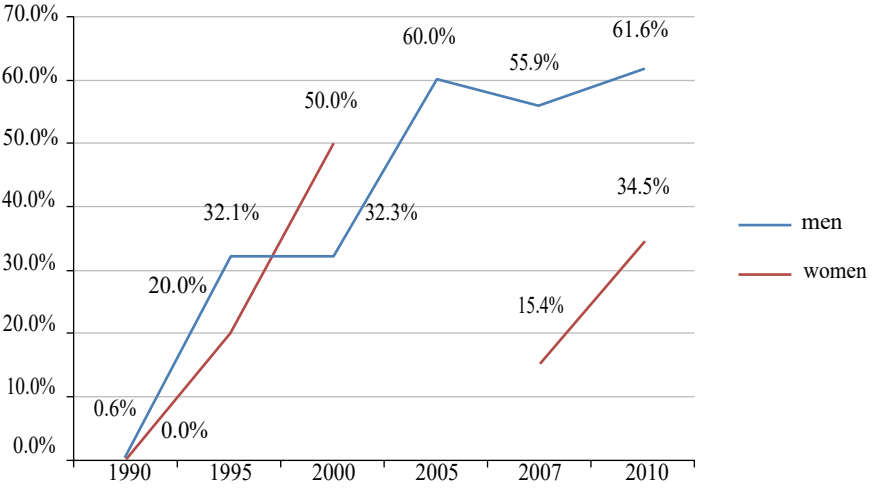

Figure 4 *mps with Business Background, 1990–2010, by Gender*
Source: Based on data collected by the Department of International and Comparative Politics at the AmericanUniversity of Central Asia.

background after 2007 shows the interconnectedness between the electoral system and money. That being said, it would be premature to conclude—based on our data and the limited number of electoral cycles that have occurred since independence—that under a proportional system, money has less of an impact on women's odds of being elected.

Our brief analysis of three factors showed increasing variability in the electoral system, money and culture. According to a recent nationwide survey,42 among the obstacles to women's participation in politics, the lack of societal support is perceived to be more prevalent (42 percent of respondents) than lack of materials means (26 percent). The limited importance of money was also highlighted in a survey that followed the 2007 parliamentary elections,43 which listed the necessary characteristics of women candidates, in order of decreasing importance: professionalism, party experience, visibility/name recognition in the relevant region, ability to mobilize votes, representation of ethnic groups, and access to financial resources.

42 "Gender in Society Perception Survey," 156.

43 "Gender Analysis of Political Parties in Kyrgyzstan," UNDP, Bishkek, 2008, http://www.kg.undp.org/content/kyrgyzstan/en/home/library/womens_empowerment/gender-analysis-of-political-parties-in-kyrgyzstan.html.

While the new electoral system evidently resolved the issues with women's underrepresentation at the national level, the local elections showed the resilience of cultural and, perhaps, money factors that contributed to women's disengagement from politics.

We will now explore women's participation in politics by looking at the 2015 parliamentary elections from an anthropological perspective.

Women's Leadership in Parties—Observing the 2015 Parliamentary Elections

The 2015 parliamentary elections were remarkable in many regards: they were the first elections to happen without a prior change to the constitution, and they were peaceful. Moreover, like the 2010 elections, they were quite contested and—according to various electoral observations—relatively fairer and more transparent. 14 parties took part in the campaign, of which six eventually passed the 7 percent national and 0.7 percent regional thresholds.

Since early independence, various studies on gender and politics have stressed the issue of gender inequality and the lack of women's party leadership in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan.44 Yet there is a lack of anthropological scholarship on women's engagement in parliamentary politics and the decision-making process in Kyrgyzstan.

This section of the paper aims to analyze women's political participation in the 2015 election using anthropological field methods that address the question discussed above—namely, which factors affect women's political participation in Kyrgyzstan. This section also aims to explore recommendations that could be made to empower women in Kyrgyzstan politically. One of the authors of this paper, an active member of *Bir Bol* party, which successfully entered the current parliament (winning 10 of 120 seats), conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews among deputy candidates between March 2014 and December 2015.

As Huskey and Hill state, regionalism, ethnicity, personalism, and violence offer convincing explanations for party preferences in Central Asian elections.45 On top of these factors, the electoral process and political participation in

44 Hämmerle, *Gender Politics in Central Asia*; Handrahan, "Gender and Ethnicity."

45 Eugene Huskey and David Hill, "Regionalism, Personalism, Ethnicity, and Violence: Parties and Voter Preference in the 2010 Parliamentary Election in Kyrgyzstan," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 29, no. 3 (2013): 237–67.

Kyrgyzstan are influenced by such key issues as discrepancies in the neoliberal economy, unpredictable power dynamics, chronic fraud in the electoral system, and increasing gender inequality. Gender inequality is present not only in politics, but also in everyday life, more or less excluding women in Kyrgyzstan from any forms of decision-making practice and process. According to the un in the Kyrgyz Republic, "the number of women who suffered from domestic violence (those who applied for help) in 2015 reached 8,458 people." The pro- portion of early marriages in the Kyrgyz Republic stands at 12.7 percent today (9.2 percent in cities, 14.6 percent in villages). Female poverty in 2015 increased by 3 percent compared to 2014, due to women's low labor force participation rate (49.9 percent).46 All these complex factors add an additional burden to female candidates, whose electoral perspectives are diminished by the patriarchal models that still exist in Kyrgyz society.47

From a gender perspective, the women who stood for election in 2015 came from diverse professional, educational, and family backgrounds; they also had varying levels of political status and experience. We divided women candidates into three groups, based on such criteria as financial resources, social self-presentation, and recognition, which are conventionally considered to affect electoral outcomes for female candidates. In terms of women owning financial resources, these come from two sources: (1) their own business that provides capital; or (2) the funds of a male family member (husband, father, son, or other). Women instrumentalize their financial capital and financial resources to push themselves up party lists, increasing their odds of gaining political power. As the 2015 election showed, women candidates had to con- tribute to the party's budget as much as men candidates did. Various estimates place the cost of contribution between us$50,000 and us$1 million.48 In some cases, however, a woman candidate's financial resources were not equal to her professional status, social recognition, and so-called "reputation capital," which includes such socio-cultural characteristics as marriage status, moral reputation, and knowledge of Kyrgyz traditions and Kyrgyz language.

46 "National Women's Forum of Kyrgyzstan to be held in Bishkek," United Nations in the Kyrgyz Republic, http://kg.one.un.org/content/unct/kyrgyzstan/en/home/news/kg-news/2017/national-women-s-forum-of-kyrgyzstan-to-be-held-in-bishkek.html.

47 Aksana Ismailbekova, "Constructing the Authority of Women through Custom: Bulak Village, Kyrgyzstan," *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 44, no. 2 (2016): 266–80.

48 Zhibek Begalieva, "Million na mandat deputata," *Nastoiashchee vremia*, September 24, 2015, http://www.currenttime.tv/a/27267990.html.

Women's party membership and political successes are also heavily shaped by informal networks of friendship, colleagueship or kinship, which are a dominant feature of many societies in transition, especially those of post-socialist countries.49 Party leaders manage these links, ties and connections; very rarely are women selected "from the street," as it were. A current woman deputy from the *Respublika-Ata-Zhurt* party, who preferred to remain anonymous, shared with one of the authors her views about the mechanisms of party membership selection:

> I came to the party because I have friendly relationships with one of the male leaders of the party. He knows well of my financial stability and perhaps this fact was decisive for him in inviting me to participate in the election. I did not participate in or nor was I a member of any party before 2014, and after the conversation with him I decided to enter the party. I definitely considered my friendly relationship a guarantee of my success during the election.

Another candidate from *Bir Bol* party described how she became a member of a party:

> Party leaders invited me because they knew my father, who dealt with the educational system and institutions in one of the *oblasts* of the country. Other parties also invited me to become a member, but I chose this one because they respected the authority of my father. I thought that this fact and my own professional experience made me useful and successful in the party and future election.
>
> Damira, 48 years old, chief of the *Bir Bol* party's women's committee

The experience of one of the authors similarly related to this "previous choice" model of party networking. In early 2014, she became a member of the *Bir Bol* party on the invitation of an in-law, who recommended her to the party leaders. When she went to a meeting with them, she immediately recognized that one of the leaders was a person with whom she used to work after graduating from university. These past collegial relationships encouraged her to become

49 Jan Åke Dellenbrant and Oleg Andreev, "Russian Politics in Transition: Political Parties and Organizations in Russia and the Murmansk Region," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 17 (1994): 109–37; Andrey A. Meleshevich, *Party Systems in Post-Soviet Countries: A Comparative Study of Political Institutionalization in the Baltic Countries, Russia and Ukraine* (New York: Palgrave, 2007).

very involved with the party, and she actively worked for its success before and during the election.

Analyzing these three experiences, we can infer that women's party membership is largely built on such ties as friendship, kinship networks, and collegial experience. In many cases, these models and practices of party building show the immaturity and instability of the party system. In addition, Kyrgyzstan's small population[50] and geographical area increase the interplay of informal relations, making them more used within the country's political system. A weakness of this party-building system is that women are put in a position of dependency on—and subordination to—the party leader/s and his/their preferences and decisions.

At the same time, personal ties are no guarantee of party success; prospective candidates must also contribute financial resources to the party's cash box. The current parliament includes several women who are from economically well-to-do families. For instance, *Respublika-Ata-Zhurt* deputy Dinara Isaeva ranked number 8 on a list of the 20 richest state officials. Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (sdpk) deputy Elvira Surabaldieva owns a car sale business and Aisuluu Mamasheva is from a family that has for many years been engaged in the restaurant industry.[51] These examples show that parliamentary candidates' financial resources do not vary by gender. Women deputies with different business interests are spread equally between the winning parties, a vivid indicator of women's comparatively high involvement in individual or family business.

In the 2015 election, women's financial capacity and their willingness to pay was one of the most crucial criteria in becoming a party member and occupying one of the top positions on the party list. A financially successful woman deputy from the *Respublika-Ata-Zhurt* party who had two enterprises made such a point:

50 The total population of the Kyrgyz Republic was 5,727,553 in 2016, of whom Kyrgyz comprised 70.9 percent, according to Index Mundi, "Kyrgyzstan Demographics Profile 2017," http://www.indexmundi.com/kyrgyzstan/demographics_profile.html.

51 Kanymgul Elkeeva, "Tizmedegi belgisiz, belgiluu aiymdar," *Azattyk*, September 3, 2015, https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_politics_women_parliament/27224475.html. There is also an article by the Azattyk media agency about the different types of women deputies in the current parliament—see "O meste zhenshchiny v Zhogorku Keneshe," *Azattyk*, September 4, 2015, http://rus.azattyk.org/content/article/27226446.html.

> From the beginning, our party leaders have put women candidates in a position of self-financing and self-sustaining. The allocated voting precinct was entirely financed by the woman candidate. Due to this, some women spent their own financial resources, ranging from us$50,000 to us$250,000; others sought assistance from relatives; and a third group took out loans from the bank.

Women's financial wealth spurs male politicians to want to attract such candidates to the party and negotiate partnership. At the same time, if a woman wins, she risks losing her financial status, since Article 5 of the 2008 Law about the status of *Zhogorku Kenesh* deputies says that a deputy cannot head any business activity. In practice, however, this law often goes unobserved: many deputies own and lead companies.52

The second means of becoming a party member is through social activity. Social recognition is based on voters' knowledge of some public and even private information about a female candidate. In 2015, such candidates were praised far more than those who were known only because they were standing for election. Such current deputies as Ainuru Altybaeva, Karamat Orozova and Natalya Nikitenko were already well-known women deputies in previous parliaments. Almost all party leaders took advantage of such women's political capital. On this topic, a deputy from *Bir Bol* party who wished to remain anonymous pointed out:

> Women in the 2015 election fought for parliamentary seats as men did. There were no preferences in terms of gender. Both sexes were equal and the main criteria for their success were professionalism, work experience in the political sphere, and their credibility to the electorate. In our party, women did not pay any money, and the three women who were elected were chosen because of their professionalism, public recognition, and trust among their electorate. Women in our party played a leading role in the election. We got such women professionals as Cholpon Jakupova and Bakyt Esenbaeva. All of them represent such different spheres where hu- man rights advocacy is very needed—and no, none of these three womenpaid.

52 During her term in 2010–2015, the deputy Damira Niyazalieva sold her pharmacy business to a foreign company—see "Damira Niiazalieva prodala semeinyi farmatsevticheskii biznes inostrantsam," *Kabarlar.kg*, April 29, 2014, http://kabarlar.org/news/22723-damira-niyazalieva-prodala-semeynyy-farmacevticheskiy-biznes-inostrancam.html.

Obviously, this respondent evaluated the situation from the perspective of his party. In many other parties, however, women candidates had to pay and then were suddenly kicked off from the list of candidates or asked to voluntarily sign a leave list.

This category of women candidates enters a party with professional-educational capital rather than with financial resources. Their well-known professional careers and social service at the local, regional or national level make them an asset to a party. Analyzing the list of women candidates for all fourteen parties that ran in 2015, we may conclude that a party's relative success was, in many instances, achieved through the activities of these women, who enthusiastically agitated for the party out of their own devotion and loyalty. Such loyalty was encouraged by different motivations: party leaders promise candidates better jobs, financial assistance, the promotion of their relatives, etc. in exchange for promoting the party before and during the election. On the one hand, such patron-client relationships—based on material and social reciprocity—destroy the party's structure, since women and men alike become increasingly dependent on the party and especially on its leader/s. On the other hand, this approach may solidify party unity and guarantee the party's success during the election.

Such ambivalence and uncertainty about party-member relations and women's in-party status is vividly illustrated by the *Bir Bol* party (Figure 5 and

Figure 5 Bir Bol *Party Female Candidates, 2015*
Photo credit: andrei kostikin.

Figure 6 *The Main Banner of the* Bir Bol *Party: "We Are Different but We will Be Together"*
Photo credit: cholpon turdalieva.

Figure 6). Its party list included 100 men and 49 women, for a total of 149 candidates.53 Most of these women come from education, journalism, NGOs, small and medium enterprises, and even aviation. All of them had conversations with their party curators, the chiefs of the local party units. Structurally, *Bir Bol* was built as a party with corporate governance, designed to avoid having a single leader. The ruling committee of the party included 18 people, who represented the party in seven *oblasts* and the cities of Osh and Bishkek. Given these regional-territorial divisions, local leaders were responsible for deploying all resources to the end of an election victory.

However, on the eve of the election, the party decided to bet on a woman, Cholpon Jakupova, who has worked for many years in the legal clinic Adilet, engaging in the protection of human rights (see Figure 7). The fact that her clinic had helped more than 60,000 people and aids 12,000 victims suffering from different forms of violence annually54 attracted many voters and made

53 Guliza Chudubaeva, "Okonchatel'nyi spisok kandidatov ot partii 'Bir Bol'," *KNews*, September 4, 2015, http://knews.kg/2015/09/okonchatelnyiy-spisok-kandidatov-ot-partii-bir-bol/.

54 See more about Adilet Law Fund at the Fund's website, http://adilet.kg/.

Figure 7 *Cholpon Jakupova against a Background of the* Bir Bol *Party's Banners*
Source: "Obrashchenie kyrgyzstantsam—Cholpon Dzhakupova," YouTube video, 3:59, posted by "Politicheskaia Partiia Bir Bol," October 2, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmWtyRfi9sc.

them attentive to a party that consisted chiefly of former state officials, businessmen, and generals. Such changes in the party's pre-election policy indicate two interconnected positions. First, the party, which was publicly condemned for its leaders' relations with former president Bakiyev, started to search for women whose image could change public opinion and help improve the reputation of party leaders and of the party itself. Criticism of the party increased when one of the candidates was investigated for land fraud perpetrated during his time as a prime minster.

A second issue that affected the party's campaign was the overall needs of the Kyrgyzstani people, who wanted to see more justice and equality in the country's ineffective and corrupt judicial system. Prior to the 2014 election and in early 2015, there were several incidents of violence against children and women. Cholpon Jakupova and her clinic investigated such cases. Thus, close to election day, on October 4, the party's election campaign came to focus on a single idea: the protection of the rights of a simple people:

> Cholpon Jakupova is a really great specialist and professional. Since the foundation of her clinics, she has protected more than 60,000 people, most of them from the regions. We are proud to have her among us and if you vote for our party, you vote for your civic rights.
>
> Speech of *Bir Bol* candidate akylbek japarov

Two weeks before the election, the *Bir Bol* party's banners in Bishkek were changed to banners bearing the image of Cholpon Jakupova, with the key appeal "For the right of a simple person," which appears to have made people think positively about the party.

As was previously mentioned, women candidates Ainuru Altybaeva, Natalya Nikitenko and Karamat Orozova became deputies after the 2015 parliamentary elections. The gender issues raised by these candidates—mainly related to women's empowerment at the local, *oblast* and national levels—attracted many voters. For instance, voters recalled Ainuru Altybaeva's legislative initiatives about fixed party lists, including that only another woman should replace a woman on a party list. In contrast to these deputies, the parliament also included women whom ex-president Roza Otunbyeva called "fish-like deputies." They were heavily criticized by the public for their social and political indifference, including not initiating any laws or amendments.55

The average age of a female candidate in the 2015 election was between 30 and 50 years old, which cuts against the notion that women enter politics later in life than men due to family responsibilities.56 For instance, Bakyt Esenbaeva, the mother of four small children, became the vice-speaker immediately after the election. (Esenbaeva is second on the right in Figure 5.)

In February 2015, former prosecutor of the Kyrgyz Republic Aida Salyanova founded the *Kuchtuu Kyrgyzstan* party. However, as the election approached, she moved to the old socialist party *Ata Meken*. Such party shifts are very common for both men and women, reflecting the weakness of party-building in Kyrgyzstan and the instability of party ideologies, which are generally very similar to one another.

In this section, we used interviews and one of the co-authors' election observations to discuss which factors played an important role in women's participation in the 2015 electoral process. A specific emphasis was placed on party recruitment and the influence of everyday routine on women's political activity. Most of the factors were analyzed from the general perspective and confirm the data presented in the preceding sections: women's ability

55 For the first occasion on which Roza Otunbaeva referred to these women as "fish-like deputies," at the Women's Forum on March 2, 2015, see "Roza Otunbaeva: Rabota Zhogorku Kenesha 5-go sozyva pokazala, chto v parlamente est' deputaty 'rybki'," *Rus.kg*, March 4, 2015, http://rus.kg/news_rus/events_rus/34258-roza-otunbaeva-rabota-zhogorku-kenesha-5-go-sozyva-pokazala-chto-v-parlamente-est-deputaty-rybki.html.

56 Ernest Mandel, "The Laws of Motion of the Soviet Economy," *The Review of Radical Political Economics* 13, no. 1 (1981): 35–39.

to engage in—and succeed in—electoral processes is heavily dependent on social connections and money (the electoral system was taken for granted). It is also notable that given high levels of party switching, the weakness of the party system in general, and the tumultuous politics which endanger male politicians' political reputations, the party leadership tends to rely on women.

Conclusion

Some studies have suggested that proportional representation and cultural factors have less of an impact on less developed countries than they do on developed countries, positing that there is an economic development threshold that needs to be passed to improve women's role in politics.57 Kyrgyzstan, being in the former category, has certainly not reached that threshold, yet these two factors have played a decisive role in women's political participation.

Looking at the post-Soviet dynamics, it is evident that the change of electoral system and the introduction of quotas have helped increase women's political participation in parliamentary elections. Yet there were, for a long time, loopholes in the formal institutional arrangements that allowed women candidates to be removed from party lists after elections. The 2015 parliamentary elections produced so far the lowest level of women's representation in the three contests since proportional representation and quotas were introduced (around 20 percent). If Kyrgyzstan keeps this electoral system, the overall proportion of women will likely not decrease drastically, to where it was before 2005, but retaining women in the parliament up to the legislatively mandated threshold will be a continuous struggle.

The role of money is also significant. Interviews and other data in this paper show the importance of this element to party campaigning and indicate that women remain vulnerable when it comes to the ability to contribute to a party cash desk. These elections were quite expensive even on the formal side (as of October 4, 2015, the parties had spent a combined more than 780 mln soms,58

57 Richard E. Matland, "Women's Representation in National Legislatures: Developed and Developing Countries," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 23, no. 1. (Feb. 1998): 109–25.

58 For the report on party spending, see "Otchet o dvizhenii denezhnykh sredstv iz izbiratel'nykh fondov politicheskikh partii na 4 oktiabria 2015 g.," Central Election and Referendum Commission of the Kyrgyz Republic, https://shailoo.gov.kg/ru/news/1031/, accessed January 5, 2018.

or almost US$12 million, on campaigning); the pressure to extract contributions from candidates, including women, was high. Yet there are indications that women were often more valued for the social capital they brought to the table, namely their professionalism and reputations, which play an important role in tumultuous political transitions.