Uncertainty Perpetuated? The Pitfalls of a Weakly Institutionalized Party System in Kyrgyzstan

Accepted version of an article published in *Central Asian Affairs*:
Doolotkeldieva, Asel, and Alexander Wolters. "Uncertainty Perpetuated? The Pitfalls of a Weakly Institutionalized Party System in Kyrgyzstan", *Central Asian Affairs* 4, 1 (2017): 26-50.

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Abstract

The parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan in October 2015 garnered widespread approval from commentators for the level of fairness and freedom maintained through- out the campaign. However, the results of the vote do not provide a clear indication of the current state of affairs of parliamentarism in the republic. Focusing on the commercialization of party lists, we argue that neither identity politics nor the logic of neopatrimonialism adequately explain the dynamics of political competition in Kyrgyzstan. Instead, we see perpetual uncertainty emerging from contradicting yet increasing attempts to harness the capital of privatized party lists and to impose discipline. Eventually, and beyond short-term threats of an emerging super-presidentialism, Kyrgyz- stan risks suffering from hollow parliamentarism, with political parties persistently failing to supply legislative initiatives with substantial agendas and adequate professionals. The weakly institutionalized political parties and their short-sighted electoral strategies undermine both the parliamentary system and its political pluralism.

Keywords

political parties – elections – parliamentarism – constitutional reform – neopatrimonialism – Kyrgyzstan – Central Asia

doi 10.1163/22142290-00401002

The parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan in October 2015 received widespread approval from foreign and domestic commentators for the level of fairness and freedom maintained throughout the campaign. Five years after the October 2010 elections, the first following the ouster of President Kurmanbek Bakiev, Kyrgyzstan has once again confirmed its exceptional political standing in Central Asia. In the words of Ignacio Sánchez Amor, the head of the short-term OSCE observer mission, "[t]hese lively and competitive elections were unique in this region as, until 8 o'clock last night, nobody knew what the composition of the parliament would be."[1] Taken together with a similar statement made on the occasion of the elections in 2010, and considering the generally favorable evaluations by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and other observers, Kyrgyzstan can now claim to have conducted two competitive and mostly fair elections in a row.[2]

This seemingly positive outcome of a full election cycle in Kyrgyzstan deserves further attention. Despite multiple predictions about the inevitable failure of the parliamentary experiment in Kyrgyzstan, the system apparently proved itself. Not only did it withstand all pressures for parliamentary dissolution and early elections, it also avoided a protracted stalemate (the dreaded "Belgian" scenario). And yet, the results of the October 2015 vote have not provided clear indications of the current state of the parliamentary experiment in the republic: Does the orderly and peaceful competition between political parties signify the establishment of political plurality? Or does the absence of meaningful political agendas indicate the continuous dominance of informal bargaining?

In this article we focus on this last inquiry. We analyze the conditions for political plurality and to come to terms with the under-investigated relationship between the newly emerging party system and the locus of political

1 Parliamentary Assembly – Council of Europe, "Elections in Kyrgyzstan Were Competitive and Offered Voters a Wide Range of Choice," October 5, 2015, http://www.assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/News/News-View-EN.asp?newsid=5818&lang=2&cat=31 (accessed February 28,2016).

2 For the statement, see 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), 237–267. For reports, see "Kyrgyz Republic. Parliamentary Elections, 4 October 2015, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission—Final Report," Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, http://www.OSCE.org/ODIHR/elections/kyrgyzstan/219186?download=true (accessed February 28, 2016); and "Kyrgyz Republic. Parliamentary Elections, 10 October 2010. OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission— Final Report," Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, http://www.OSCE.org/odihr/elections/kyrgyzstan/74649?download=true (accessed February 28, 2016).

power. In the pursuit of this goal we focus on the micro-politics of party formation, fractional discipline, and the creation of parliamentary groups. Such an analysis has wider implications for the study of parliamentarism in Kyrgyzstan and FSU: It questions the repeated references to identity politics and their relevance for politics. Furthermore, it contributes to our understanding of the neopatrimonial character of post-Soviet politics. In contrast to elite-centered explanations of neopatrimonial rule in the former Soviet Union, we claim that weakly institutionalized political parties undermine the parliamentary system. It is through such institutional failure by default that Kyrgyzstan risks protracted periods of uncertainty and hollow parliamentarism with flimsy reform agendas.

Our article is structured as follows: After outlining the recent parliamentary elections, we discuss the validity of existing explanations of the parliamentary system in Kyrgyzstan. We contrast references to the importance of identity politics in Kyrgyz politics with a detailed analysis of election results in selected regions and electoral districts. We then review the current debate on neopatrimonialism in the former Soviet region in order to further theorize on the conditions for the neopatrimonial integration of party organizations in Kyrgyzstan. We argue that the political parties in Kyrgyzstan incapacitate themselves by seeking to establish full control over their elites and completely privatizing electoral lists. In the following section, we support our argument by tracing the process of party disintegration since 2010 and by providing selected case studies of candidate selection and voter mobilization from recent electoral campaigns. Finally, we discuss the implications of our results for the future of politics and of parliamentarism in Kyrgyzstan.

The Parliamentary Elections of October 2015

In addition to the acclaim received for fair and free elections, the post-voting situation in Kyrgyzstan was marked by public calm and idyllic proceedings to begin negotiations to form a majority coalition. Six parties managed to overcome the threshold of 7 percent and entered the parliament.3 As expected, the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) took the lead, receiving 27.6

3 See, for results, "Opredeleny okonchatel′nye itogi parlamentskikh vyborov 2015 goda v Kirgizii," Russkg.ru, October 15, 2016, http://russkg.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5529:-2015-&catid=67:2012–01–16–18–22–49&Itemid=1 (accessed February 29, 2016); for a discussion of the results, see Alexander Wolters, "Demokratie und ihre Simulation: Parlamentswahlen in Kirgistan und ihre Folgen," *Zentralasiennalysen*,

percent of the votes and 38 mandates. The SDPK clearly had benefited from its affiliation with formally impartial President Atambaev and at times brazenly used his public standing during the electoral campaign. Respublika–Ata-Jurt came in second with 20.3 percent and 28 seats in the parliament. This party merger had been orchestrated by politicians Omurbek Babanov and Kamchybek Tashiev and was mostly perceived as a marriage between powerful networks from the North and South of the country. The following places in the vote were taken by political newcomers: the political party *Kyrgyzstan*4 (13.1 percent / 18 seats) was founded only in June 2015 by Kanat Isaev, a former deputy and special governmental envoy to the Chui region. Önügüü-Progress (9.4 percent / 13 seats), on the other hand, had existed since February 2012 and had formed a stronghold in the southern region of Jalal-Abad, led by successful entrepreneur Bakyt Torobaev. The fifth party to enter parliament was Bir Bol (8.6 percent / 12 seats), supposedly gathering in its ranks supporters of former President Kurmanbek Bakiev under the leadership of long-term deputy Altynbek Sulaimanov. The sixth and final party to take its seats in the Zhogorku Kenesh was Ata Meken (7.1 percent / 11 seats), led by Omurbek Tekebaev, a vet- eran politician known for his role in designing the new constitutional order that came into existence via referendum in June 2010. To overcome the newly established 7 percent threshold,5 many existing parties had sought to unite, for example Respublica and Ata-Jurt, Emgek and Butun Kyrgyzstan, or Ata Meken and Uluttar Birimdigi.

Following offers from almost all parties to side with the SDPK, three parties eventually joined with the Social Democrats at the beginning of November 2015 in a majority coalition with the vacuous title "Stability, Trust, and new Possibilities in the Zhogorku Kenesh."6 Together with *Kyrgyzstan*,

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95 (November 2015). In Kyrgyzstan an electoral system of proportional representation according to party lists is in place.

4 In order to avoid confusion with the republic's name Kyrgyzstan, the name of the political party *Kyrgyzstan* will be set in italic.

5 Previously the threshold was established at the level of 5% to be calculated from all voters *registered* and not from the actual number of votes *cast*. In the run up to the 2015 elections, parliament adopted a new 7% threshold to be calculated from the actual number of votes, hoping to reduce the number of winning parties in order to facilitate the formation of a majority coalition. Newer parties and the "non-systemic" opposition objected this move, denouncing it as a measure designed to exclude alternative political forces.

6 See "SDPK pristupaet k formirovaniyu koalitsii," Radio Azattyk, October 29, 2015, http://rus.azattyk.org/content/article/27333084.html (accessed February 29, 2016); and "V koalitsiyu bol'shinstva voshli chetyre fraktsii," Radio Azattyk, November 2, 2015, http://rus.azattyk.org/content/article/27340255.html (accessed February 29, 2016).

Önügüü-Progress, and Ata Meken, the SDPK-led coalition secured 80 mandates. Respublika–Ata-Jurt and Bir Bol formed the opposition, which under the current constitution holds specific rights, for example the chairmanship of influential parliamentary committees such as budget and legislation. The new speaker of the Zhogorku Kenesh was the old one, Asylbek Zheenbekov, a long-term serving party member of the SDPK without special credentials and reputed to be an opportunist.7 Finally, Temir Sariev returned as prime minister, heading a cabinet that offered only minor changes compared with the last one. Most of the ministers had held their portfolios before the elections.8

While international observers praised the stability of the elections, local critics targeted the meaninglessness of the political competition and hidden forms of manipulation. The latter took the form of a broadly shared suspicion that the presidential administration had orchestrated the electoral campaign. This suspicion was triggered by several developments: First, and most importantly, by 2015 both the intra-parliamentary and the "non-systemic" opposition had become marginalized. This happened, according to press accounts and interviews with several deputies and political activists, because the presidential administration had worked consistently toward co-opting and repressing individual members of parliament and thus creating splits within opposition parties.9 Second, several political parties were last-minute creations with no previous record of victory—a factor that provides the important political and economic capital that helps parties to coalesce during the elections.10 For instance, *Kyrgyzstan*'s third place after SDPK and Respublica–Ata-Jurt came as a surprise to many. Its success was explained by close affiliations with the SDPK and the widespread use of vote-buying.11 Third, despite the appearance of competing political agendas, the debates avoided open criticism of President Atambaev and his party. Rumors had circulated that any criticism of the head of state

7 See "Sekret uspecha toraga Zheenbekova," Radio Azattyk, November 5, 2015, http://rus.azattyk.org/content/article/27346328.html (accessed February 29, 2016).

8 See "Parlament utverdil Sarieva v dolzhnosti prem′era," Radio Azattyk, November 5, 2015, http://rus.azattyk.org/content/article/27346306.html (accessed February 29, 2016); Wolters, "Demokratie und ihre Simulation."

9 Authors' interviews with a representative of the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, an expert from the Institute for Public Analysis, and two Members of Parliament, Bishkek, September 2013.

10 Huskey and Hill follow Hale in this regard, yet also refer to the general volatility of political parties in post-communist regimes, see Huskey and Hill, "Regionalism, Personalism, Ethnicity, and Violence," 238, 260.

11 Asel Doolotkeldieva, "Vybory 2015: Absurd, nauka i obshchestvo," Radio Azattyk, October 6, 2015, http://rus.azattyk.org/content/blog/27290292.html (accessed February 2, 2016).

would face the wrath of the secret services. In conversations with the authors, several political activists confirmed cases of surveillance and intimidation in the run-up to the election.12

As for the supposed irrelevance of the political competition, commentators pointed out the interchangeability of party programs as well as the dominance of businessmen and shady figures among the new members of parliament. Most new MPs were former state bureaucrats or entrepreneurs with questionable reputations. Professional politicians, with expertise in legislation, or even remotely charismatic leaders with the ability to initiate debates, were largely absent from the party lists. This tendency was also reflected in the discussions that public tv stations and print and online forums attempted to launch. For many observers, the lackluster performance of the participants confirmed the widely held beliefs that politics in Kyrgyzstan still follows informal bargains and that parties only serve as vehicles for their leaders.

The Diminishing Significance of Identity Politics

In previous research on politics in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia, political mobilization has been successfully explained by claims about the dominant role of identity politics. In the aftermath of the tragic ethnic clashes in Osh and Jalal-Abad in 2010, several scholars have referred to the significance of ethnicity as a source for mobilizing electoral support as well as the dominant discursive power of politicized identity in public debates. Gullete and Heathershaw, for example, discuss the power of ethnicized claims to sovereignty that redraw the lines of what can be said in public debates with repercussions as far reaching as foreign policy.13 Meena Singh Roy, as well as Engvall, stress further that the condition of being Kyrgyz threatens to exclude ethnic minorities from representation, which, in turn, destabilizes the whole parliamentary system.14 In their analysis of the electoral campaign of 2010,

12 Several informal conversations with activists of political youth movements, Bishkek, April–August 2015. To exert power over deputies, the presidency can use its control over the security services and over the loyal Office of the General Prosecutor.

13 David Gullette and John Heathershaw, "The Affective Politics of Sovereignty: Reflecting on the 2010 Conflict in Kyrgyzstan," *Nationalities Papers*, 43, no. 1 (2015), 122–139.

14 Meena Singh Roy, "Future of Parliamentary Democracy in Kyrgyzstan," *Strategic Analysis*, 35, no. 2 (2011), 199–206; Johan Engvall, "Kyrgyzstan and the Trials of Independence," in Marlene Laruelle and Johan Engvall (eds), *Kyrgyzstan beyond "Democracy Island" and "Failing State": Social and Political Changes in a Post-Soviet Society* (Lanham, md: Lexington Books, 2015), 17.

Huskey and Hill discuss other identity markers for their relevance in political mobilization, such as regionalism, ethnicity, personalistic rule, and violence. They do not deny the impact of financial capital on election manipulation, yet they underline the active creation of identity differences by political entrepreneurs, for example the exploitation of the country's North–South divide.15 Political elites, they claim, move within identity frames to increase their electability. Alkan follows this line of argumentation in his discussion of the political developments in the aftermath of the Tulip Revolution of 2005. He reformulates older concepts of clan and tribal affiliations in Kyrgyzstan to indicate the strength of local networks within the party system and their contradictory effects of undermining both the means the presidency uses to manipulate competing forces and the means multiple party forces use to consolidate their grip on power.16

Contrary to the expectations formulated in these accounts, identity politics seem to have become less significant in Kyrgyzstan now that the second parliamentary elections have successfully completed. The North–South cleavage,17 for instance, was silenced in 2015 in favor of a much more nuanced and differentiated understanding of the "South" and the "North." What is more, the nationalist discourse, which provisionally opened up in 2010 a new, promising frame for political debates since the country's peaceful transition to independence, did not translate into a lasting divide between, for example, the exclusive and the liberal.18 Below we would like to substantiate our critique of the role of identity politics using selected results from the elections in 2015.

Table 1 depicts the distribution of votes by oblast. No clear cut correspondence between an assumed geographically fixed identity (for example, "southern") and the voting both in time and space can be detected. Parties gained different results within the North and the South. For example, Respublika– Ata-Jurt performed well in southern Jalal-Abad, but won only 18 percent in neighboring southern Osh oblast, which is less than in Chui, where the party

15 Huskey and Hill, "Regionalism, Personalism, Ethnicity, and Violence."

16 Haluk Alkan, "Post-Soviet Politics in Kyrgyzstan: Between Centralism and Localism?" *Contemporary Politics*, 15, no. 3 (2009), 355–375; on the concept of localism in the context of Kyrgyzstan, see Scott Radnitz, *Weapons of the Wealthy: Predatory Regimes and Elite-led Protests in Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

17 See Maxim Ryabkov, "The North–South Cleavage and Political Support in Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey*, 27, nos. 3–4 (2008): 301–316.

18 Tunisia, where the Islamist party Ennahdha confronted a diverse yet lively secular opposition, provides the blueprint for such a scenario, see Andrea G. Brode-Barres, "The Impact of Political Parties and Coalition Building on Tunisia's Democratic Future," *Journal of North African Studies*, 18, no. 2 (2013): 211–230.

Table 1 *Election results by Oblast*

Oblast	**Batken**	**Bishkek**	**Jalal-Abad**	**Issyk-Kul**	**Naryn**	**Osh (City)**	**Osch (Oblast)**	**Talas**	**Chui**
Party In Percent	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**
Ata Meken	8.41	9.78	10.00	9.05	13.31	6.33	7.28	15.43	7.40
Respblika-Ata-Jurt	22.60	25.58	26.41	27.12	16.28	18.13	18.06	41.60	22.29
Kyrgyzstan	8.75	10.70	16.91	14.08	20.43	15.62	13.66	14.55	19.38
BirBol	14.63	8.11	13.34	8.11	3.14	8.78	11.32	4.25	8.19
Önügüü	9.36	8.08	16.48	9.55	8.22	8.12	10.49	10.47	9.74

Source: Central Election Commission (ess.shailoo.gov.kg)

gained more than 22 percent.19 Ata Meken, often considered to be a "northern" party, polled more votes in Jalal-Abad than in northern Chui, a reversal of its 2010 parliamentary results.20 At the same time, the party performed best in the northern regions of Talas and Naryn, in contrast with the declining trend in Chui and Bishkek. Even the SDPK, assumed to play equally well in all parts of the country due to its position of power and its access to the notorious "administrative resources," produced mixed results: It won almost 40 percent of the votes in Osh oblast, yet gained less than 17 percent in neighboring Jalal- Abad. Among the newcomers, only Bir Bol (deemed in popular idioms as a "southern" party) demonstrates a clear difference between votes gathered in the southern parts and those gained in the northern.21 Exceptionally, *Kyrgyzstan* and Önügüü performed almost equally well in all provinces.22

19 In the 2010 parliamentary elections Ata-Jurt gained most of its votes in Osh city and Osh oblast, while Jalal-Abad came in third, see Shairbek Juraev, "The Evolving Role of Political Parties in Kyrgyz Politics," in Marlene Laruelle and Johan Engvall (eds), *Kyrgyzstan beyond "Democracy Island" and "Failing State": Social and Political Changes in a Post-Soviet Society* (Lanham, md: Lexington Books, 2015), 31.

20 Ibid.

21 The exception to this rule is the result for Osh city, where the party won only 8.78% of the votes.

22 Exceptions are *Kyrgyzstan*'s low performance in Batken, and Önügüü's top result in Jalal-Abad.

Table 2 *Election results by district (Chui Oblast)*

Party	**SDPK**	**Respublika–Ata-Jurt**	**Ata Meken**	**Önügüü**	**Bir-Bol**	***Kyrgyzstan***
Districts (Chui Oblast) In percent	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**
Alamedin	38.43	19.73	3.78	7.40	5.26	12.09
Chui	22.61	11.04	3.68	8.68	7.15	38.60
Kemin	20.61	32.51	11.18	4.63	5.92	13.45
Moskva	31.38	14.44	10.51	16.92	7.30	9.66
Panfilov	26.22	17.39	1.74	2.10	8.55	35.06
Sokuluk	25.06	26.58	3.98	8.27	4.19	17.14
Tokmok	22.76	12.55	3.38	10.93	8.53	31.50
Issyk-Ata	31.85	16.31	10.89	11.02	6.99	9.85
Zhajyl	31.26	19.94	8.04	5.06	14.74	12.87

Source: Central Election Commission (ess.shailoo.gov.kg)

Some of the results could have, perhaps, still been explained by the "regional stronghold" of party leaders. For example, the Ata-Jurt boss Kamchybek Tashiev is from Jalal-Abad oblast while his ally Omurbek Babanov is from Talas, both places where the unified party gained its best results. Önügüü boss Bakyt Torobaev is also from Jalal-Abad, while *Kyrgyzstan* leader Kanat Isaev is from Chui. However, a more nuanced differentiation of the election outcomes for the electoral districts deconstructs even the narrative of strong regional affiliations.

Based on the data presented in Tables 2 and 3, we further question whether it is possible to correlate existing regional references with voting behavior. Not only did references to South and North fail to manifest themselves in homogeneous support, but even distinct oblasts did not serve as clear indications of parties' regional strongholds. For example, Respublika–Ata-Jurt's presence in Jalal-Abad oblast should not be mistaken as an equally distributed popularity within this region: The party gained 45.36 percent of votes in Mailuu-Suu district (at the top among other districts) but only 11.31 percent in Karakul district (at the bottom), thus creating a gap of up to 33 percent within the same province. The "northern" party Ata Meken, on the other hand, nowhere gained more than 11.5 percent in Chui oblast and even fell below 2 percent in the Panfilov district; while the "southern" party Bir Bol polled a surprising 14.74 percent

Table 3 *Election results by district (Dzhalal-Abad Oblast)*

Party	**SDPK**	**Respublika–Ata-Jurt**	**Ata Meken**	**Önügüü**	**BirBol**	***Kyrgyzstan***
Districts (Jalal-Abad Oblast) In percent	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**	**%**
Aksy	12.64	17.88	9.42	8.12	16.73	14.19
Ala-Buka	12.15	11.50	14.12	7.57	18.89	20.84
Bazar-Korgon	5.36	30.54	21.44	16.12	4.70	11.93
Chatkal	9.25	19.22	1.84	20.24	5.86	11.95
Jalal-Abad	28.57	19.96	2.25	14.81	5.45	18.35
Karakul	36.16	11.31	0.89	5.74	1.46	33.13
MailuuSuu	28.61	45.36	3.93	7.18	1.21	2.76
Nooken	9.08	29.72	10.50	14.56	21.35	2.20
Suzak	10.19	22.93	4.09	21.22	11.40	16.56
TashKumyr	23.29	20.29	3.38	9.43	11.22	20.77
ToguzToro	22.78	11.95	5.63	9.00	17.95	13.61
Toktogul	26.30	23.10	2.87	12.32	3.19	16.04

Source: Central Election Commission (ess.shailoo.gov.kg).

of the votes in the district Zhajyl, located in the western part of Chui oblast (with an oblast average of 7.6 percent). Within Chui oblast the Önügüü party received more than 16 percent of votes in Moskva district, yet only 2.1 percent in Panfilov. In Jalal-Abad province, the party's results are similarly unequally scattered: 21.22 percent in Suzak, but only 5 percent in Karakul. Bir Bol's performance in Jalal-Abad is even more perplexing with 21.35 percent of the votes in Nooken and a scant 1.21 percent in Mailuu-Suu. A similar tendency is observed within the SDPK's regional distribution of votes. According to Table 3, the party received the highest number of votes in Karakul district (36.16 percent) and the lowest (5.36 percent) in Bazar-Kurgon within Jalal-Abad oblast.

A systematic comparison of the party performances in the selected Chui and Jalal-Abad oblasts, illustrated in the Tables 2 and 3, further confirms that the electoral turnout in the respective districts was rather diverse, if not erratic. At the very minimum, the results of the parliamentary elections of October 2015 call into question explanations that refer to these identity politics. They make us further ask about the validity of local networks if parties' specific electoral

performances in one district seem not to affect neighboring ones (see, for example, the results for Respublika–Ata-Jurt, *Kyrgyzstan*, and Ata Meken in the neighboring districts of Kemin and Chui in Chui oblast). Overall, the impression prevails that the *outcome of elections is determined by the conditions for competition in each given locality*. We hypothesize that this very condition for competition is itself produced by the dynamics that shape the formation of party lists.

Neopatrimonialism in Kyrgyz Politics

The concept of neopatrimonialism serves to further develop our argument about the dynamics of party list formation in Kyrgyzstan. In this perspective, political parties are understood as tools for informal manipulation in the hands of rent-seeking elites.23 The debate revolves around the relationship be- tween formal institutional settings and the informal steering capacity of elites. References to the formal structure of electoral systems, as earlier discussed by Ishiyama and Kennedy in their analysis of elections in the former Soviet Union, compete with explanations that see elite actions as the determinate variable.24 Turovsky, for example, refers to the enhanced role played by elites in shaping and managing political parties in the former Soviet Union, a claim earlier supported by Oversloot and Verheul, who further dismiss the relevance of electoral systems. They have argued that such formal frameworks will be changed and adapted as long as elites keep power resources in their hand to manage parties and their institutional environment.25 Robinson brings electoral systems back in, yet complicates the picture by identifying the needs of elites to steer the neopatrimonial dynamics built into party systems. He explains changing electoral rules for political parties in Russia with the

23 For the concept of neopatrimonialism, following a Weberian typology, see Gero Erdmann, and Ulf Engel, "Neopatrimonialism Reconsidered: Critical Review and Elaboration of an Elusive Concept," *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 45, no. 1 (2007): 95–119; Michael Bratton, and Nicholas van de Walle, "Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa," *World Politics*, 46, no. 4, (1994): 453–489.

24 John T. Ishiyama and Ryan Kennedy, "Superpresidentialism and Political Party Development in Russia, Ukraine, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan," Europe-Asia Studies, 53, no. 8 (2001): 1177–91.

25 Rostislav Turovsky, "Party Systems in Post-Soviet States: The Shaping of Political Competition," *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 12, no. 2 (2011), 197–213; Hans Oversloot and Ruben Verheul, "Managing Democracy: Political Parties and the State in Russia," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 22, no. 3 (2006): 383–405.

changing needs of central elites, who are now forced to manage parties. Whereas Russian President Boris Yeltsin enjoyed a fragmented party landscape that allowed him to continue his rule, his successor, Vladimir Putin, increased party stability in order to better control society at the expense of the party's legitimacy. Isaac similarly refers to the management of the party of power in Kazakhstan, Nur Otan, as a project of the presidential administration to exert control over the political competition. In both Robinson's and Isaac's analyses, neopatrimonialism infuses a specific dynamic into the political competition, which puts in place the demand for top-down management and the hierarchical integration of clientelistic networks.26

In our view, the case of Kyrgyzstan introduces a new level of complexity. If before the main question focused on the interrelationship between electoral systems and the neopatrimonial tension, then Kyrgyzstan is being depicted today as the rare example of a potentially stable system of contestation between neopatrimonially organized clientelistic networks in the form of political parties. Quite in contrast with explanations that regard party politics as possible sources of regime instability,27 the competitive arrangement of diverse parties serves as a balancing effect, sustaining the practice of state capture and rent seeking. Marat, for example, stresses the key role of the new constitution in managing the balance among competing interests: "The new constitution presumes that Kyrgyz political actors are driven by neopatrimonial links and therefore seeks to regulate them to the extent that no one political network captures too much power."28 She further argues that "Kyrgyzstan today is an example of how formal rules can transform and regulate neopatrimonial politics: although fierce political struggle often revolves around business interests, the new constitution both facilitates and restricts competition among power holders."29 Juraev, in his discussion of the first legislative term since 2010,

26 For a detailed case study of such integration, see Barbara Christophe, *Metamorphosen des Leviathan in einer post-sozialistischen Gesellschaft. Georgiens Provinz zwischen Fassaden der Anarchie und regulativer Allmacht* (Verlag, 2005); further case material on Kyrgyzstan is provided in Johan Engvall, The State as Investment Market: An Analytical Framework for Interpreting Politics and Bureaucracy in Kyrgyzstan (PhD diss., University of Uppsala,2011.

27 See, for example, Ryan Shirah, "Electoral Authoritarianism and Political Unrest," *International Political Science Review*, (June 2015): 1–15.

28 Erica Marat, "Kyrgyzstan: A parliamentary system based on inter-elite consensus," *Demokratizatsiya* 20, no. 4 (2012): 325–344, here 326.

29 Ibid.

supports this claim stating, "The June 2010 Constitution created very favorable conditions for party competition in Kyrgyzstan."30

Both authors are, however, cautious in weighting future developments of the parliamentary system in Kyrgyzstan. Marat warns of the possibility of the reemergence of a centralized presidency in the event that the parliament gets dissolved, with informality ruling over formal institutions and a predominance of patronage networks. Marat's assumption that even in this scenario a dominant ruler is unlikely to rise, contrasts with Juraev, who considers the entitlement of the SDPK as the new party of power and President Atambaev's expressed hopes for fewer parties in the parliament as signs that he plans to establish himself as the sole center of political decision-making.31

We concur with both authors in their assessment of the crucial moment the recent elections constitute. And we confirm the singular role the new constitution has played in shaping a balance between competing elites and a political system free of any dominant player. Here we follow up on Marat's conjecture that the lasting uncertainty about the validity of the new system among political actors causes a barrier to sustainable political plurality.32 However, we identify this uncertainty as a source for a total insecurity toward any future scenario, not necessarily a return to authoritarian rule. In our view, neither the presidency nor the parliament serves *per se* as a node for possible stabilization or destabilization of the political competition. Quite to the contrary, the sources for destabilization lie within actors themselves: within parliamentary fractions that are torn apart by internal factionalism and within the competing networks that constitute the presidential administration where the urge to secure assets in the months leading up to the 2017 presidential elections gains momentum. Guided by uncertainty about the future constitutional order, politicians are compelled to invest into ever more corrupt and short-sighted means to make sure to stay in the game, fully disregarding any programmatic and/oridentity-related references.

This type of investment we locate at the center of the parties' *self-incapacitation* that lastingly weakens their chances to establish strong party machines, and that continuously risks undermining their position in the parliament vis-à-vis the presidency as well as in relation to each other. Furthermore, the investments manifest themselves when party lists are being formed in the run-up to elections. Contrary to assumptions about the strong legacy of autocratic regimes and their roots in regionalized patronage networks as

30 Juraev, "The Evolving Role of Political Parties in Kyrgyz Politics," 33.

31 Ibid., 34.

32 Marat (2012), 343.

criteria for elite member selection, we maintain that the dominant strategy used to form party lists is increasingly built on a commercial rationale. The strategy takes the form of two new selection criteria of political personnel that we tentatively call the *transaction value of vote buying* and the *imperative to control*.

The *transaction value of vote buying* refers to the rising trend among candidates to rely on financial capital in order to gather votes. The traditional popularity of candidates based on informal networks of loyalty (whether kin, professional, or geographical) is increasingly complemented and/or supplemented by the simple ability of candidates to buy votes.33 It is the competition among multiple parties that forces candidates to spread their vote buying practices, even if they enjoy genuine authority within their constituencies. And this competition is promoted by the parties involved, for which it ultimately does not make a difference whether a given candidate is truly supported by the local constituency or not; what matters are the votes brought in to the overall party tally.

With the *imperative to control* we refer to the specific capacity of party bosses to apply disciplining measures to secure continued control over the electoral list. This second selection criteria directly corresponds to the transaction value of vote buying, in that it attempts to provide for maneuverability in order to establish faction discipline given the purely commercial interests of the listed candidates. Anticipating internal defections, party bosses seek to "rearrange" their electoral lists, specifically in the short period between the announcement of the preliminary and the final election results. Although the constitution prohibits changing the content or the order of party lists after elections, parties find ways to circumvent the law.34 For example, they may force candidates to preemptively provide their consent to withdraw from the list in case they have demonstrated an "insufficient" voting record.35 One extreme outcome of this dynamic is the distortion of the proportional system because the electoral districts are being informally run in line with the logic

33 This fact also points to the overly exaggerated role of informal networks of loyalty and political mobilization. In the context of discredited politics, even the political capital of "traditional" sources such as kinship networks eventually erodes.

34 See Huskey and Hill, "Regionalism, Personalism, Ethnicity, and Violence," 258, for examples of past reshuffles with comparative information on each party in the parliament since 2010.

35 There is, however, no clear understanding of what the sufficient score would look like; thus candidates are left vulnerable to party bosses' discretionary decisions to exclude them; interview with a participant of the Ata Meken pre-electoral campaign, Bishkek, 2015.

of a majoritarian system. Political parties can now "offer" their candidates any place in their list, while considering them indebted to the party leadership. With this "insurance policy" in place, both sides supposedly enter into such an agreement on equal terms: whereas party bosses gain greater powers over the performances of each candidate by the compartmentalization of electoral districts into informal single-mandate districts, candidates can rest assured that they will enter parliament no matter their actual place on the party list. All that matters now is generating the needed number of votes.

The commercialization of official positions is certainly not a new phenomenon. Engvall has argued that the Kyrgyzstani state functions as an investment market for members of the elite.36 However, political parties so far chose their candidates taking into consideration their regional support base. Thus parties included a large number of members of state regional administrations as well as heads of important local institutions such as schools, hospitals, and large businesses. This electoral strategy rests on the idea of building parties on the basis of regional loyalties and existing patronage networks.37 The recent commercialization of electoral lists points to the departure from this old logic. And, paradoxical as it seems, it has developed with the evolution of the competition among parties since 2010. Returning to this particular point in time, we further intend to show that within the first two years after the formation of the new parliament in 2010, a certain path dependency was set in place that has conditioned weak parties to resort to the same practice and even to radicalize shortsighted electoral strategies that had weakened them already in the first election. Today the candidates' investments are made in a much more uncertain environment without fixed terms for returns. For both parties and candidates, this condition leads to ever riskier speculation about the right investment strategy, which in turn results in ever increasing attempts of party bosses to install control measures. The final result is the self-incapacitation of political parties, not only as collective bodies for representation and programmatic politics but also as neopatrimonially integrated informal networks.

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36 Johan Engvall, "Why Are Public Offices Sold in Kyrgyzstan?" in Marlene Laruelle and Johan Engvall (eds), *Kyrgyzstan beyond "Democracy Island" and "Failing State": Social and Political Changes in a Post-Soviet Society* (Lanham, md: Lexington Books, 2015), 39–58.

37 See Fredrik Sjöberg, "Competitive Elections in Authoritarian States. Weak States, Strong Elites, and Fractional Societies in Central Asia and Beyond" (PhD diss., University of Uppsala, 2011), for a discussion of different incentives of candidates in elections, when a majoritarian system was still in place. Here the market only matters insofar as it allows entrepreneurs access to the political competition, using their economic capital to run a campaign.

Fractional Discord and the Road to Self-Incapacitation after 2010

Following Juraev, and developing Huskey and Hill's claim about the impact of money interests,38 we argue that in 2010, far from relying only on candidates' traditional legitimacy, parties began privatizing and commercializing their electoral lists. Such a formation of electoral lists was followed by major internal conflicts within the parliamentary fractions, despite initial expectations that strong regional identities would grow in dominance. Observing par- ty lists formation in 2010, Juraev stresses that "most parties compile[d] their electoral lists based on 'money, votes, or both'."39 Money and the ability to cast votes already back then attracted a specific type of candidate. A study by the nongovernmental organization "Citizens against Corruption" established that between 2010 and 2015, businessmen and state functionaries held 62 percent of the party's seats in the Zhogorku Kenesh. The Respublika party hosted the largest number of businessmen (48 percent of its ranks) whereas Ata-Jurt contained the largest group of former state functionaries (54 percent of its ranks).40 Yet, neither business nor bureaucratic networks helped these two parties consolidate and prepare for the national elections of 2015. Soon after the elections in 2010, members of Ata-Jurt's and Respublika's parliamentary fractions began to defect and to create the so-called deputy groups (*deputatskie gruppy*).

Serious internal conflicts started to plague Respublika barely a year after the elections. Several groups emerged within the party under the leader- ship of fraction members: Bakyt Torobaev formed the deputy group Önügüü (5 deputies) in February 2013, before he transformed the group into a party of the same name; Kanat Isaev created in May 2013 the deputy group Yntymak (8 deputies) and much later established the independent party *Kyrgyzstan*; Altynbek Sulaimanov fashioned the deputy group Bir Bol, which also turned into an independent party of the same name. All these defecting leaders ran in the 2015 elections with their newly established parties comprised of veteran political personnel. These defections started in 2011–2012 but took a more formal shape in spring 2013 when the parliament adopted a law that legitimized

38 Huskey and Hill ("Regionalism, Personalism, Ethnicity, and Violence") provide a balanced account of the roles of identity entrepreneurs mixed with pure commercialized interests to shape the dynamics of party list formation, compare, for example, pages 257 and 259.

39 Juraev, "The Evolving Role of Political Parties in Kyrgyz Politics," 29.

40 Vladimir Nochevkin, "Parliament Kyrgyzstana – neprofessionalny, projorlivy, skandalny i korrumpirovanny" Centrasia.ru, November 19, 2012, http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA .php?st=1353299040 (accessed February 2, 2016).

the existence of independent groups—even through the Constitutional Court revoked this law in 2014.41 The divisions were further exacerbated when the head of the party, Prime Minister Omurbek Babanov, was dismissed from the government in September 2012, and the party was forced to exit the majority coalition. The marginalization of the party was a strong signal indicating Babanov's new lame-duck status, which further accelerated the disintegration of the fraction.42 As a result of these major internal divisions, in the run up to the elections of 2015, 17 out of 23 of Respublika's deputies ran as candidates from other parties.

Similarly, the results of the national elections in 2010 vividly confirmed Ata-Jurt's reputation as a "southern" stronghold comprised of networks with access to former state resources and/or private businesses. Given that these fraction members shared a common identity based on regional affinities and political views (against the new constitutional order), on the one hand, and their popular support within nationalist movements in the South on the other, many expected this party to only grow with time to become a strong representative of the South, in opposition to the "northern" president and the government. Yet, like Respublika, Ata-Jurt soon experienced internal fragmentation. A number of deputies left the fraction to form the deputy groups Yntymak and Za Reformu. Moreover, the two charismatic party founders, Kamchybek Tashiev and Akhmatbek Keldibekov, clashed over the party leadership and the fraction split into two supporting camps.43 Once an active opposition party (that organized dozens of protests throughout the country between 2011 and 2013), Ata-Jurt became yet another disbanded fraction. At the end of the parliamentary term, most of the Ata-Jurt deputies had been co-opted by other parties: 16 out of 28 party deputies ran as candidates from other parties in October 2015.44 The fragmentation of these two parties left Respublica stripped of her various "southern" deputies, whereas Ata-Jurt lost not only its various "northern" but

41 See "Parlament.kg. Sgruppirovat'sya i?," 24.kg (October 21, 2013) http://arch.24.kg/parlament/163238-parlamentkg-sgruppirovatsya-i.html (accessed February 2, 2016).

42 In the run up to national elections in 2015, Babanov said he was going to lobby for the introduction of the imperative mandate as a way to secure a greater control over faction members and to stop defections, see "Omurbek Babanov o planakh po uchastiyu v parlamentskikh vyborakh i predlozheniyakh po razvitiyu strany," News.mail.ru December 31, 2014, https://news.mail.ru/politics/20635500/ (accessed February 2, 2016).

43 "Parlament.kg," 24.kg, October 21, 2013.

44 "Vybory-2015: v kakie partii ushli deistvuiushchie deputaty parlamenta," Zanoza.kg, September 1, 2015, http://zanoza.kg/doc/32399_1_vybory_2015:_v_kakie_partii_yshli_deystvyushie_depytaty_parlamenta.html (accessed February 12, 2016).

also some of its Osh networks too. In late 2014, Babanov and Tashiev decided to run in the forthcoming elections as a united party, although their parties had been in radical opposition to each other during the years 2010–2013. The decision to merge was both pragmatic and desperate , understood as an attempt to bring together Respublica's remaining "northern" and Ata-Jurt partial "southern" electoral bases and support networks.45 Indeed, our previous ethnographic work shows that Respublica's clientelistic networks in the southern provinces had suffered from major defections as many local city council deputies and informal leaders were shifting to newly established parties such as Bir Bol and Önügüü and to the ruling party SDPK. Ata-Jurt faced similar challenges even in Jalal-Abad province, the fiefdom of party leader Kamchybek Tashiev, where local members were expressing disappointment about Tashiev's failed attempt to storm the Bishkek White House in October 2012. Here, too, the city council members were defecting to other parties with supposedly greaterchances of winning future elections.46

Despite both leaders' experience with party disintegration and their acknowledgement of the crucial role of party list formation in this, they failed to apply the lessons learned when preparing for the elections in 2015.47 How- ever, choosing between substantial party building and short-sighted control measures, they opted for the latter strategy. In general, instead of restoring their regional support bases, party leaders sought refuge in previous tactics and compiled a new party list using the commercialization of candidacies. Eventually the parties entered the 2015 electoral cycle struggling to sustain their clientelistic networks and facing a widening gap between party members and potential constituencies. What is more, internal defections weakened the parties in the intermediate term and even disabled some of them from running anew as was the case with the Ar-Namys party.48

45 Yet, the merger was publicly considered controversial: both parties had fought each other on multiple occasions over different topics, including their views on the constitution. However, as other pre-electoral party unions have shown, opposing ideologies can easily be put aside in hope of quick electoral victory.

46 Asel Doolotkeldieva, "Development of Political Parties in Rural Kyrgyzstan in Semi-parliamentarian Conditions," Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (Bishkek, 2015).

47 Examples of party work is Tashiev's meeting with local constituencies in Jalal-Abad, 2011; Babanov's meeting with members of the Reforma party, August 2015; information about party work from interview with Respublica member and deputy of the newly merged Respublica–Ata-Jurt, Bishkek, August 2015; and from participatory observation, Bishkek, August 2015.

48 By 2015 only six out of 25 initial deputies had remained loyal to party leader Feliks Kulov. Already in 2011, 10 deputies left the faction and officially asked to join the majority

In the following section we provide examples of parties' recourse to the commercialization of party lists during the subsequent elections of 2015. In particular, we look at Respublica–Ata-Jurt, Bir Bol, Önügüü, and *Kyrgyzstan*. Ata Meken and SDPK constitute so far provisional exceptions. We conclude that the short-term electoral strategies, based on the logics of the transaction value of vote buying and the imperative to control, are not designed to sustain neopatrimonial networks as the basis of hierarchically integrated party organizations but to secure temporary access to the parliament via elections.

Commercialized Party Lists and Control Mechanisms

For the united yet weakened Respublika–Ata-Jurt party, the monetization of party lists took extreme forms in 2015. Acting deputy Jyldyzkan Djoldosheva explained her shift to the Aalam party with the fact that the latter was the only party that did not request money in exchange for a place on the list.49 The united party list of Respublica–Ata-Jurt included people with money and the ability to attract votes based either on the candidate's assumed popularity or the candidate's known potential to buy votes.50 The roster of strong candidates includes Dinara Isaeva, a famous businesswoman and wife of notorious ex- prime minister Daniyar Usenov (Isaeva claimed she had already paid $1 mil- lion for her slot on the party list back in 2010); Bakiev's former press secretary, Nurlan Shakiev; as well as two judges from Bishkek city courts that acquitted the leader of Ata-Jurt party, Kamchybek Tashiev, when he was accused of at- tempting a coup in 2012; others are the former minister of emergencies, Bolot Borbiev, former interior minister Zarylbek Rysaliev, and many more. In order to populate this list to maximize commercial interests, Respublika–Ata-Jurt in- vented new techniques. The party went so far as to force its candidates to swear an oath on camera that they would withdraw in case of insufficient votes.51

coalition. The party ran in 2015 but only gained 0.83% of the vote.

49 "Zhyldyzkan Dzholdoshova besplatno vstupila v partiyu 'Aalam'," Vb.kg, August 4, 2015, http://www.vb.kg/doc/322022_jyldyzkan_djoldoshova_besplatno_vstypila_v_partiu_ aalam.html (accessed February 12, 2016).

50 According to different sources, voters received or were promised to receive between 500 and 3,000 som per vote in 2015; interviews with party activists and with voters, Bishkek, Osh, September–October, 2015.

51 "My vynuzhdeny brat′ s nashikh kandidatov klyatvu, chtoby usilit′ distsiplinu v partii – zayavil zhurnalistam sopredsedatel′ politicheskoy organizatsii Omurbek Babanov," 24. kg, August 20, 2015, http://24.kg/vybory/18007_rukovodstvo_partii_respublika_ata_jurt_ obyyasnilo_pochemu_berut_klyatvu_s_kandidatov/ (accessed February 13, 2016).

The post-electoral developments proved the usefulness of such techniques. The party resorted to a heavy post-electoral "rearrangement" of its list. By October 14, 2015, only ten days after the election and the day before the announcement of the final election results, 70 candidates had left the list—the largest shuffle among those parties entering the parliament. Only three candidates withdrew from the SDPK's list, for example.52 Out of these 70 departing candidates, eight had occupied places among the first 28 seats that the party had won in the parliament. Furthermore, the party intimidated and tried unsuccessfully to evict six more deputies after the announcement of the final re- sults.53 Last but not least, about four months after the election, the first split between the two united parties occurred when Ata-Jurt decided to run against Respublica for the municipal elections in Osh city, which were scheduled for March 2016.54 Finally, the united party split in November 2015 in order to run for forthcoming presidential elections independently.

Newly established parties such as *Kyrgyzstan*, Bir Bol, and Önügüü have encountered similar problems. Following their recent formation, these parties did not cultivate long-standing clientelistic networks either in the regions or in the center, and yet they were able to fill their electoral lists within a short period of time. For instance, during our fieldwork study in September 2014 in seven regional towns, we understandably did not notice any activism by the *Kyrgyzstan* party. The local public was discussing the possibilities of other new parties running in the elections, but they did not know *Kyrgyzstan* yet.55 Led by the former Chui governor, Kanat Isaev, the party's massive campaign in summer 2015, just few months prior to the election, won her third place, after

52 "Vnutri partii vovsyu idet delezhka mandatov," Radio Azattyk, October 16, 2015, http://rus.azattyk.mobi/a/27309236.html (accessed February 24, 2016).

53 In an interview with Kloop.kg, Aida Ismailova, one of the deputies, said that her house was picketed for 10 days by young men in sport costumes allegedly on the orders of the party leaders when she refused to give in her mandate, "Skandal s deputatskimi spiskami v Kyrgyzstane," *Open Asia* (October 27, 2015), http://theopenasia.net/articles/detail/skandal-s-mandatami-v-kyrgyzstane/ (accessed February 24, 2016).

54 In an interview, Tashiev, the founder of Ata-Jurt and co-leader of Respublica–Ata-Jurt, could not give a clear answer as to why Ata-Jurt is running in parallel in Osh city municipal elections. The uneven distribution of mandates between Ata-Jurt and Respublica clientelistic networks might be the cause for this split: deputies with Ata-Jurt affiliation got only 11 out of 28 seats, see "'Respublika Ata-Zhurttu' emne azhyraštyrdy?," Radio Azattyk, February 25, 2016, http://www.azattyk.org/media/video/inconvenient__questions_tv/27572752.html?z=0&zp=1, (accessed March 3, 2016).

55 Doolotkeldieva, "Development of Political Parties in Rural Kyrgyzstan in Semi-parliamentarian Conditions," Bishkek, 2015.

the ruling party SDPK and the united Respublica–Ata-Jurt. As Tables 2 and 3 indicate, that success must have been largely due to candidates' performances on the ground.

Kyrgyzstan's rise in politics was further facilitated by the fall of Zamandash. Formerly a strong party with long-standing regional networks (represented in 20 city councils out of 23 in the country) and designed to form a support base to the ruling SDPK, Zamandash broke apart just a few months prior to the elections due to harsh internal competition. Following the epic fall of Zamandash, a significant portion of its members shifted at least provisionally toward supporting *Kyrgyzstan*'s electoral campaign.56 Notwithstanding its tremendous luck in acquiring pre-established networks, the new party eventually also resorted to privatization and filled its party list with those it deemed able to buy the votes, i.e., businessmen and former state bureaucrats. Candidates who had served earlier in Respublica, SDPK, and Ata-Jurt now bestowed money and provisional clientelistic networks on their new political home.57 The power to discipline became apparent right after the elections, when *Kyrgyzstan* began rearranging its main list (45 candidates withdrew) and even replaced three deputies with candidates from lower places on the list.58

Information circulating in early spring 2016, after several reshuffles of *Kyrgyzstan*'s list, shed light on the details of control mechanisms as well as provided hints about the ongoing informal transformation of the electoral system. For example, Elmira Djumalieva, who lost both her place on the list and her mandate, shared details about an early gathering of the party *Kyrgyzstan* when its list was being formed.59 At this meeting, candidates were asked to sign two documents: the first asked for the candidate's agreement to voluntarily leave the party if the party leadership found this necessary. The second document attested that each candidate was indebted to the party in the amount of US$500,000. The party then guaranteed equal conditions for everybody to participate in the elections—if they won the cutthroat internal competition for places on the party list. This mechanism was apparently also used by Bir Bol, which also employed techniques in line with the logic of what we have termed

56 Interview with a former member of the Zamandash party, Bishkek, 2015.

57 Sharshenbek Adbykerimov, owner of the largest alcohol company in Kyrgyzstan, Ayu, is the main albeit informal financer of the *Kyrgyzstan* party.

58 "Isaev: Vernem dengi tem, kto ne popal v spisok," Gezitter.org, September 14, 2015, http://www.gezitter.org/interviews/43433_isaev_vernem_dengi_tem_kto_ne_popal_v_spisok/ (accessed February 2, 2016).

59 "'Maylanyshkan' mandat," *Radio Azattyk*, February 17, 2016, http://www.azattyk.org/media/video/inconvenient __questions_tv/27557975.html?z=0&zp=1 (accessed March 3, 2016).

the transaction value of vote-buying. For example, Bakirdin Subanbekov, native son of the town of Karabalta, was responsible for the good performance of the party in his home region of Zhajyl, as he himself publicly declared, yet he had received only 13th place on the list (Bir Bol won 12 mandates in the elections). He further explains: "From the beginning we had agreed: the candidate who brings in more votes should receive the mandate."60 After public discussions about the proper candidate to leave in order to let Subanbekov in—apparently the decision was to be made between tv announcer Lunara Mamytova and bank manager Bakyt Esenbaeva—the latter was let go, allowing party leader Altynbek Sulaimanov to keep his word to Subanbekov.61

Provisional exceptions to the nexus between the protracted weakness of parties and the privatization of their electoral lists involve the parties Ata Meken and SDPK. Although the two were not immune to internal conflicts, they were able to maintain some operational degree of cohesion. Thus, only two SDPK deputies and three Ata Meken deputies ran from other parties in 2015. However, both represent only provisional exceptions as their electoral lists were partially constructed according to the logic of the transaction value of vote buying and the imperative of control. Although Ata Meken reserved winning seats for politicians who either enjoyed authority within specific constituencies, like former prosecutor general Aida Salyanova from Naryn oblast, it sold the remaining winning seats to established businessmen. When the party gained only 11 seats in the parliament, a number of qualified candidates had to cede their places to wealthier candidates. For example, the young politician and Tekebaev's long-standing companion Joomart Saparbaev, former prime minister Joomart Otorbaev, and former head of the ngo Interbilim Asia Sasykbaeva withdrew from the list shortly after the elections. Their exclusion and the replacement with business representatives will

60 See "Bakirdin Subanbekov, deputat fraktsii 'Bir bol' v ZhK, general-leitenant militsii: 'Sobral sootvetstvuiushchie golosa, poetomu ne chuvstvuyu sebya nelovko'," Gezitter. org, February 19, 2016, http://www.gezitter.org/interviews/47867_bakirdin_subanbekov_deputat_fraktsii_bir_bol_v_jk_general-leytenant_militsii_sobral_sootvetstvuyuschie_golosa_poetomu_ne_chuvstvuyu_sebya_nelovko/ (accessed February 29, 2016).

61 See, for this episode, "Mesto Lunary zaimet Bakiridin?" Gezitter.org, December 4, 2015, http://www.gezitter.org/ushaktar/45865_mesto_lunaryi_zaymet_bakiridin/ (accessed February 29, 2016); "Vice-spiker Bakyt Esenbaeva dobrovol′no slozhila deputatskii mandat," Kirtag, February 4, 2016, http://kyrtag.kg/politics/vitse-spiker-bakyt-esenbaeva- dobrovolno-slozhila-deputatskiy-mandat- (accessed February 29, 2016), and "Pravil′no, chto prishel Subanbekov," Gezitter.org, February 11, 2016, http://www.gezitter.org/politic/47617_pravilno_chto_prishel_subanbekov/ (accessed February 29, 2016).

continue to weaken Ata Meken's standing both in policymaking and regional networks that are largely comprised of farmers, teachers, and sometimes even committed members.

For now, the privatization of SDPK's list seems to be a winning strategy for the ruling party. By opening its lists for co-optation and making them accessible to wide circles of politicians and oligarchs from other parties, SDPK appears to benefit in the short term. Yet, the widening and strengthening of these clientelistic networks is most likely to be temporary. This fleeting alliance became evident as the party prepared for municipal elections in Osh, Kyrgyzstan's so-called second capital. According to information about SDPK's municipal electoral campaign, candidates who sought to join the SDPK party list did not hide that they have simultaneously approached other parties for the same request in order to increase their chances to secure a seat in the city council.62 Guided by pure commercial incentives, future candidates dismiss any concerns for party programs or ideas. In fact, the SDPK's municipal list, currently containing acting deputies and rent-seeking patrons, signifies the party's inability to fill local administrations with effective cadres. Interested only in candidates that have best chances to buy votes, the party has failed to attract professionals and young elites. Such short-sighted strategy bodes ill for the ruling party when President Atambaev leaves office in 2017 and when deputies begin re-calculating the benefits of a lame-duck party and join any organization that offers better promises of victory at the following elections.

As we have seen from these brief accounts, instead of programmatic work and the development of party organizations, parties opt for short-sighted measures in order to win elections, securing the votes by trying to force candidates to buy them off in each electoral district. The results of our ethnographic work conducted earlier in 2014 on party development in the regions further corroborate our claim. In interviews, local deputies expressed their anger about the fact that party bosses exploited their local authority for votes in 2010 but quickly abandoned their constituents soon after the elections. This holds true even in regard to the ruling SDPK with its enhanced institutional access to state resources and to the bureaucracy.63 Up until today, political parties in Kyrgyzstan invested huge sums of money to essentially buy votes and or-

62 Interview with SDPK campaign member, Osh, March 2016. This is different from Juraev's account about a candidate, who only informally reveals the fact that he has been approached by other parties as well. In the 2015 elections, the market was transparent and information about supply and demand circulated freely, see Juraev, "The Evolving Role of Political Parties in Kyrgyz Politics," 29.

63 Doolotkeldieva, "Vybory 2015."

ganize fancy concerts to attract voters, while they discard investments into long-term institutional party building. And it seems that the future of parties will be determined by their ability to control single candidates that try to master the challenges of fierce competition on the ground.

Perpetuated Insecurity and the Future of Politics in Kyrgyzstan

The current dynamics in the parties' competition in Kyrgyzstan create a dilemma. The increased employment of techniques that follow the logic of the transaction value of vote buying combined with attempts to control the slates submitted post-election causes an ever more volatile election environment. Thus parties eventually cease to be genuine political agents, originally meant to introduce change by reform and to represent divergent societal interests. Furthermore, our study reveals the destructive impact of the emerging insecurity on the neopatrimonially integrated networks in Kyrgyz politics that rest on imaginary or weak regional affiliations or otherwise bonded loyalty structures. Today, party leaders use all means to discipline their parliamentary factions. But because list assignments are based on commercial transactions, genuine loyalty or even a vague sense of belonging to a political organization does not emerge. Unable to determine the actual capital of a candidate and his ability to bring in the necessary votes (between 5,000 and 10,000 per district) before- hand, party leaders seek to keep the ultimate right to drop candidates and rear- range the list upon discretion.

To summarize the logic at play here: Increased reliance on the transaction value of vote buying demands increased control over the candidates, which in turn, reproduces the incentive to commercialize the electoral process further. Today, everything is in greater flux and eventually determined by single candidates and their capacity to compete in the local arena of a given electoral district. In the end, all that remains is more strategizing by both parties and candidates over a better offer for future elections. Temptations to succumb to co-optation or repression emanating from the ruling elite might interfere with this market logic, yet even the party of power was compelled to rely on commercial interests to populate its party list in order to orchestrate its electoral performance in October 2015.

Parliamentarism in Kyrgyzstan can only suffer from such a dynamic. First, candidates that increasingly employ vote-buying in their respective districts commercialize the relation between voter and representative, thus further depoliticizing the electoral process. In the next elections the allegiance lies with the wealthier candidate, to put it simply; competition for programs is ren-

dered meaningless in such a system. Second, because the integrity of parties is rarely achieved, the parliament as an institution is being undermined in the near future. Weakened parties lead to weaker fractions in the parliament and to easily manipulated majorities (and minorities). Third, a weakened parliament translates into the concentration of power in the president. If earlier the prime minister could be independent from the president by means of strong party support, today, as the strength of parties is fading, the prime minister is becoming dependent on the president. One should not, however, deduce this last development as a one-way road in Kyrgyzstan. As our case study about the president's party, the SDPK, has shown, the presidency in the current system in Kyrgyzstan turns out to be not much more than just an additional bet. The decision to opt for or against it ultimately rests on the estimation of its strength and the risk of becoming a lame-duck.

Finally, for the voter, this situation is dire. In times of elections he is left with no proper choice: politicians shift from one party to another without providing any political rationale. How to generate a political orientation in such an environment? After the elections, no programmatic work is done, and one cannot expect actual policy change. The parliament engages in reforms only insofar as it is not entangled in problems of depleted fraction discipline or preparations for coming elections. The results of our analysis of party-list formation in the context of the elections in 2015 mean that voters should expect even less genuine legislative work to take place in the years to come.