Ala-Too as the Main City/Country Square: Changing Forms, Uses, and Meanings

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between reformatting of Bishkek's central square "from above" and mosaics of meanings, claims, and practices produced by different social actors "from below" in response to the ongoing transformation of this space. Drawing on narratives of long-term Bishkek residents and recent internal migrants to the city, we investigate commonalities and divergences in their perception of Ala-Too's changing image. It is shown why the square, despite its planned multifunctionality, does not fulfill the needs of various segments of the city population. We also analyze political meanings of the "emptiness" of the square and the ambivalent public reaction to the ways it is being "filled." The square becomes a spatial mirror of society—a society that remains in constant flux, searching for social stability and for unifying national symbols, heroes, and slogans.

Keywords

Square as a public space – post-Soviet transformation – diversities of popular perception – political meanings – Kyrgyzstan – Bishkek

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Ala-Too Square was built by the middle of the 1980s in the center of the capital city then known as Frunze. It became well-known around the world due to the dramatic events that occurred there in 2005 and 2010—events that culminated in the overthrow of Kyrgyzstan's government. While working on a larger project on how locals perceive changing urban spaces (taking Central Asia as an example),[1] we could not help but notice how much the square has changed and how those changes have been interpreted by different groups of city dwellers. This article reconstructs the mosaics of meanings, claims, and practices produced by different social actors in the course of their "consumption" of this part of the city, probably the most politically and symbolically charged space of contemporary Bishkek. The "square" is broadly understood as an area that includes not only the square as it is shown on the typical city map, but also a number of adjacent buildings, monuments, and recreation zones.

The square, built in the late Soviet period and embodying the triumph of the Soviet asphalt-concrete architecture and modern Soviet town planning, has endured several transformations since the breakup of the USSR in late 1991. It has acquired new artefacts and new histories, while at the same time becoming a "place of memory."[2] These changes are largely in line with the physical and symbolic reformatting of public spaces in post-Soviet cities (including their squares)—one of the most popular themes in post-socialist urban studies.[3]

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1 This article is drawn from the international research project "Exploring Urban Identity and Community Relations in Post-Soviet Central Asia," supported by the Leverhulme Trust (UK, 2007–2012). Throughout the project implementation, about 80 in-depth interviews highlighting various people's perception of post-Soviet transformation of the capital of Kyrgyzstan, were conducted. Additionally, 20 more interviews were conducted in September-October 2013 during the work of Natalya Kosmarskaya and Guzel Sabirova as Visiting Fellows at the Central Asia Studies Institute (CASI) affiliated with the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek (AUCA). We express our most sincere gratitude to the CASI Director Svetlana Jacquesson, whose invitation and financial support has made this research possible.

2 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations*, 26 (Spring 1989): 7–25.

3 Kiril Stanilov (ed.), *The Post-Socialist City: Urban Form and Space Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe After Socialism* (Berlin: Springer, 2007); John Czaplicka, Nida Gelazis, and Blair A. Ruble (eds), *Cities After the Fall of Communism. Reshaping Cultural Landscapes and European Identity* (Washington, dc: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2009); Tsypylma Darieva, Wolfgang Kaschuba, and Melanie Krebs (eds), *Urban Spaces after Socialism. Ethnographies of Public Places in Eurasian Cities* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 2011); Owen Hatherley, *Na ploshchadi. V poiskakh obshchestvennykh prostranstv postsovetskogo goroda* (Moscow: Strelka Press, 2012); Owen Hatherley, "Na ploshchadi. Arkhitekturnoe

These transformations include re-evaluations of the political messages that were embedded in squares in general, as well as in the monuments in those squares;4 the search for new national symbols located on the squares;5 the new fate of the old symbols;6 changes in the memorial landscapes of squares,7 and radical reconfigurations of symbolically charged parts of the city center.8 Other scholars have examined the transformation of public space in post-socialist cities by analyzing the representative and legitimate potential of the central square,9 studying the linkage between new economic relations and the mode of use of public space,10 and considering the intricate manifestations of urban (dis)order that emerges on the square.11

The recent history of squares cannot be viewed separately from public protests (both organized and spontaneous), different forms of political resistance and their suppression by the state. In this respect, the most famous squares that have served this purpose are Taksim Meydani in Istanbul and Tahrir Square in Cairo. In the post-Soviet countries, perhaps the best example is Independence Square (*Maidan Nezalezhnosti*) in Kyiv. Considerable research has

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i politicheskoe vozrozhdenie urbanisticheskoy tipologii," *Neprikosnovennyi zapas. Debaty o politike i kul'ture*, no. 5 (2014).

4 A. Kazakevich. "Simvolika mesta: zabyvanie i fragmentatsya 'sovetskogo' v landshafte Minska," *Neprikosnovennyi zapas. Debaty o politike i kul'ture,* no. 6 (2011): 17–33.

5 Diana Ter-Ghazaryan, "'Civilizing the City Center': Symbolic Spaces and Narratives of the Nation in Yerevan's Post-Soviet Landscape," *Nationalities Papers,* 41, no. 4 (2013): 570–589.

6 In 2003, the Lenin monument was moved several hundred meters from Ala-Too, the main square of Bishkek, to a place behind the History Museum. This act demonstrates how the new elite found a new use for the resources of the Soviet past, as opposed to rejection (see, e.g., Sally Cummings, "Leaving Lenin: Elites, Official Ideology and Monuments in the Kyrgyz Republic," *Nationalities Papers,* 41, no. 4 (2013): 606–621).

7 N. Vukov and S. Toncheva. "Town Squares and Socialist Heritage: The Reworking of Memorial Landscapes in Post-Socialist Bulgaria," in S. Schroder-Esch and J.H. Ulbricht (eds), *The Politics of Heritage and Regional Development Strategies*." Accessed July 15, 2016. http://www.swkk.de/hermes/research/…Band_2/HERMES_vol2_13Vukov.pdf.

8 Tsypylma Darieva, "Sterilizuya publichnoe prostranstvo? Bakinskaya naberezhnaya kak promenad istorii," *Neprikosnovennyi zapas. Debaty o politike i kul'ture,* no. 6 (2011): 119–138.

9 Elitza Stanoeva, "The Central City Square as a Legitimation Resource: The Main Square of Socialist Sofia," *Critique and Humanism Journal,* no. 35 (2010): 285–320.

10 Judit Bodnar, "Assembling the Square: Social Transformation in Public Space and the Bro- ken Mirage of the Second Economy in Post-Socialist Budapest," *Slavic Review,* 57, no. 3 (1998): 489–515.

11 Gisa Weszkalnys, "Discourses on Urban Disorder in Alexanderplatz, Berlin," *Space and Culture*, 10, no. 2 (2007): 207–230.

been devoted to analyzing the symbolism and materiality of main city squares through the lens of their sociopolitical function.12

While much of the research mentioned above employs a "top–down" approach, there have been relatively few attempts to measure how city (square) transformations are perceived "from below." This study seeks to address this shortcoming by highlighting the interconnections between the reformatting of the square "from above," both in a symbolic and material sense, and the numerous and frequently critical meanings that ordinary inhabitants of Frunze/ Bishkek apply to the Ala-Too Square in response to the ongoing transformation of this space. Despite its turbulent recent history, Ala-Too Square has yet to draw the attention of social researchers.13

The article also reveals how the changing image of the square and how it is perceived by various groups of city dwellers might serve as symbolic mirror of society at large, including existing social and ideological tensions and contradictory evaluations of the past. In doing so, we adhere to the traditions of research into urban spaces that follow in the footsteps of Henri Lefebvre,14 who viewed public spaces as a product of social relationships. He also underlined the role of ideological claims and mediating social actors in the process of producing space:

> Neither nature itself (let it be climate or geography) nor preceding history can adequately explain the space. This also refers to "culture." Similarly, the growth of productive forces alone cannot define parameters of space. Mediators interfere: social groups' action, patterns of knowledge, ideologies, representations.15

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12 Aysegul Baykan and Tali Hatuka, "Politics and Culture in the Making of Public Space: Taksim Square, 1 May 1977, Istanbul," *Planning Perspectives,* 25, no. 1 (2010): 49–68; Hatherley, *Na ploshchadi*; Ilay R. Örs, "Genie in the Bottle: Gezi Park, Taksim Square, and the Realignment of Democracy and Space in Turkey," *Philosophy and Social Criticism,* 40, no. 4/5 (2014): 489–498; Hatherley, "Na ploshchadi"; Atef Said, "We Ought to Be There: Historicizing Space and Mobilization in Tahrir Square," *International Sociology*, 30, no. 4 (2015): 348–366.

13 The work of Nurzat Sultanalieva looks through the spatial lens specifically at the course and routes of the "revolutions" of March 2005 and April 2010 and is based primarily on interviews with participants of these events. See: Nurzat Sultanalieva, "Symbolism, Space and Revolutions: A Curious Case of Kyrgyzstan," (M.A. thesis, Central European University, Budapest, 2011).

14 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

15 Henri Lefebvre, "Sotsial'noe prostranstvo," *Neprikosnovenny zapas. Debaty o politike i kul'ture*, no. 2 (2010): 10. Accessed August 15, 2016. http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2010/2/le1. html.

In the other words, "economic relations and forces of production, social, political, and cultural histories and the agents of these histories have an impact on the form of space and define its meaning."16 As a result, complex reciprocal interactions emerge among space, politics, culture, and power.

Square Construction: "Ordinary People Believed that it Would Become the Center of Their Future"

Urbanization in the USSR was carried out in such a way that the main investments were made in the cities and capitals of the 15 Soviet republics, such as Frunze. Frunze, a small local center (initially called Pishpek) with the population of several thousand people at the beginning of the twentieth century, gradually became a large industrial city. If in 1913 only 18,000 people lived there, by the late 1950s it was 220,000 people,17 and by the end of the Soviet era it had grown to over 600,000 people.18

By the end of 1960s Frunze had acquired some features of a city. Urban residents were proud of its parks and boulevards, as well as its increasing industrial capacity and growing links with other Soviet cities. However, the town architects and locals recalled that Frunze was still a largely provincial town, an "unfinished town" of sorts, lagging behind Alma-Ata19 in terms of architectural development.

Soviet planners identified the lack of a central urban plaza as one of Frunze's "weak" points. Instead, new modern buildings stood alongside old brick and stone one-story buildings—a contrast that did not help portray Frunze as a dynamic developing socialist city worthy of its capital status. This feeling was shared by Turdakun Usubaliev, the republic party leader between 1961 and 1985. Among other things, his initiative to build a new square stemmed from the need to make the city grander than the republic's other urban "centers."

By the late 1960s Frunze had a square that was used for official ritual functions. The Old Square had (and still has) a monument dedicated to Marx and Engels, housed the city's key administrative buildings, and was the site of all major parades. Apart from the Old Square, there were other symbolically charged places in the city center: a boulevard named after Former Soviet secret

16 Baykan and Hatuka, "Politics and Culture in the Making of Public Space," 50.

17 Frunze, *Entsyklopedia* (Frunze, 1984), 14.

18 Naselenie Kyrgyzstana, *Itogi pervoy natsional'noy perepisi naseleniya Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki 1999 goda v tablitsakh*, Book ii (part one) (Bishkek: 2000, 13).

19 The capital of the Kazakh SSR, founded at the same time as Frunze. It is now known as Almaty.

police chief Feliks Dzerzhinsky and the "Ala-Too" cinema house. Part of one street running between the "Ala-Too" and "Russia" cinemas was called Broadway (or *Brod* in the city slang) in the 1950 and 1960s. One of our respondents described the contrasts of old Frunze as follows:

> The thing is, Dzerzhinka, the center, was kind of elite. … There were elite four- and five-story buildings there; government officials, commanding officers, culture sector workers and engineers lived there. They made the place feel elite. You wouldn't believe but the rest of the city was … around the Opera Theatre, there were those dilapidated houses, just like in Kuznechny Fort. A theatre and right next to it, those little houses (male, Uyghur, 65 years old, higher education, biologist).

The 1970 master plan for the city's revival included a complex redesign of the city center—with a new department store, a post office, theatres, a circus, and a new square. This project was dubbed "Jubilee development" (*yubileynoe stroitel'stvo*).20 The new central square was to become a part of a major regeneration project and create a new architectural image for the city. Part of this plan involved moving the city center to the southern part of the city, so that the new square would offer a view of the mountains:

> The Moscow architects suggested creating a view on the fourth wall … the fourth wall being the mountains. The plan was to open up a view on those mountains and to make the space between Pervomayskaia Street [now it is called Razzakova Street] and Orozbekova Street into a huge pedestrian esplanade, so that people could walk along and see the mountains at all times. The esplanade would finish with a railway station. And so those arches were created, as if it was a theatre decoration, to look at those mountains through the arches. … It was a good modern Soviet idea. Everyone knew, including the guys from Moscow, that Dzerzhinka, Young Guard Boulevard were very overgrown, you couldn't see anything there. And so instead we wanted to have some short greenery that would allow to have that view. We don't have a space with a view over the mountains. You just go past and don't have a feeling that you're next to a mountain (male, Kyrgyz, 55 years old, higher education, architect, local history specialist).

20 According to our respondents who remember that period, the construction of the new square was to commemorate several jubilees: 100 years since Kyrgyzstan made the decision to become part of Russia (1974) and 50 years since the creation of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic (1986).

Thus, the original idea was for the mountains to play an important part in the look and location of the new square. The small and cozy center with large trees that provided much needed shade in the local climate, would become a spacious, grand center with a view over the mountains; offering cool, fresh mountain air alongside sparkling fountains. It was an ambitious plan. One resident of Frunze recalled these aspirations as being on a "Taj Mahal-like" scale.

This project could not be implemented without complex, lengthy negotiations between the local leadership of the Kyrgyz SSR and Moscow. In fact, construction was significantly delayed because local officials had to wait for Moscow to approve this ambitious plan.21 Part of these discussions covered the ideological implications inherent to any change in the image of the city center, in general, and the square, in particular. Gennady Kutateladze, the chief architect for Frunze in the 1970s and 1980s, presents an interesting picture of how contesting imaginaries emerged over the city center planning process:

> A lot of debate was caused by the Lenin Museum … I can't recall the name of the director of the Lenin Museum in Moscow at that time … she was responsible for money transfers to the museum in Frunze. … The architects were local, there was that competition. … There were 24–25 projects but we didn't want to have the Lenin Museum there. Myself and a number of other architects tried to convince the city [governor] not to do it … we went to the republican party leader for three days, tried to convince him against the idea … But no, he said that we were anti-communists.
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> I. (interviewer): And what would you have preferred to have there?
> R. (respondent): To have a monument, fountains, greenery, pedestrians

That lost battle over the green part of the square would have repercussions many years later as one of several factors that made Ala-Too less attractive to residents seeking leisure and recreation.

The new square had to be appropriately imposing for a capital city. Major construction finally began in the 1970s. The whole area became one enormous building site. In real terms this meant the demolition of not just the slums, but also several factories, residential and public buildings, including relatively new and sturdy ones, in order to create a brand new space. One respondent, who lived very close to the construction area, relays the feelings of the local inhabitants—a mix of discontent, readiness to bow to pressure "from the top," and excited anticipation:

21 V.V. Kurbatov and E.G. Pisarskoy, *Arkhitektura goroda Frunze* (Frunze, 1978).

R.: Usubaliev decided to build this square, many good houses were demolished, such a wasteful way of handling these buildings … it was so distressing to look at this … but on the other hand we now have a beautiful square.

I.: So you like it now. And at that time?

R.: At that time we also took it positively. You know what kind of people we have here? People with a kind of Asian-Soviet mentality—if they "at the top" want something, it means it should be done at all costs. And we were told that it would appear as a wonderful square (female, Kyrgyz, 71 years old, higher education, museum worker).

Ala-Too Square, in its present form, was completed by the mid-1980s. In 1984, a bronze statue of Lenin was erected in the center of the square. The architects and artists among our respondents tended to view the new square as a good modernist project. Two new buildings on the square—the president's residence (White House) and the Lenin Museum (now the Historical Muse- um) were built from marble and granite in the best traditions of architectural modernism. But the square proved a little too large for Frunze and was there- fore difficult to fill even on holidays when parades were staged there.

Photo 1 *Aerial view of the central part of Frunze prior to reconstruction*
Source: http://www.foto.kg/galereya/2783-centr-goroda-frunze- prospekt-dzerzhinskogo.html

As Viacheslav Glazychev pointed out, "The 'expansion' [*raskrytie*] of the square reaches its limits in Soviet architecture. … The function of a square is restricted here to the creation of 'emptiness,' which would be filled only twice a year by demonstrations of loyalty toward the state."22 In line with this trend, the appearance of Ala-Too completely conformed to the standards of late-Soviet city squares—urban spaces possessing a particular kind of sacred emptiness. This contrasted with the everyday profane space of the town and served to strengthen and reinforce the disciplining (organizing) power of the state.

The new square was the last of a series of ferro-concrete building projects and was constructed to "to grow into," i.e., taking into account the pace of population growth in Frunze to the year 2000. It was alien for the city, not only because it was new, but also because it did not correspond in size to the capital nor to its reputation as a green, "garden city" (*gorod-sad*).

Photo 2 *View of the square in the late Soviet period*
Source: Project "Kyrgyzskiy Fotoarkhiv" http://www.foto.kg/galereya/page,1,402,1358-frunze-ploschad-imeni-v-i-lenina.html

22 V. Glazychev, *Urbanistika* (Moscow: Evropa, 2008), 167.

Post-Soviet Transformation: New Monuments and New Symbolism

The square was completed by the start of the *perestroika* period, and by that time residents had begun to consider it as a public gathering place. Over time, it became a special urban space and a national symbol. After the Kyrgyz SSR transformed into an independent state, Ala-Too was regarded as the city's primary square. It became a place for political demonstrations, collective prayers, and celebrations of independence. The space was actively domesticated and appropriated by demonstrators, protesters, and urban communities of all sizes that needed a large space and wanted to be seen and heard.

The dramatic events of 2005 and 2010, when Kyrgyzstan's incumbent governments were overthrown, shaped the new image of the square. The yurts (symbols of nomadic archaism and Kyrgyz rural everyday life) that protesters camped in and the camp fires burning in the square changed the face and function of this space. The square came to resemble a camp of nomads; new smells and new sounds emanated from the space; the old emptiness was filled with the crowd and order was disrupted in a literal and metaphorical sense.

The post-Soviet transformation was directed at changing the face and function of the square and better zoning of the space inside. Initially the square was divided by Chuysky Avenue (one of the city's two main thoroughfares that cuts through it horizontally) into two parts—"official-ceremonial" and recreational. Both have undergone significant change since 1991.

During the Soviet period, the architectural array of the square consisted of the Lenin monument in the center and the People's Friendship memorial, constructed in 1974 in honor of the 100th anniversary of the voluntary accession of Kyrgyzstan to the Russian Empire. Since the city became the capital of the new independent state of Kyrgyzstan, new national symbols have appeared, giving the square a new image. These changes were designed to create a new Kyrgyz sacredness. Instead of the monument to Dzerzhinsky by the Dubovy (Oak) Park, there is now a monument to the "Alay queen"—Kurmandzhan Datka, the leader of Southern (Alay) Kyrgyz. In 2003, under the leadership of President Askar Akayev, the traditional Soviet centerpiece, the Lenin monument, was relocated to a place behind the History Museum (the former Lenin Museum). This move occurred relatively late in comparison with other capitals of the former Soviet republics, which disposed of these monuments with greater haste. Lenin was replaced by the Kyrgyz Independence monument employing the im- age of a flying woman holding a *tunduk* (the crowning grid of a Kyrgyz yurt used for lighting and ventilation). While the monument was unpopular among the traditionalists ("a bad sign, a monument to a woman, and the tunduk is in the wrong hand"), it became a symbol of change and hope for pro-Western liberals.

When President Kurmanbek Bakiyev was removed from the office in April 2010, the "woman" was also "removed" and replaced with a statue of the epic hero Manas on a horse. A monument to writer Chingiz Aitmatov, a symbol of Kyrgyz cultural modernization, appeared on the other side of the square. These two monuments became the physical realization of two symbolic and competing conceptions of the developing independence of Kyrgyzstan.

Photo 3 *Chingiz Aitmatov and Manas—confronting or balancing each other?*
Picture of the authors

The appearance of new monuments in the central square provides a great deal of material for reflection on the role of the state in urban transformation; on the search for a new ideological basis for the developing new state; on how modern Kyrgyzstan is re-evaluating its Soviet past; and on how the concepts of patriarchy and modernity are competing in different versions of the "national idea." New sculptural figures, in the eyes of city residents, interact with each other, contradict each other, engage in a dialogue with each other, and compete for public sympathy.

The "New Manas" statue has become a variation on the "old Manas" in front of the Philharmonia building. The symbolic "weight" of Aitmatov is deter- mined not only by his position opposite Manas, but also by the fact that he is positioned on two roads leading away from the center of Ala-Too, near a bus stop. In other words, he is positioned on the edge of the square. The figure itself does, indeed, bear some resemblance to popular sculpture images of Sergei Yesenin, making the contrast between the writer's figure and its neighbor on a horse even more startling.

After the events of March 2005, which brought Kurmanbek Bakiyev to power, the recreational function of the square took on a new significance. Flower beds, benches, and new illuminated fountains appeared, and in the evenings there was live music. A new fence was built around the White House. There was an important sociopolitical reasoning behind this change. As one respondent put it, "An empty space of the square was to be filled with something, so that a crowd of angry men with guns would not be tempted to crowd there together." Further on in his interview, he specified how and why Ala-Too lost its "sacred emptiness" associated with the square's "political" function:

> When this square appeared during the Soviet time under Usubaliev, it was quite a new space for the city—empty and of a much larger size than could fit Frunze, a relatively small town at that time … However, when crowds of protesters chose the square for their meetings, the true function of this space became obvious. The smells of *shashlyk,* blood, sweat, and powder permeated the square. And this emptiness seemed also to become a sacred one: at night the moon was reflected in the fountain basins, and at any critical moment crowds could come there again in order to express themselves … So, when Bakiyev entered office, during his first years he tried to resist these gatherings, and then it seems that somebody gave him the idea he should rid the square of its sacral spirit, to "clean it up" (*zachistka ot sakral'nosti*). Flower beds, benches, and all that stuff were created, all under the slogan of working for the people's own good (male, Kyrgyz, 48 years old, higher education, architect).

This method of driving political protesters off the vast space of city squares is an invented "tradition" with a rich pedigree. For instance, the local authorities in London constructed several huge fountains in Trafalgar Square after "Bloody Sunday" in November 1887, when demonstrations ended up in a clash between workers and police.23 Post-Soviet cities are not an exception.24

The year 2010 brought a new chapter in the square's transformation. The blood of those who had stormed the White House confirmed the square's status as both a memorial and a revolutionary space. The last step in the creation of the modern image of the square became the design of the black-and-white marble monument, dedicated to the April 2010 events, as well as a memorial plaque with the names of the people who were killed near the White House.

The "memorialization" of the square has received ambiguous reviews from the residents. On the one hand, it provides a memorial to the recent dramatic

Photo 4 *Monument to commemorate "revolution" of April 2010*
Picture of the authors

23 Hatherley, *Na ploshchadi*, 18.

24 Glazychev mentions, for instance, about "accurate elimination" of public gatherings function of Manezhnaya Square (near Kremlin in Moscow), which attracted thousands of political demonstrators at the end of 1980s, but now is full of people enjoying fountains and underground shopping malls (Glazychev, *Urbanistika*, 164).

events and serves as a kind of warning for the city. At the same time, it also adds to the landscape of the square. On the other hand, the pretense and the categorical nature of the monument (the black-and-white contrast symbolizing the struggle between good and evil); the use of marble (already used extensively around the square), make it look too ideologically heavy and too one-sided.

The locals also remember another monument, which only existed for a short time before being replaced by the black-and-white one. It was a small obelisk featuring a memorial plaque with the names of people killed at the square, placed on the fence of the White House. In effect, the square has be- come a place of remembrance of the violence that took place there and is now frequently felt to be a kind of cemetery. This has given it a new sacred meaning, although not a consolidating or appealing meaning.

Changing Square Images in the Eyes of Capital Residents: "Monuments," "Flowers," "People"

Today Ala-Too Square has become the main landmark of Bishkek and the primary urban symbol of Kyrgyzstan. The space has its own rhythm of days and seasons, with its own working days and "special" celebrations. It fills with people in varying numbers for celebrations, evenings, and weekends. During business hours it remains a large, mainly empty space, sporadically disturbed by public transportation and people who have to cross the square for their day-to-day activities.

On special occasions, Ala-Too fulfills different functions. Most importantly, it is a site where state power is represented and legitimized, mainly due to the square's large size and monumental architecture. Ordinary people use the square for their own purposes. Photographers and private vendors, for example, set up around the fountains; there is also a new bike loan station there; on hot days children invade the fountains. It is also a place to display art projects, stage various youth and sport events, and listen to concerts.

The narratives about the city square that emerged in our interviews can be structured around three themes. Metaphorically they might be defined as "monuments" (dealing with the past and present materiality of the square and adjacent zones); "flowers" (recreation), and "people" (who visits and who avoids the square). At some points, the narratives demonstrate a divergence in views between the so-called long-term residents25 of Bishkek (*starozhily*) and

25 By "long-term residents" we mean people who lived in the city during the Soviet eraand who are still resident there today. They are thus the part of the present day urban

recent migrants to the city. However, this is not always the case. For instance, both groups of respondents were quite unanimous in their attitudes toward the symbolically charged part of the built environment (changing range of monuments on the square). Thus, the most common reaction to removal of the old monuments and erection of the new ones was indifference:26 "it is not significant for me"; "not interesting"; "let it be like it is." Very few respondents mentioned monuments of their own volition in general conversation.27 One of respondents recalled that she had wanted a Kyrgyz taxi driver (not a mi- grant) to take her to some building near the black-and-white marble monument, but he could not understand what she was talking about. In the authors' view, taking "symbolic beacons" as insignificant and boring might be a Soviet "tradition," a projection of the interpretation of plaques with the names of the "idols" of the past era—for the elder generations in the least. As far as the younger people are concerned, their reasoning might be different. As one respondent mused on the topic:

> What is a monument? It is bronze, copper, it costs a lot, and those in power are trying to carry a message to the public through these expensive monuments, in the hope that they will live for centuries. But now the people who use tv and internet every day, they are used to a digital, visual images, which live a day or two, and these monuments do not say much to the contemporary public and do not receive much response from the people. (male, Russian, 29 years old, higher education, NGO activist).

Long-term residents' narratives related to the materiality of the square were mainly comparative, focused on how the "center" looked before and how it looks now. In their opinion, it has proved difficult to "incorporate" the newly built square into the fabric of the town, and the inhabitants have found it difficult to get used to its new functions. This sort of argument deals with the "(un)humanness" of the square. From the start, the emptiness of the new square was felt to be alien, especially compared with the old "cozy and human"

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population most likely to have clear recollections of the city as it was in the past. They also call themselves *Frunzentsy*, implying that memory about Frunze is an integral element of their identity.

26 Extensive comments on this topic were only received from the people who could be taken as local "cultural leaders" (architects, designers, etc.).

27 This corresponds with the results of our earlier research of popular attitudes towards diverse manifestations of the re-symbolization of the urban environment in Central Asian cities. See, e.g., Natalya Kosmarskaya. "Contribution to a Forum on City Culture, Urban Culture," *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, no. 7 (2012): 79–82.

center. People were unaccustomed to the new monumentality and scale that turned to be an "uncomfortable desert":

> My grandmother lived on Karpinka, so I would travel to see her from Panfilov to Karpinka through the center. It was really cozy and human. The in- humanity began … when they started to reshape the square and build the White House; they knocked down the old House of Officers, the skating rink … There wasn't monumentality there, there weren't ambitions. When Usubaliev redeveloped it, ambitions appeared. But before that there were spaces that were more human-sized, but then they became disproportionate. (female, Russian, 53 years old, higher education, NGO worker).

For the Bishkekians who came of age during the "Frunze period," the center is associated not with Ala-Too Square but with various different places or sites— the Old Square, the cinema, Dzerzhinsky Boulevard, Tsum (the Central Department Store), and parks.

At the same time, Bishkek remains "small" and provincial; the huge and pompous square, created in Soviet times (if one returns to its original form before the appearance of flower beds here) is also dissonant with the dimensions of the city. According to one respondent, the square is a dead zone that locals have not been able to assimilate because it has not become a "city": it is empty, it remains a model of clean, presentational architecture:

> I note these things when the townspeople don't like a particular place, it's not attractive to them, it is as if they don't notice it. And this History Museum, it's everywhere, but the townspeople themselves don't really see it.
> … There are these sort of dead zones. … And this phenomenon occurred, that square that was created by this "anniversary construction," I think, even now is not understood as belonging to the inhabitants. It can't be accepted as belonging to them because it was purely presentational architecture. Architects immediately called it "architecture of eastern despotism." The White House, which is now called the Presidential Palace; the Lenin museum branch and also some other buildings. … They aren't interpreted as the city. And what was there before is remembered by everybody (male, Kyrgyz, 55 years, higher education, local history specialist).

The sense of estrangement from the square felt by long-term residents is strengthened by the fact that it is poorly incorporated into the ensemble of the green town. Former *Frunzentsy* found it difficult to accept the new image of the square without green plantings ("Our climate is completely unsuitable for the square, it is like the Nevada desert in the daytime"). Though complaints

about the heat were produced both by the newcomers to Bishkek and its long- term residents, for the latter the scorching asphalt of the square turned out to be another sad reminder of "our wonderful Frunze," which was indeed one of the greenest cities in the USSR. Parks and green spaces were most frequently mentioned favorite places in the town in a nostalgic context.28

Green zones in Central Asian cities (parks and boulevards) are practical in terms of creating a physically comfortable space—places that are comfortable to walk in during hot weather. Moreover, the colorful lawns are associated with civilization and luxury. Long-term residents regard trees and flowers as indicators that confirm the urban status of the place. That is why many of them discussed the quality of the new flowerbeds on the square and their decoration in general—mostly in negative terms.

Long-term residents had negative interpretations of the Ala-Too space. They regard the flowerbeds, fountains, and the live music as a loss of "capital

Photo 5 *Recreational part of the square*
Picture of the authors

28 For analysis of Soviet nostalgia of the long-term residents of Central Asian cities within the framework of concepts of "localized" and "de-localized" memories see: Moya Flynn, Natalya Kosmarskaya, and Guzel Sabirova, "The Place of Memory in Understanding Ur- ban Change in Central Asia: The Cities of Bishkek and Ferghana," *Europe-Asia Studies,* 66, no. 9 (2014): 1501–1524.

status"; that is, visual signs of the city's downward slide into a *kolkhoz*-site or a *raitzentr*:29

> flowerbeds, all these clocks, it's such a little … some kind of extremely undemanding taste … The authorities had a good reason to make it beautiful, human, and nice, let's say. But nonetheless it turned out like a kolkhoz …. Not the flowerbeds themselves but the way they were carved out (female, Russian, 34 years old, higher education, designer).

> What you see now—I think, that flower gardens are now better in the collective farms than here (female, Kyrgyz, 55 years old, higher education, teacher).

> Lawns and flowerbeds … difficult to comment on this … It reminds [me of] not even some provincial town, but a small settlement. A kind of paradise for the director of a kolkhoz (male, Kyrgyz, 48 years old, higher education, architect).

Some respondents talked with annoyance about a sort of "petuniaization" of the square and the city in general. Here the point is made that petunias are omnipresent in Bishkek but make for a rather miserable sight. In fact, the petunia, an annual decorative plant with beautiful flowers, has been used for years to decorate the cities of Europe and Russia. However, if the plant is not looked after properly, their flowerbeds and planters can appear shoddy and unimpressive.

While the flowerbeds, illuminated fountains, and live music have partly eradicated the former emptiness of the huge, "imperial" square and introduced elements of festival and multifunctionality, they have not made the place more appealing. Many factors affect the atmosphere; for instance, the type of music that is chosen for the square is important, whether classical or popular "ethnic" folk styles. The long-term residents themselves wish to see the square as a focal point for the modern city. One of the routes to this, in their opinion, is to fill this space with commercial sites of a suitable level and quality, in particular the arched zone of the buildings that frame the square:

29 The labels *kolkhoz* (collective farm of the Soviet period) and *raitsentr* (a small provincial town, a center of a district (*raion*), the lower administrative unit in the USSR and also in present-day Russia and some post-Soviet states), are frequently used in Russian, in a figurative sense, as symbols of low educational status and cultural backwardness.

Photo 6 *Ala-Too square, looking after petunias*
Picture of the authors

> I am afraid to walk there. I never go there because it isn't the city. The city dwellers don't go there. But we need to turn this space into an urban one because there is so much potential in the square. In Paris there is Rivoli Street and there are also these arches, good shops and cafes… It's clear that there is the flag flying there, people have to go there because it is the essence of the city, it is the main square, but it is not urban at all because the whole city hangs out (*zavisaet*) in other places, not on the square. They should make it so that there are people there … They should at least start from the arches. There are some strange salons there, some weird hairdressers… There needs to be domestic tourists, but they need to see what a city is. They don't need to come and see Bishkek and think, "Oh, it's just bigger than our *raitzentr*, there's nothing to see here…." There are many points of interest but they are all around the square (male, Kyrgyz, 36 years old, higher education, employee of international organization).

For newly arrived residents of the city, the atmosphere of the square itself is a point of pride and joy: "We are happy that it has become so clean and beautiful, with flowers, benches, fountains"; "When I pass by the square I enjoy how

it looks." One respondent who had described the flowers planted there as a symbol of joy, a symbol that all was well in the country, remarked bitterly about recent changes to the square:

R.: The flowers from Tyuleev30 have remained. But what are we to do now, you go there to the square and it's now like a cemetery … It's my opinion … Only [in] one place was the square beautiful. And it has become a cemetery. Before you'd go there with joy, right? Sometimes we would sit there with my daughter. And now to go there somehow makes my heart ache. I am unhappy there. There's this monument plaque there … And when I see it I feel bad again.

I.: You mean it reminds you of what happened, right?

R.: I remember and I am sad; we've only got one good little space. I used to go there and I was glad, right? We've got a good place, you can sit there and relax if only a little bit. Well, to feel proud of one's country, to feel that this is your country. Oh! This is my country! And now this really isn't there at all. I don't have these feelings. Now I see the plaque about it. Why did they hang it up there? It would be better if the flowers were good, if they made it beautiful. Or if they built something beautiful there, right? Not a monument. It's a beautiful place, and they should make it colorful (female, Kyrgyz, 41 years old, secondary education, shop assistant).

The perception by long-term residents of the new face of the square also needs to be examined in the context of the intensive rural–urban migration of the post-Soviet period. Importantly, for these inhabitants, the "rural" image of the square and the presence of "crowds" of newcomers are closely correlated: "After the square was rearranged, it has started to attract absolutely new 'consumers'." The word "newcomers" (*priezzhie*) is used to describe rural im- migrants who are seen to possess different habits and mindsets. "Newcomers" are also "others" in terms of the evaluation of the past and present of the city.

The main behavioral pattern of the long-term residents in relation to the square with "the wrong flowers and the wrong people" is to avoid it: "Only newcomers walk around here, there aren't any city people (*gorodskie*)." As interviews testify, there can be different reasons for this avoidance:

> Now the square is entirely different, very noisy, like a bazaar. … What should we do there? We do not like to go there … (male, Kyrgyz, 63 years old, higher education, university teacher).

30 Nuriman Tyuleev, mayor of Bishkek during the Bakiyev era.

Going there really provokes some discomfort for us. The place is not very clean, I walk with a child, and people nearby spit on asphalt, drink beer, wash in the fountains and wash their things there (male, Russian, 33 years old, higher education, businessman).

Photo 7 *Independence Day on the square. People enjoying cool of fountains*
Picture of the authors

> Our middle class … I have never heard about them going to the square during the public holidays. First, they fear that these poor residents might get drunk and beat them. And another reason—as only poor people go there, they do not want to contact with them (*slivat'sia*) (female, Kyrgyz, 22 years old, incomplete higher education, student).

This discourse clearly correlates with the generally negative attitudes of city dwellers toward the numerous internal labor migrants who have come to the capital in successive waves since the end of the 1980s. Their arrival is, in several senses, connected with the appearance around the city of a so-called migration belt of poorly built "new settlements."[31]

The transformation of Ala-Too Square is viewed as a part of the increasing "ruralization" of Bishkek. For long-term residents, the square is marked as a place for "rural" newcomers[32] who come here to familiarize themselves with "urban" leisure. Some long-term residents examined this issue more closely. What is important for them is not only that some elements of the square create a low cultural level to those consuming this space. The very relevance of a visit to the square as a test of "urbanism" is placed in doubt:

> The public gather there, new urban dwellers gather. You want to become a city dweller; that's difficult, you need to learn something, work something out, do it tactfully. It is easier to go to the center of the city, park your car, put a bottle of vodka on the hood, turn on the music, take some photos and invite your mates: "I'm in the center of the city, I am a city dweller." And now the real city dwellers are practically hiding in the corners somewhere and all these newcomers have occupied (*okkupirovali*) the center (male, Kyrgyz, 52 years-old, higher education, architect).

So it is precisely the "recreational" zone of the square that provokes criticism and rejection on the part of the long-term residents, because here exists some

31 The attitude of long-term residents toward internal migrants is a broader issue that needs to be contextualized within the socio-political development of Kyrgyzstan and its capital in the post-Soviet period. This approach is pursued in Moya Flynn and Natalya Kosmarskaya, "Exploring 'North' and 'South' in Post-Soviet Bishkek: Discourses and Perceptions of Rural-Urban Migration," *Nationalities Papers*, 40, no. 3 (2012): 453–471. Deconstruction of anti-migrant discourse of long-term residents can also be found there.

32 To be precise, our interviews testify that recent migrants to the city also have a number of reasons not to visit the square (e.g., heat, noise, and crowds and, more frequently, because they lack time and/or money for this kind of entertainment).

kind of potential for giving the square the image of the contemporary city-site. The filling of the square with ethnic symbols and sounds associated with "rural" ways of life block the arrival, implantation, and germination of modern, attractive, urban ways of life.

Discussion and Conclusion

The transformation of Ala-Too Square, the images and events associated with this, reflect not only the past and present of Frunze/Bishkek, but also the confluence of the newly independent state's birth, its ideology, symbols, and values. The square, created as the key urban space at the end of the Soviet period, has been at the center of the most important events that have occurred in post- Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Today the square embodies contradictory expectations of the future. Here the memory of political protests and revolutionary events is materialized, and stones are imprinted with the chief national heroes and symbols.

The square is a main transport artery with dense traffic levels cutting through it. During the day, a large mass of people cross the square, either on foot or by transport. The visual range of the square is perceived as common- place by the majority of inhabitants. Here the "South" and "North" of the country, urban and rural lifestyles meet or observe each other, personalized by the so-called *Frunzentsy*, who long for their cozy green capital, and the "newcomers" who voluntarily or by necessity found themselves in an unfamiliar urban environment.

As our findings testify, these two segments of the city population have differing views on the square and use this space in a different way. The long-term residents' consolidated stance toward migrants and the present image of the square is based on their common cherished memories about what the square (city) was during the Soviet time.

However, in our view, the "old residents–migrants" dichotomy should be treated in a more nuanced way. Thus, among members of both groups, indifference prevails in relation to the latest "memorialization" of the square after the events of April 2010. Informants also talked about discomfort and stress because of the presence of the memorial plaque; about associations of the square with a "cemetery." The memorial to the bloody events has damaged the image of the square as a place for leisure, fun, and rest.

Additionally, some people may be identified (on both sides of the divide) for whom the politically charged "protest" (*mitingovaya*) function of the square seems to be of crucial importance. These are, for instance, people with direct

experience of "revolutions" and political protests, a group mostly made up of migrants from different parts of Kyrgyzstan.33 As far as long-term residents are concerned, these people may well be pro-Western liberals, involved in some sort of social activism. Despite their ambiguous evaluations of "revolutions" themselves (in the words of the respondent cited below, "There are mixed feelings about revolutions, revolutionaries, and looters. And as all revolutions are conducted by looters, you really feel that looters are just criminals"), they are critical of the "cleaning up" (*zachistka*) of the square undertaken by Bakiyev. They also insist that capital city needs an "empty" square to accommodate potential political protesters, giving them the chance to "express themselves":

> In any case, Ala-Too has fulfilled its task of being some sort of Agora for us, both in March and in April. But Bakiyev has ruined it with all his flowerbeds … The city really needs such a space if we say that we are a democratic, parliamentary republic. To allow people to hold meetings there (male, Kyrgyz, 55 years old, higher education, local history specialist).

Local disputes over the "emptiness" or "fullness" of the square and its political meanings have an important international dimension. Owen Hatherley, who has shown in his book how vast "windswept" squares of the former socialist cities of Eastern Europe and Russia changed their faces after the fall of communism, argues that we should reconsider the simplified vision of these public spaces as mainly symbols of authoritarian rule: "With all our criticisms towards empty spaces, we should not forget that this emptiness is a nuisance both for those with power and money and that simulation of a joyous consumerist activity on the squares is not much better than immovable monumentalism of [authoritarian] regime."34

Turning back to the "old residents–migrants" dichotomy in relation to the square, this bifurcation may be rooted in mutual misunderstandings and also a specific dissonance of cultural codes and life experiences. As mentioned above, long-term residents commented quite a lot on the "undemanding taste" of both producers of recreational part of the square (the city authorities) and its main consumers (newcomers to Bishkek—migrants from the rural areas). According to the long-term residents, Ala-Too Square, in its present form, does not differ much from any *raitzentr*, a provincial town where you could enjoy the same plain flowers, popular Kyrgyz music, and ever-present monument to

33 Sultanalieva, *Symbolism, Space, and Revolutions.*

34 Hatherley, *Na ploshchadi*, 7.

Lenin or "some local *bai*."35 However, there is an obvious controversy in this kind of reasoning: if the central capital square appears so parochial, why is it so popular among yesterday's provincials?

Yes, the flowers really do look drab, and the artistic value of the new monuments leaves much to be desired. But, older residents seem to overlook an important fact. Due to the peculiarity of urbanization in Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek attracts people from all regions of the country.36 This specific position of Bishkek-as-beacon is echoed in the particular relationship that the Kyrgyz have with their capital:

> Bishkek—it is unique for us … It is not just a big village … for those from the regions, it represents possibilities; to settle in the city is to be able to look at these city lights … it is the most special place, it is our New York, it is our Las Vegas (male, Kyrgyz, 34 years old, higher education, university teacher).

For the residents of Frunze, which was "full of roses" during the Soviet era, the presence of a huge variety of well-tended flowers was a part of their everydayness. In contrast, for rural dwellers accustomed to investing their scarce resources (time, money, land, water, etc.) into growing the plants needed for survival, flowers in the center of the city, even if they appear rather plain or wilted, epitomize a sort of *joie de vivre*, mirth, and festivity.

Newcomers to Bishkek, in turn, feel hurt that they are not accepted as true urbanites though formally they reside within the city "walls." They do not fully realize that the stance of the older residents is rooted, aesthetically and psychologically, in their memories about life in the "other" city, Frunze. Many of those who call themselves *Frunzentsy* today, do not just rely on hearsay for knowledge on what this "other" city was like—they grew up in it.

In the post-Soviet period, Ala-Too was presented as a living post card for Bishkek (as an urban capital) and Kyrgyzstan as a whole (at the national level), both for the country residents and for international visitors. But the question of what image should be predominant in this representative role remains open. On the one hand, the square is expected to be multifunctional, fulfilling the needs of various segments of the population and corresponding to ideas of contemporary urban space. On the other hand, under already

35 This word of Turkic origin was initially used (in Central Asian languages) to refer to local feudal lords. In Soviet times this term acquired derogative meaning, i.e., a corrupt and cruel local party/state official.

36 See Flynn and Kosmarskaya, "Exploring 'North' and 'South' in Post-Soviet Bishkek," 458.

existing multifunctionality and polyphony, in the eyes of old residents the square is "non-city"; it is inappropriate for city dwellers and it has become a "rural place," attracting only country "bumpkins."

But how should the central square be reformatted, in order to better satisfy the minds and hearts of the majority of the citizens and also be attractive for international visitors? What should be the image of central square in a multiethnic country with a Soviet past and predominately rural population? What image would satisfy the various tastes, consumer demands, and ideological claims? Should a place be found for some other heroes on pedestals? Do some new Soviet-like elements need to be incorporated? Could classical music or jazz be played on Mondays, and Kyrgyz pop music offered on Wednesdays?

The core of the problem is the state of Kyrgyzstani society itself. In fact, the square is a spatial mirror of society that remains in constant flux, in search of social stability, unifying national symbols, heroes, and slogans. Commenting on the two recently appeared monuments, one of the respondents, for instance, asked: "Why did they put two totally different monuments opposite each other?" An answer may be found in the reflections of the other respondent:

> So here we have Manas and there we have Chingiz Aitmatov … And this duality, which, in my opinion, shows the double face of those in power … it is a struggle of modernity with traditionalism, I would even call it paternalism … We want both this and the other. (male, Kyrgyz, higher education, architect, local history specialist).

In the other words, Ala-Too Square is a mirror of society that strives to forge a harmonious whole out of a host of fragments:

> Some sort of urban style, it is now substantially distorted by a semi-rural, provincial polyphony … It is not just a minor thing, it is a symbol; I am thinking about our relationship toward the whole—no general idea, just fragments in our minds … But what do you want? Look at our attitude towards the law—we are, probably, the only country that changed its constitution three times, if not more, within three years. It is our negligent attitude toward a stable "frame of reference". (male, Kyrgyz, 48 years old, higher education, architect).

Suggestions for reformatting the square come from different social agents. One option would be to put more emphasis on the Kyrgyz traditional culture, another to celebrate globalized urban culture (for instance, the above-mentioned

Rivoli-like shopping arcades). Finally, the return of Soviet urban style is not entirely out of the question.37

Any of these choices, however, might be fraught with the risk of intensifying the existing ideological and aesthetic scrappiness and eclecticism of this space. One spatial solution that suggests itself might be "decentralization" of the capital center. Bishkek has become too large territorially; the suburbs are too far off, visiting central part of the city is not affordable for many residents (they don't have enough time and/or money). This "spreading out" is becoming more and more at odds with the presence of a single significant "center" (Ala-Too Square). Super-centralization of all the possible functions on one square—a legacy of "imperial" managerial practices—adds to the discriminatory character inherent to the current divide between the "center" and under- privileged peripheries, which are mainly populated by newcomers to the city.

Supporters of the reorganization of urban life take note of the rapid development of Bishkek in terms of the "new settlements" on the outskirts and sup- port creation of new squares that will play the role of alternative centers for recreational and politically significant activities. In general terms, any future scenario of transformation of the Ala-Too Square and (de)centralization of its functions will tell us a lot about routes and roots of shifts in the country's ideological, political and social domains.

37 For instance, Tyuleev, having zealously taken on the task of developing the city's infrastructure, chose postcards of Frunze in the 1970s as a visual "idea."