From Frunze to Bishkek: Soviet Territorial Youth Formations and Their Decline in the 1990s and 2000s

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Emil Nasritdinov
American University in Central Asia, Bishkek
emilzn@gmail.com

Philipp Schröder
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Institute for Asianand African Studies, Germany
pschroeder@asa.hu-berlin.de

Abstract

This article presents an "alternative urban history" of Bishkek (Frunze). We describe the history of Soviet streets and of the everyday life of young people, whose narratives fit neither the Soviet nor the post-Soviet history textbooks. Yet, these stories are extremely important, rich, and unique. They reveal the complex dynamics of the social organization of urban territories in cities of Soviet origin. The research has shown that the territorial youth culture of Frunze had much in common with similar developments in cities all across the Soviet Union. At the same time, it developed its own particular features, complexities, and diversities due to specific local conditions. The study also provides insights into the power of territory. It reveals how identities, every- day practices, and the socialization of young people were embedded in the specific geographies of the Kyrgyz capital.

Keywords

Soviet youth culture – urban life – territory – Kyrgyzstan – Bishkek

During Soviet times, the public discourse on youth was determined by a specific political context. As Pilkington observed, the Soviet regime first used the

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institution of the Komsomol (Young Communist League) to socially control urban youth, as well as to portray its development in the media and social sciences. Judging from the ambitious socialist project to shape "social harmony" and to constantly achieve "progress," this produced a binary opposition distinguishing between "youth-as-constructors-of-communism" and "youth-as-victims-of-Western-influence."[1]

Our article, however, embraces neither of these paradigms, but sets off from the phenomenon of informal street cultures among Soviet youth. As a reality of everyday life that stood in contrast to the official narrative, informal street cultures were an "inconvenient" topic that received little scholarly attention beyond the assertion that it produced "delinquent youth."

In fact, further studies on the relationships among youth socialization, culture, and territory began to evolve only during the post-Soviet era, yet without any coherent or systemic approach.2 The main purpose of these later investigations could be summarized as to "reconstruct and follow the history of these communities, to look at their main parameters, to analyze daily rules of behavior, values, and worldviews of the members of street groups in their historic dynamics and in the context of various social and cultural factors."3 In that regard, comparing street cultures in cities across the Soviet/post-Soviet space reveals distinct similarities, despite the sometimes enormous geographic distances separating them. This again suggests that approaching this phenomenon necessarily must entail an investigation of the particular socio-economic and ideological realities associated with the Soviet Union.4 In this article, by analyzing the patterns of street culture development before and after 1991, we trace the particular link between youth sociabilities and urban spaces within the context of post-Soviet transformations.

Researchers mark the 1950s as the period of an emerging youth street culture in Soviet space. From there on, three main historical periods can be

1 H. Pilkington, "Russia's Youth and its Culture: A Nation's Constructors and Constructed" (London: Routledge, 1994).

2 D. Gromov, "Podrostkovo-molodezhnye ulichnye gruppirovki kak ob'ekt etnograficheskogo issledovaniya," in D.V. Gromov and N.L. Pushkareva (eds), *Molodezhnye ulichnye gruppirovki: vvedenie v problematiku* (Moscow: IEA RAN, 2009).

3 N. Pushkareva, "Novyi' proekt po izucheniyu molodezhnykh gruppirovok," in D.V. Gromov and N.L. Pushkareva (eds), *Molodezhnye ulichnye gruppirovki: vvedenie v problematiku* (Moscow: IEA RAN, 2009).

4 Gromov, "Podrostkovo-molodezhnye ulichnye gruppirovki kak ob'ekt etnograficheskogo issledovaniya."

distinguished.5 The first period is from the 1950s to the 1980s. In the Soviet Union, these decades were a period of postwar industrialization and urbanization. At that time, cities were newly (re)developed and many "modern" residential micro-districts replaced the former old or "Oriental" structures. At the same time, a different notion of urban territoriality was emerging with specific identifications, mental and material boundaries, and new official administrative denominations. At a time when there were still few entertainment opportunities at home, and young people therefore spent most of their time outside in the streets and yards, these new territorial demarcations became the formative basis for youth street culture.

Youth street culture developed very strongly in Kazan (Russia), for example. Known as the "Kazan phenomenon," the orientation of youth groups along territorial lines began to spread to other cities along the Volga River.6 The peak of such youth street culture was reached in the 1970s. Beginning in the mid-1980s, and particularly during the *perestroika* era, youth street culture began to decline along with the numbers of young people participating in it. In that period of societal restructuring and "openness" (*glasnost*) both scholars and the general public began taking a noticeable interest in the phenomenon. This was when movies like *Little Vera*, *My Name is Harlequin*, and *Needle* made it into the cinemas and depicted different facets of everyday life among late Soviet youth. *My Name is Harlequin*, for example, closely followed a group of young people from the suburbs of Minsk, Byelorussia, and depicted how they used to raid the city and fight with other groups.7

The second period covers roughly the decade from the late 1980s to the late 1990s. This time, also referred to as the *likhie 90e* (wild 1990s), is known for the blurring of territorial boundaries and the criminalization of youth street culture. To be clear, the youth street groups themselves seldom were criminal; rather, the embrace of "street life" sometimes served as an entry-point for joining criminal groups.8 At the same time, the previous violent conflicts, in which territorially organized groups of young men, so-called neighborhood brothers,

5 Gromov, "Podrostkovo-molodezhnye ulichnye gruppirovki kak ob'ekt etnograficheskogo issledovaniya"; N. Karbainov, "'Eu, khunkhuz, kuda udesh'?! Edes' bratva, i my umresh'!' 'ulichnye voiny' v Ulan-Ude," in D.V. Gromov and N.L. Pushkareva (eds), *Molodezhnye ulichnye gruppirovki: vvedenie v problematiku* (Moscow: IEA RAN, 2009).

6 A. Shashkin, "Ulitsa: svoi i chuzhne (na materiale molodezhnykh gruppirovok gorodov Srednego Povolzh'ya," in D.V. Gromov and N.L. Pushkareva (eds), *Molodezhnye ulichnye gruppirovki: vvedenie v problematiku* (Moscow: IEA RAN, 2009).

7 See movie review: http://www.nytimes.com/movies/movie/170401/Menja-Zovut-Arlekino/overview (accessed October 24, 2015).

8 Gromov, "Podrostkovo-molodezhnye ulichnye gruppirovki kak ob'ekt etnograficheskogo issledovaniya."

had tested their strength against each other and created a street reputation, became less relevant. Instead, new lines of distinction emerged. These did not separate narrow territorial units but larger social groups: long-term urbanites versus "newcomers", i.e. those who had relocated to the cities from the villages.9 In some places, like Ulan-Ude, "the formation of one form of tolerance, like in interethnic relations, became possible because of the formation of new form of intolerance … between city and village."10

The third period, the late 1990s and 2000s, witnessed the spread of youth cultures that were not territorially focused but revolved around different "ideas", such as hip-hop music, soccer fans, or skinheads.11 Regardless of these new cultural differentiations within different urban landscapes, the confrontation between the rural newcomers to cities and the established urbanites has remained significant.12 In Russia, in particular there is a growing confrontation with labor migrants from other post-Soviet countries, first and foremost with those who are visibly and by complexion quite different from the local Slavic population – including migrants from Central Asia and Caucasus.

What are the origins of this youth street culture? There are several main influences.13 Many believe that the roots of street violence, which is an essential masculine performance associated with youth culture, lie in the practice of Russian village fights as an instrument for protecting the procreative sphere of the family and community. Working-class solidarity can be thought of as another influence, since many street groups originated from Soviet workers' families that emphasized physical strength, courage, and simplicity. Many active adherents of youth street culture also belonged to the lower socio-economic strata of Soviet society. As such, they had limited opportunities for education and career advancement, so the streets became spaces where they could fully "realize" themselves.14 Another important influence has been Soviet

9 Karbainov, "'Eu, khunkhuz, kuda udesh'?! Edes' bratva, i my umresh'!' 'ulichnye voiny' v Ulan-Ude"; Philipp Schröder, "'Urbanizing' Bishkek: Interrelations of Boundaries, Migration, Group Size and Opportunity Structure," *Central Asian Survey*, 29, no. 4 (2010): 453–467.

10 Karbainov, "'Eu, khunkhuz, kuda udesh'?! Edes' bratva, i my umresh'!' 'ulichnye voiny' v Ulan-Ude," 147.

11 Gromov, "Podrostkovo-molodezhnye ulichnye gruppirovki kak ob'ekt etnograficheskogo issledovaniya."

12 Karbainov, "'Eu, khunkhuz, kuda udesh'?! Edes' bratva, i my umresh'!' 'ulichnye voiny' v Ulan-Ude."

13 D. Gromov and S. Stevenson, "Patsanskie pravila (na materialakh moskovskogo regiona, 1980–2000-e gody), in D.V. Gromov and N.L. Pushkareva (eds), *Molodezhnye ulichnye gruppirovki: vvedenie v problematiku* (Moscow: IEA RAN, 2009).

14 Karbainov, "'Eu, khunkhuz, kuda udesh'?! Edes' bratva, i my umresh'!' 'ulichnye voiny' v Ulan-Ude."

prison culture, many of whose rules, values, and terminologies were carried into the regular streets. At the same time, these influences mark youth street culture as a predominantly male domain, in which young women largely are reduced to secondary agents or spectators.

Youth street cultures may be conceptualized in terms of "territory" and of "local" versus "alien" identities, again formed on the basis of belonging to specific places, such as neighborhoods.15 A specific locality, its social history, and embeddedness, are the reference points from which the life-worlds of young people evolved and were maintained, where their personalities were shaped in battles for their territory, and where they built up their reputations and internalized values of a communal life: in short, this is where "boys" became "men."16 For the most part, each group tried to control its own yard, street, block, or city region. Gromov describes territory as a space of colonization and distinguishes three concentric zones: (1) the "nearest" colonization – territory under the complete control of the group; (2) "middle" colonization – territories on the border between groups: parks, empty fields, former industrial sites – where the main battles between rivalry groups often took place; and (3) "distant" colonization: short raids into the "enemy" territory with a purpose of attack, challenge, or revenge.17

In relation to territory, many urban boys perceived the city as a space of constant struggle and contestation. Their own territory became a "safe space" and zone of protection, whereas everything outside of it was a matter of danger and conquest. In their daily practice, boys usually learned to make sense of and navigate the landscapes of urban violence, speak its language, and mobilize support when necessary.18 The holistic role that territory played at that time largely was maintained through violence: "locals" were protected, while "aliens" or "intruders" were beaten. For many boys, becoming a member of such a youth group was a matter of personal safety because, if they were alone, they could be beaten both within their own territory as well as outside of it.19

15 Gromov, "Podrostkovo-molodezhnye ulichnye gruppirovki kak ob'ekt etnograficheskogo issledovaniya"; Karbainov, "'Eu, khunkhuz, kuda udesh'?! Edes' bratva, i my umresh'!' 'ulichnye voiny' v Ulan-Ude."

16 S. Stevenson, "Rebyata s nashego dvora: Ulichnye podrostkovo-molodezhnye kompani v Moskve," in D.V. Gromov and M.Yu. Martynova (eds), *Molodezhnye subkul'tury Moskvy* (Moscow: IEA RAN, 2009).

17 Gromov, "Podrostkovo-molodezhnye ulichnye gruppirovki kak ob'ekt etnograficheskogo issledovaniya."

18 Stevenson, "Rebyata s nashego dvora: Ulichnye podrostkovo-molodezhnye kompani v Moskve."

19 Shashkin, "Ulitsa: svoi i chuzhne (na materiale molodezhnykh gruppirovok gorodov Srednego Povolzh'ya."

The street youth groups were mainly comprised of boys aged 14–19. Membership usually ended when a boy left to serve in the army. According to Gromov, groups can be analyzed on a number of characteristics: how organized they are, the voluntary versus obligatory nature of participation, the level of tolerance toward nonmembers, the criminality of their activities, gender equality versus sexism, and freestyle versus uniformity of clothing.20 From these characteristics evolve two extreme group types: (1) amorphous, voluntary, nonaggressive, law-abiding, gender-inclusive groups versus (2) well-organized, obligatory, aggressive, criminal, and sexist groups.

Beyond the matter of social organization, youth street cultures share a unique vocabulary. In Russian-speaking environments, the most frequent word used to define a group member is *patsan* (young boy). In different contexts, different adjectives were used to define the "proper" *patsan*: *real'nyi* (real) *patsan*, *pravil'nyi* (right) *patsan*, *normal'nyi* (normal) *patsan*.21 This gang slang for example, has been also picked up by the popular Russian tv series *Real'nye patsany*, which chronicles the experiences of several such boys who came to Moscow from the provincial town of Perm.

Within a youth street group, there were a number of terms that assigned members different roles, such as *korol* (Russian for king = territory leader), *diplomat* (boy with good negotiation skills who helps to alleviate conflicts), or *zadira* (boy with rhetoric skills, who picks the fights).22 Similarly, there was a whole vocabulary to define other street actors who did not belong to the group. The most popular of them were *botanik* (person who spends most of his time studying and does not know how to behave in the street), *neformal* (member of an idea-centric subculture, like rocker or punk), *lokh* (weak, cowardly boy who cannot defend himself), *inorodets* (representative of a different ethnic group), or *mazhor* (boy from a wealthy family with influential parents).23 In addition to the descriptive terms, there was a very rich youth slang and a unique style of conversation that marked belonging to the group.

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20 Gromov, "Podrostkovo-molodezhnye ulichnye gruppirovki kak ob'ekt etnograficheskogo issledovaniya."

21 Stevenson, "Rebyata s nashego dvora: Ulichnye podrostkovo-molodezhnye kompani v Moskve."

22 Gromov and Stevenson, "Patsanskie pravila (na materialakh moskovskogo regiona, 1980–2000-e gody), in D.V. Gromov and N.L. Pushkareva (eds), *Molodezhnye ulichnye gruppirovki: vvedenie v problematiku* (Moscow: IEA RAN, 2009).

23 Gromov, "Podrostkovo-molodezhnye ulichnye gruppirovki kak ob'ekt etnograficheskogo issledovaniya"; Shashkin, "Ulitsa: svoi i chuzhne (na materiale molodezhnykh gruppirovok gorodov Srednego Povolzh'ya"; Stevenson, "Rebyata s nashego dvora: Ulichnye podrostkovo-molodezhnye kompani v Moskve."

The rightful dominance of a youth group in a certain territory had to be continuously defended through various kinds of fights. Gromov distinguishes two main types of conflicts: situational encounters, which can happen any time, and long-term feuds between groups, which can last for many years and involve generations of young people. From time to time, groups arranged for a *strelka* – a fight scheduled for an appointed time and at an appointed place. This was decided between the *starshaki* (elders of the groups), who also agreed on the number of fighters from each side. Such fights were called *stenka na stenku* (wall on wall) or *krai na krai* (region on region).

During these fights, many boys were hurt and some killed. Still, during Soviet times the fights were considered "safer" than today's violence, because there were still informal rules in play, such as not to kick someone further after he had fallen to the floor, to fight without weapons, or to only fight "until the first blood." These rules were part of an unwritten code of honor among street boys. For an individual member, the fights served an important role: they helped him build up courage, improve fighting skills, strengthen his personality, reinforce group solidarity and friendship, and negotiate the notions of honor, brotherhood, and sacrifice.24 These were important components of the boys' socialization in an urban landscape and when it came to perform masculinity.

Masculinity in youth street culture, however, was not just about fighting. For many boys it was a much broader cultural phenomenon, which also included specific life goals, ways of everyday behavior, ways of speaking, and relations with family and with girls. Stevenson follows Connell to call this type of masculinity "hegemonic." It affects almost all aspects of a boy's life on his path to manhood.25 To be a man and to be *krutoi* (cool), a boy had to continuously prove himself to his peers. Shashkin shows how the construction of masculinity in the street happens by deconstructing the masculinity of the other through violence or the repression of a nonmember, a representative of another group, or an adult male passer-by (often to rob the victim).26 At the same time, a boy had to learn to defend himself in the aggressive urban environment, not only through fights but also through "proper speaking" and other behavioral strategies.

24 Stevenson, "Rebyata s nashego dvora: Ulichnye podrostkovo-molodezhnye kompani v Moskve."

25 Stevenson, "Rebyata s nashego dvora: Ulichnye podrostkovo-molodezhnye kompani v Moskve"; Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Stanford, ca: Stanford University Press, 1987).

26 Shashkin, "Ulitsa: svoi i chuzhne (na materiale molodezhnykh gruppirovok gorodov Srednego Povolzh'ya."

Boys were subject to violence not only from other groups, but also from the members of their own group, who could hand down various punishments to maintain discipline and street hierarchies. Stevenson refers to Goffman to show how people who spend considerable time in unpredictable, dangerous environments become risk-takers, ready to jeopardize their safety and turn everything into confrontation.27 Such risk-taking then may lead to negative consequences for group members. Stevenson shows that such violence could not always be kept within acceptable limits and how boys' games can bring tragic results both for themselves and for the people around them.28 Respondents in Gromov's study also frequently mentioned their friends who had passed away at a young age.29

The studies reviewed in this section focus mostly on Russian cities. However, the phenomenon of youth street cultures was also quite influential in the periphery of the Soviet Union, including the Central Asian republics. Central Asia exhibits many similar patterns, yet also this region developed some unique features of its own. Next, we examine this phenomenon in the context of Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. The following reflections mainly are based on oral history data that was gathered during multiple episodes of ethnographic fieldwork by the authors, but also as part of the seminar "Facebook, Urban Life, and Youth Culture," which took place in the fall of 2014 at the American University of Central Asia and where participants formed smaller research teams to study individual raions.

Geographies of Frunze/Bishkek Youth

Bishkek is the capital of Kyrgyzstan. Until 1991 it was called Frunze, and nearly three-fifths of the city's population were ethnic Russians. One-fifth were ethnic Kyrgyz and the last fifth came from a variety of other ethnic groups.30 Not surprisingly, as a "Russian-Soviet city," Frunze's development mirrored that of many cities in the Russian sfsr. The first urban areas with informal names emerged in the 1930s and were known as "Shanghai", "Paris", and "London."31 Yet

27 Stevenson, "Rebyata s nashego dvora: Ulichnye podrostkovo-molodezhnye kompani v Moskve"; Erving Goffman, "Interaction Ritual," in Goffman, *Where the Action Is: Three Essays* (London: Allen Lane, 1967), 239–240.

28 Stevenson, "Rebyata s nashego dvora: Ulichnye podrostkovo-molodezhnye kompani v Moskve."

29 Gromov, "Podrostkovo-molodezhnye ulichnye gruppirovki kak ob'ekt etnograficheskogo issledovaniya."

30 Schröder, "'Urbanizing' Bishkek: Interrelations of Boundaries, Migration, Group Size and Opportunity Structure."

31 V. Petrov, *Frunze Sovetskii, 1926–1991* (Bishkek, 2008).

it was only in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the first prototypes of youth groups emerged in those and other territories. Early on, these territories locally were known as *krai* (Russian for region) and there were not many of them. Yet the city was rapidly growing and expanding as new residential areas were built. From the 1960s to the 1980s, several *microraiony* (micro-districts) were built in the southern part of Frunze. Once these had been populated, the youth street cultures expanded and became more complex. In that way, it may have been that due to the emergence of *micro-raiony* that the word *raion* (Russian for district) became a popular synonym for *krai*. By the late 1980s, almost all of Frunze was informally divided into *krais* and *raions*. Accordingly, we were able to identify almost 50 youth territories with their unique names and boundaries.

In Figure 1, the white spaces mark industrial zones, administrative buildings, university campuses, and hospitals. White spaces on the city's edges are new neighborhoods built since the 1990s, after the street culture phenomenon

Figure 1 *Map of youth raions of Frunze*

had begun to decline. The rest of the city, however, was well divided between raions of different sizes and shapes. Looking at the map, one can almost feel the territoriality of these youth communities, bounded by streets, rivers, railways, and parks. The names of raions only strengthen that feeling: almost all of them are defined in spatial terms. Names of raions can be grouped into the following spatial categories:

- Names of countries: USA (United Sixth and Asanbai [micro-regions]), Canada (micro-district to the North of USA), FRG (Russian for "West Germany," but in reality Frunzenskii Rabochii Gorodok – Frunze Labor Town), Kitaika (China), Shvetsiya (Sweden);
- Names of cities: Paris, London, Boston, Shanghai;
- Names of actual streets in Frunze: Botanika, Dzerzhinka, Turusbechka, Karpinka, Sorokaletka;
- Directions: Zapad (West), Vostok (East), Yuzhnye vorota (Southern Gates); and
- Specific objects in space: tets (power station), Staryi avtovokzal (old bus station), Remzavod (repair factory), Kirpichnyi (brick factory), Park Fuchika (park named after Fuchik), Porta (airport), Promzona (industrial zone), Krepost (fortress), Karagachova Rosha (elm grove), Pribaikalie (area before the "Big Chui Chanel"), Zabaikalie (area behind the "Big Chui Chanel"), Yubileika ("Yubileinyi" shop).

The names of these raions are strongly connected to particular spatial associations. With these names as an important element of young people's identities, territory becomes embodied and is embedded into both individual and communal experiences of dwelling.

Another important territorial unit of youth street culture is the *dvor* (yard) – usually the territory in the middle of one or several apartment buildings. In that regard, our research revealed that raions in the central parts of the city were more fragmented than the raions in the periphery. Many blocks or yards in the city center had their own unique names – something that was very rare in the micro-raions or in the low-rise residential areas. In some cases, such dvors even claimed to be independent from any raion. Figure 2 shows see the location of some of these dvors.

The names of dvors often were linked to particular local histories, while raions were more likely to be associated with specific buildings. For example, Tri bogatyra (three strong men) was used to identify the yard with three residential towers in it; Piyanyi dom (drunk house) – an apartment building that features an experimental wave-like facade; Lysyi (bold) – a yard with three

Figure 2 *Map of dvory in the central part*

houses without balconies on the facades oriented toward the yard. Several dvors were named after the shops on the first-floor of a building, such as Okhotnik (hunter), Sporttovary (sports goods), Tyshaga ("Tyshacha melochei" shop), Trikotazhka (textile shop), Zhenskii (women's clothing shop), Okean (fish shop "Ocean"), and Torgashka (shop "Trading house"); and several dvors were named after other important objects: Dom kino (house of cinema), Pochtarik (post office), Domodezhka (house of clothing). There were a few "cities" as well: Moskva (Moscow), Bangkok, and Urumchi. A few dvors had specific spatial characteristics: Kubik (cube), Treugol'nik (triangle), and Yama (pit); colors: Belyi (white), Chernyi (black) and Rozovyi (pink); and even smells: Vonyuchii (stinky).

How can this fragmentation within the more central areas of the city be explained in contrast to the situation at the urban periphery? In our opinion, the explanation lies in the longer history and certain spatial qualities of the central parts. Youth territorial groups were formed in the central parts earlier than they were in the micro-raions of the city, which were built later. As time went on, the internal rivalries divided central raions into more or less independent dvors, which functioned as individual urban units, but could unite in times of conflicts with other raions.32 Perhaps, if the youth street culture had not declined since the late 1980s, the situation in the micro-raions would have as well become more complex and fragmented. Beyond that, certain spatial characteristics seem also important. Many blocks in the city center have buildings located on their perimeter and form "fortresses" with enclosed interior

32 Schröder, "From Shanghai to Iug."

Figure 3 *Different types of urban fabric: A) bounded block in the city center (rayon Zapad), B) parallel apartment buildings in the 8th microrayon (Yuzhnye vorota), and C) low-rise housing in the Uzbek ethnic neighborhood (Mahalla)*

spaces of yards, while houses in micro-raions are situated in rows, often parallel to each other, and feature low-rise individual housing. They do not form such urban enclosures (see Figure 3).

These and other differences contributed to the formation of three distinct types of youth territories: central raions, micro-raions, and low-rise residential periphery, which includes some ethnic neighborhoods. Central raions, such as *Dzerzhinka, Turusbehka, Sorokaletka*, and *Saltanat* were called *Tsentrovye* (central) and were known for the more elite-kind of families living there: those of government officials, Communist Party leaders, famous artists, musicians, writers, and so on. In contrast, micro-raions and low-rise residential areas were distributed among various Frunze factories and populated by the working class communities. Accordingly, *tsentrovye* residents somewhat looked down on the periphery: for example, they called micro-raions as *myrk-raions.*33 At the same time, young people from working class families in the periphery considered boys from the center to be snobs and "mommy's boys". *Tsentrovye* boys had "enemies" on all four sides: *myrk-raions* on the south, ethnic raions such as *Karpinka* and *Tokoldosh* on the east, working class neighborhoods such as *Paris* and *Kyzyl Asker* on the west. Yet, in this setup their most serious enemy was behind the "Big Chui Channel" on the north and was called *Zabaikalie.* This was a mysterious large *krai* with unclear boundaries:

33 *Myrk* is a derogative term for someone who recently came from a village to the city and does not yet have "urban features and manners" have; see Schröder, "'Urbanizing' Bishkek: Interrelations of Boundaries, Migration, Group Size and Opportunity Structure"; Philipp Schröder, "From Shanghai to Iug-2: Integration and Identification among and beyond the Male Youth of a Bishkek Neighbourhood" (PhD diss., Philos. Fak. I, Martin-Luther-Univ. Halle-Wittenberg, Halle/Saale, 2012).

> I had the impression that *Zabaikalie* was everything that was against us. Nobody could clearly define their boundaries, but everybody knew for sure – they were the enemy.
>
> respondent from *Dzerzhinka*

> Boys from *Saltanat* had to fight them quite frequently. We used to collect piles of stones near our houses and these boys … would come with long metal chains coiled on their hands.
>
> respondent from *Saltanat*

This is how borders between raions became similar to borders between feudal states in perpetual conflict. Especially, this was noticeable when the borders themselves were materially manifested, like in the case of the "Big Chui Channel", railway lines, big streets like Prospekt Mira, and the Ala-Archa or Alamedin rivers. Territories along such borders usually served as the main battlefields. Other borders were less clearly defined and thus were perceived as either continuously contested or neutral. Interestingly, boys living in such "unclear" border zones, could claim belonging to either of two neighboring raions, depending on the circumstance. In some cases, the borders of raions, as time went on, were expanding or shrinking, dividing or uniting – yet usually not significantly.

Finally, when talking about space, it is important to mention *tochki* (points), such as Tochka 33, tt (intersection of Turusbekova and Toktogula streets), or Pyatak u papy Karlo (meeting place near the monument to Karl Marx in the central part of town called Broadway, where representatives of many raions could gather for their negotiations). Another important kind of tochka was the diskoteka (disco club). These were often organized in the city parks: Panfilov, Fuchika, Druzhby and sometimes inside various public buildings, such as Dom kul'tury (house of culture) or inside schools. The diskoteka or diskuch was a very important platform where young people from different raions got to know each other and formed some inter-raion solidarities. But more often than that they were places for regular fights between raions:

> In the club *Zhastyk*, in the 3rd micro-raion, there was *diskoteka*, and the whole city would come to dance there. We used to go there almost every day. The entrance was one Ruble, but we never paid, instead we would force the guy at the entrance to give us *kontramarkas* (free passes). The main reason we went there was to fight. There was no single day without a fight. The building was very small and when the fight started, there would immediately be a fighting circle formed in the middle.
>
> respondent from *Botanika*

Diskuch, tochka, dvor, raion, krai – these were the main spatial markers in youth's cognition of the city. For example, young girls in Turusbechka would call each other and arrange to meet in the *Chernyi dvor* (black yard) or in **tt**.[34] Interestingly, this was the language of youth only: one respondent from Turusbechka shared with us how when she got engaged and shared this news with her family, the first thing her brother asked was: "Where is he from?" "From *Zapad* (West)," was her answer, which made her brother happy, since this was an allied raion, but apparently left her parents completely puzzled: "What are you two talking about?"

This brief introductory analysis shows the essence of territory in the lives of young people in Soviet Frunze and early post-Soviet Bishkek. Youth had a city of their own – separate from the official city of their parents or the state administration. The city of young people had its own spatial arrangements, divisions, and hierarchies, its own typologies of objects in space, and its own rules and regulations governing the way these spaces were appropriated, avoided, or transited. Raions had many things in common, but they were also distinct. In the next section we will look at what contributed to this diversity of raions.

The Diversity of Frunze/Bishkek Raions

Raions were unique in terms of the specific features of their territory and the characteristics of families living there. For example, a central raion such as Dzerzhinka was famous for the arts and music schools attended by youth, who themselves often were the children of famous musicians and artists.[35] Youth from the central raion of Turusbechka were also famous for its young musicians, such as Erkin Mukashev, who played live music in diskotekas and thus contributed to the specific reputation of the raion.[36]

Young people in such central raions had different interests from the majority inhabiting other raions: they were familiar with Western music, with various

34 Kozhoeva, Egimbaeva, and Nurmambetova, "Turusbechka."

35 A. Musaeva and K. Orekhova, "Dzerzhinka is the Best Street in the World," in Emil Nasritdinov and Philipp Schröder (eds), *From Frunze to Bishkek – from X to Y: Youth Cultures and Their Transformation in the Capital of Kyrgyzstan* (Washington, dc: Central Asian Studies Institute, forthcoming).

36 A. Kozhoeva, B. Egimbaeva, and A. Nurmambetova, "Turusbechka," in Emil Nasritdinov and Philipp Schröder (eds), *From Frunze to Bishkek – from X to Y: Youth Cultures and Their transformation in the Capital of Kyrgyzstan* (Washington, dc: Central Asian Studies Institute, forthcoming).

Western subcultures, and with Soviet *samizdat* (informal uncensored Soviet authors). In many ways, they themselves contributed to the formation of Soviet underground and alternative lifestyles and ideologies in Frunze, which, as in other cities, was an additional, yet nonterritorial strand of Soviet youth culture.37 In particular, young people in these raions listened to the Beatles, the Scorpions, later to Aquarium, exchanged music tapes and tried to play the same songs themselves. They also exchanged books and discussed them intensively.38 Therefore, it was not only physical strength, but also the intellectual and artistic abilities of young people that were valued in the rather "elite" youth territories. Dzerzhinka was also famous as a romantic place, where young people would have dates and often stroll along the central alley of beautiful green Dzerzhinka Boulevard or kiss on its benches.

On the contrary, in raions like Botanika, the majority of families worked in various factories in Frunze. Botanika was home to various sports facilities: the Dynamo stadium, sport-school #48, and various other sport clubs. This, again, had great influence on the lifestyle and values of young people in that raion. Boys from Botanika attended *sportivyne sektsii* (sport clubs) from a very young age, and the most popular clubs were boxing and wrestling. In that way, the raion developed a cult of physical power and their inhabitants' abilities to fight were highly respected. Another factor that contributed to it was the physical setting itself: the raion was very green, it had one of the largest parks of the city (park Druzhby) and also a large botanical garden full of fruit trees. As one member of Botanika elaborated, the boys there thus were never short of vitamins: they ate apples, cherries, apricots, and pears from the garden. They also hunted birds and squirrels in the park and grilled them on a fire, which in their eyes gave them more energy and made them stronger than boys from other raions. Botanika was also very large in size, in fact it consisted of three territories: Verhnyaya (upper) and Nizhnyaya (lower) Botanikas and Treugolnik. It thus had a large number of boys who could be mobilized for inter-neighborhood fights. Since many of them were athletes, it is no wonder that Botanika was respected and feared by many raions in the city. Finally, Botanika was also famous for the strong friendship bonds and notions of solidarity among its boys.

Two other unique neighboring raions were Karpinka and Tokuldosh. These were low-rise residential neighborhoods heavily populated with ethnic Uighurs, Dungans, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Chechens, and Dargins. Partially

37 S. Zhuk, "Popular Culture, Identity, and Soviet Youth in Dniepropetrovsk, 1959–84", The Carl Beck Papers for Russian and East European Studies, No. 1906, 2008.

38 Musaeva and Orekhova, "Dzerzhinka is the Best Street in the World."

Photo 1 *Boys of Botanika (shared by our respondents)*

due to this diversity and competition between the boys of different ethnic groups, these raions became known as the most aggressive and dangerous ones. It was a "no go" area for many outsiders, even for adults. Karpinka and Tokuldosh also developed reputations of being hotbeds of criminal activities. They were known as places where one could purchase alcohol and drugs 24/7, even though the police headquarters was situated right in the heart of Karpinka. Some of our informants remembered that the police itself was "roofing," i.e., protecting, the illegal alcohol and drug trade. If many other raions were ruled by the young people themselves and would have a so-called young *korol* (king), Karpinka and Tokuldosh were ruled by older people and had more ties to the criminal world. Because of this, youth groups in these raions were organized more like criminal gangs as opposed to many other neighborhoods.

Among other unique raions of Frunze was Rabochii Gorodok (labor town), jokingly called *FRG* (Russian for "West Germany"), which was notable for having a regular grid of radially designed streets. Kalinchenko describes how

Figure 4 *Rabochii Gorodok*

this part of city was established by Czech and Slovak communards who came to Frunze in the 1920s to help develop the industry and formed a commune called *Integelpo*, or "international help."39 Boys who grew up in Rabochii were predominantly from working-class families, but their daily practices were affected by their parents' roots in the labor internationalist ideas. Thus, it did not have criminal groups, and drinking and smoking were not very widespread. On the contrary, the raion had what was called a *druzhina* – a kind of morality police that would patrol the streets and prevent various forms of immoral behavior. The physical shape of this raion, with its enclosed rounded border and centric radial streets, contributed to the creation of a self-contained community with distinct code of appropriate street behavior for young people.

39 M. Kalinchenko, "Rabochii Gorodok," in Emil Nasritdinov and Philipp Schröder (eds), *From Frunze to Bishkek – from X to Y: Youth Cultures and Their transformation in the Capital of Kyrgyzstan* (Washington, dc: Central Asian Studies Institute, forthcoming).

The four examples given in this section take up some very specific features of Frunze's urban environment and also of its demographic characteristics, which then contributed to the uniqueness and diversity of these raiony. After illustrating the strong effect of territoriality on youth culture in these Soviet and early post-Soviet times, the next section looks at how these differences affected the everyday life of urban young men.

Everyday Life and Youth Street Culture

Young people living in the same raion usually knew each other very well. Many were "potty friends": they went to the same kindergarten and then to the same school. But the networks reached much further. For example, boys from the southern end of Upper Botanika knew everybody in the northern corner of Treugolnik not only by name, but even by apartment number. Boys were supposed to know everyone in a ten-year age range: five years older and five years younger than oneself. (From that vantage point, our respondents denounced today's situation where people do not even know their neighbors across the staircase anymore). During Soviet times, when Botanika got together on a regular day, there would be 40–50 boys hanging out around the *turniki* (the sports field of the stadium or school); and on weekends they would play soccer from morning until dark. Nobody, according to these memories, sat at home; some youngsters would not even go home to eat. Instead they lit a fire in the park and baked stolen potatoes or roasted a stolen goose that they had caught in the nearby low-rise houses from behind a fence with a fishing rod.

Yet it was not only the young people who were socializing in the yards. During warm summer evenings, everybody was outside.40 Their parents socialized outside, too – in the *besedkas* (summer pavilions), which were lit at night and where adults would play cards for money. Women would bring various pastries and baked goods outside to share. Boys would come to the *besedkas* in the morning to pick coins from the holes in the floorboards. According to the neighborhood rhythm, after their parents had retreated to their apartments, the local youth appropriated these spaces in order to hang out, play guitar, sing songs, play cards and dominos, and share anecdotes until very late at night.

40 E. Nasritdinov, E.Gareyeva, and T. Efremenko, "How Small Kitchens Become Even Smaller: Social Life of Soviet Microdistricts," in Dolly Daou, D.J. Huppatz, and Dinh Quoc Phuong (eds) *Unbounded: On the Interior and Interiority* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 129–148.

Our respondents from the micro-regions and the urban periphery stated that during Soviet times relations between neighbors were primarily based on equality, and that people would have perceived the exhibition of one's wealth or higher social status rather negatively. While this still fits with the class-less discourse of Soviet ideology, in the city center the situation was different. As Musaeva and Orekhova point out, the youth in Dzerzhinka was divided into class A and class B youth (this is how classes in schools were organized).41 The A classes were children of the local Soviet elite, whereas B classes would have kids from regular families living in this raion. These particular hierarchies contributed to the territorial fragmentation that could be witnessed in Frunze's center. However, despite some socio-economic stratification, respondents in all raions unanimously agreed that raions never divided along ethnic lines and that there was no strong local ethnic discrimination.42

Photo 2
Young man from Yuzhnye Vorota (shared by the respondents of Iamshikova and Chotonova)

41 Musaeva and Orekhova, "Dzerzhinka is the Best Street in the World."

42 Schröder, "'Urbanizing' Bishkek: Interrelations of Boundaries, Migration, Group Size and Opportunity Structure"; Schröder, "From Shanghai to Iug-2."

In Soviet times, open-air summer movie theaters were popular in different parts of the city. Boys would jump over the walls or sit in nearby trees watching movies and eating green apricots, apples, or mulberries. The movies would start at 9–10 pm and finish close to midnight. The former Botanika boys, for example, described in some detail how they had their own "reserved" seats in the year-round Chatyr-Kul cinema theater located in Treugolnik, where they entered through the back door.

Young boys played all kinds of games, including *krasnoe znamya, makhly,* and *lyanga*, and made their own toys, such as homemade guns and *rogatkas* (slingshots) to hunt birds and squirrels. Older boys played guitar and started smoking and drinking. In the winter, however, local youth moved from the streets into the *podval* (basement) of their apartment buildings, which were quite warm because that was where the building's heating system was located. Equipped with old sofas and chairs, the basements would become the main spaces for winter socialization. Some boys brought weight-lifting equipment to the *podval* and turned it into a *kachalka* (gym). Some walls of basements were covered accordingly with posters of Arnold Schwarzenegger and cc Catch.

Raions differed by the degree of internal hierarchy among the boys. Usually, at the top was the *korol* (king), later titled *leader* or *avtoritet* (authority). To become a king, one had to be braver and stronger and to prove himself in fighting. A respondent from Botanika claimed that their "ritual" to qualify for that position was to knock down an adult man with only one swing. The main principle of this hierarchy was age, and generally younger boys had to listen to elder boys. At the same time, older boys were not allowed to humiliate youngsters or extort money from them beyond what was considered appropriate. In addition, if the difference was only two or three years, personal qualities and physical abilities became more important. All members of such youth street groups had to "show themselves", i.e. to prove their abilities in the fights inside the raion, but more often, in fights with boys from other raions.43 Various acts of wild courage also helped to establish and maintain an individual's reputation *na raione* (in the raion). Usually, raions had the *kostyak* (core group), who were the main decision makers and who would pull in other boys when it was necessary. Members of the *kostayk* were known as *avtoritety* (authorities) and knowing them was extremely important in navigating the urban space of Frunze. Mentioning the authorities in the encounters with boys from other raions could spare a boy a beating on that day.

43 Schröder, "From Shanghai to Iug-2."

Photo 3 *Boys from Pribaikalie in the Leninskoe lake (shared by the respondents of Toktosunov and Alykulov)*

There are a few lakes in Frunze, and in the summer boys would go there to swim. Since the lakes attracted youth from across the city, they often turned into spaces of contestation, and fights erupted between representatives of different raions. Also, during the summers, boys from Frunze had the habit of traveling to Lake Issyk-Kul – some 250 kilometers east of the city. This was called *bichevat* – hanging around the lake without money and a proper place to live, but with a bag of cannabis in their pockets. Our respondents shared stories with us about how they would challenge each other to go to Issyk-Kul without telling their parents; how they would jump on the bus without a ticket, making up pitiful stories for drivers about dying grandmothers; and then spend several days swimming, sleeping on the beach, drinking and doing drugs, often in the company of girls.

To fully understand the everyday life in the raiony, one has to place it in the larger context of the city and see how it relates to the complex geographies of inter-raion politics, which featured all kinds of alliances and short- or long-term conflicts. The boys' lives were not limited to their own territories, as they had to travel across the city at times. Such trips could become quite dangerous, particularly at a younger age. Younger boys were more frequently the targets of an attack than older boys, who had had more chances to develop inter-raion connections.

> When we were young, I would often travel to *Sporttovary* (sports goods store) and as soon as I stepped out of the bus, I would hear: "Hey, come here, where are you from?" These would be boys from the 13th school, raion *Zapad* or *Turusbechka*. So, you travel there and you know – someone will get to you in any case. As soon as they know that you are from *Botanika*, they will beat you, no talking … I remember once, one of our boys was heavily beaten in *Zapad.* At that time there was a bus #11 going there from *Botanika*. So, our boys got together and two full buses went in that direction. We arrived, swept everybody who was on our way and went back on the same bus route.

At the same time, Botanika protected its own territory. For example, Park Druzhby, which ironically translates as "park of friendship," was under their complete control and the boys frequently "sold bricks" to the park visitors for one ruble: if the visitor refused, they would get hit by that same brick. Students from the nearby dormitories were not spared either, so they had to assemble their own crowd of dormitory boys as well in order to be able to fight back.

There were other reasons for conflicts between raions: rivalries for girls, violations of informal street rules or codes of honor, unnecessarily showing off, or simply wrong looks during encounters in public spaces, such as dance floors or parks. From time to time, conflicts like these would evolve into the serious and arranged raion-on-raion fights called *strelka* or *stenka na stenku* (wall-on-wall). The leaders of the groups would then agree on a specific place and the rules of fighting. Participation in such fights was obligatory for everybody and those who did not join could lose their peers' respect or receive other punishments. During fights like these, raions sometimes tried to mobilize their allies.

At the same time, while our respondents frequently mentioned these types of larger-scale conflicts, it seems that, in fact, very few actually took place. Many respondents could remember actually participating in no more than one or two. Two such major conflicts that our respondents described to us had to be dispersed by the police before serious violence started. This was possible because for this particular conflict huge crowds of hundreds of boys were simultaneously moving across the city in groups, which could hardly go unnoticed by the police or local residents. To some degree, therefore, such massive fights appear to be urban legends, which nonetheless does not reduce the subjective imprint on the boys' conceptualizations of their raions and the city in general.

Conflicts between raions varied in their intensity and scale. Younger boys often engaged in the practice of racketeering. The respondents from Botanika described how they often visited mathematical school #61. Boys in this school were from different raions of the city and therefore not united. So Botanika

boys would hunt them down in the school's soccer field, line them up and force them to jump up and down until coins fell out of their pockets. Once the money was collected, they would go on to see movies or, at later age, buy wine and cigarettes.

Many informants in our research, similar to respondents in the studies reviewed in the introduction, referred to an informal, unwritten code of honor that entailed specific rules for fighting, such as that fighting should proceed without weapons. Yet still respondents described how sometimes boys brought stones, chains, brass knuckles, nunchucks, knives, and even guns to such fights. Beyond the nostalgia and romanticism surrounding the culture of street fighting, many boys therefore were seriously injured. Kozhoeva, Egimbaeva and Nurmambetova describe a case narrated by a family member of a Turusbechka boy:

> One day, he got drunk, took part in a fight and beat one guy almost to death. We did not know about that until the parents of that guy came to our house with the police and told us that their son is in a coma. The case almost reached the court, but fortunately, that guy woke up, and the case was closed. Our family paid all hospital expenses. After that case he changed, he moved to Talas [another federal state] and lived there for a while; then he came back, entered the university and successfully graduated. Now his life has changed positively, he has a good job and he is a father of three children.
>
> respondent from Turusbechka[44]

From this section, we can see how the everyday life of boys in Soviet Frunze was actively connected to and shaped by shifting urban geographies and the ability to navigate these socially. This covered routines of socialization, but also many risks and dramas. Toward the late 1980s and early 1990s, as Kyrgyzstan became a staging ground within the more existential drama of replacing the ussr with an independent country, and Frunze with Bishkek, the youth street cultures as well underwent significant transformations.

From Frunze to Bishkek: The Fading of Youth Street Culture

In the 1990s, all raions went through significant changes. This was a difficult period for everyone, but the hardest hit were boys transitioning to adulthood.

44 Kozhoeva, Egimbaeva, and Nurmambetova, "Turusbechka."

The 1990s were a period of criminalization and commercialization and of widespread alcohol and drug addiction. Harder drugs, like opium and heroin became easily available in independent Kyrgyzstan. At that time, many young people died due to alcohol poisoning or drug overdoses. One respondent from Botanika described his regular day:

> By the early 2000s, I lived with my girlfriend in the dormitory. Our small room was in the fourth floor. My girlfriend was working, I was not. Every morning after she left, I would go down and get four or five bottles of vodka because I didn't want to come down twice. I kept bottles behind the curtain and in the moment she went to the toilet I would have a drink. I usually finished all bottles by next morning.
>
> respondent from Botanika

With many Russian residents of the city emigrating to Russia starting in the early 1990s, their houses and apartments were bought by Kyrgyz migrants from the country's peripheral areas who relocated to the city to escape rural poverty.45 These demographic changes to the city, from the perspective of its long-term residents, disturbed the regular social fabric and cohesion of their raions. Neighbors no longer knew each other. Older respondents had many negative comments about the rural newcomers, about their lack of manners and consideration for other residents.46 In the eyes of Bishkek's established residents, the arrival of newcomers brought confusion and "disorder" (*bardak*): if in the Soviet past, the image of the other was always associated with territorial outsiders, now otherness resided within one's own raion, which led urban boys of different raiony to understand their similarities in terms of socialization, language use, and general *mentalitet* (mentality).47

In addition to youth culture, the material environment of the city has changed as well. In contemporary Bishkek, one can observe more fragmentation of spaces: new residential high-rise buildings are emerging in the city center, and even inside the micro-raions in places originally reserved for public use. These new buildings often have fences around them, which further divide the community. Public spaces for everyday socialization are also destroyed:

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45 Paul Fryer, Emil Nasritdinov, and Elmira Satybaldieva, "Moving towards the Brink? Migration in the Kyrgyz Republic," *Central Asian Affairs*, 1, no. 2 (2014): 171–198.

46 M. Flynn and N. Kosmarskaya, "Exploring 'North' and 'South' in Post-Soviet Bishkek: Discourses and Perceptions of Rural-Urban Migration," *Nationalities Papers*, 40, no. 3 (2012): 453–471.

47 Schröder, "From Shanghai to Iug-2."

benches, playgrounds, and summer pavilions are removed to make space for the increasing number of cars.48 From the point of view of long-term residents, socially active yards and streets slowly became things of the past. In addition, the sense of ruination and chaos evolved quite strongly, and many respondents complained of how dirty, dangerous, and disorderly everything would be now. The following is an excerpt from an online discussion of the Children of Brezhnev's Times Facebook group:

> Participant 1: Once, during the spring, I left my car near *Voentorg* and walked around *Pentagon* [dvor in the city center] looking into every corner. I have remembered youth and had tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat. Now there is devastation everywhere, there are no more lawns, only trash and this is in the city center.
> Participant 2: There is no more Frunze – the city of our childhood.
> Participant 1: The city is there, but people are different.

According to these long-term inhabitants, Frunze's raions went through a significant, and negative change. There were two opposing spatial processes taking place. On the one hand, there was further fragmentation of raions and new youth groups began organizing themselves – now around schools, which became the locus of social life, peer affiliation, and sometimes criminal practices, such as racketeering and extortion. Interestingly, these new social formations now involved not only boys, but also girls. One such example was that Girls in one school associated themselves in gangs to extort money from other girls in the school, and to fight with girls from other schools.

On the other hand, raions have evolved into larger entities. For example, boys from Turusbechka now affiliate themselves within the larger territorial entity Zapad.49 This has occurred due to the weakening of Turusbechka, in terms of its numbers and the intensity of interaction, which may indeed mean that a minimal homogenous mass of the "right group size" is necessary for a raion to function as a social unit.50

Compared with their reflections on the 1970–1980s, our respondents critically noticed how youth street culture over time became more criminal, more

48 Nasritdinov, Gareeva & Efremenko, "How Small Kitchens Become Even Smaller: Social Life of Soviet Microdistricts", in Daou, Huppatz, and Dinh (eds) "Unbounded: on the Interior and Interiority", Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2015).

49 Kozhoeva, Egimbaeva, and Nurmambetova, "Turusbechka."

50 Schröder, "'Urbanizing' Bishkek: Interrelations of Boundaries, Migration, Group Size and Opportunity Structure."

materialistic, and more dangerous. Looking at the example of Pribaikalie, Toktosunov and Alykulov describe a decline in social values that primarily is driven by monetization.51 For example, a major problem in many public schools of Bishkek today is racketeering.

> In the past, if a group of street boys asked you for money and you did not give in, they would beat you once, but then leave you alone and respect you, because you stood up for yourself. Nowadays, it is not like that. Now racketeers are not interested in your honor, they only care about money. They would beat you until you give it to them. Then they would leave you alone, but only until the next extortion. That is why I pay to send my kids to a private school, which has security.
>
> respondent from Botanika

Research conducted by the League of Defenders of Children's Rights in Kyrgyzstan shows how school racketeering has become a very common phenomenon in almost all public schools in Bishkek, and how a large number of young boys and girls are suffering from it. Cases of injuries, manslaughter, and suicides as a result of school racketeering are alarming. League representative Nazgul Turdubekova,52 for example, elaborates how the system of school racketeering is connected to criminal networks and how money collected from racketeering eventually even finds its way into Bishkek's prisons.

Contemporary Bishkek youth culture is also markedly more individualistic than what we have described for the Soviet period. Nowadays, young people experience more opportunities for entertainment, consumption, and career-building than their parents had in the 1970s and 1980s. In the context of growing consumerism, it has become absolutely normal for a small kid to play outside, to go buy chips and a drink in a small nearby shop, and then to rejoin the group eating and drinking everything by him- or herself. As respondents remarked on these examples, such behavior would have been absolutely unacceptable, in fact punishable, 25 years back when "everything was shared."

Over time, many raions have simply disappeared, and the young people living in them have lost track of the historical names and local history of these former youth territories. Some raions did preserve the names, but they seldom

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51 A. Toktosunov and E. Alykulov, "Pribaikalie, in Emil Nasritdinov and Philipp Schröder (eds), *From Frunze to Bishkek – from X to Y: Youth Cultures and Their Transformation in the Capital of Kyrgyzstan* (Washington, dc: Central Asian Studies Institute, forthcoming).

52 Nazgul Turubekova's talk at the Anthropology Club, American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, April 23, 2014.

are an essential part of boys' and girls' identities. This lost significance is exemplified by the fact that today, when a boy on the street is questioned where he came from, he is much more likely to answer "I am an urban", i.e. born in Bishkek, than "I am from Shanghai," which is a specific raion of the city.53 Today, in fact, it is even more likely that you will hear "I am from Naryn," or "I am from Osh," indicating in which federal state of Kyrgyzstan a young person was born before relocating to Bishkek.

Instead, what is common for youth from all over Bishkek nowadays is that they are plugged into different types of non-territorial communities: first, these are face-to-face communities that unite people from any part of the city according to their interests, on grounds of which they move through the city and meet in certain hubs for common activities; and second, young people are active users of all kinds of virtual online communities, such as Facebook or Odnoklassniki, a phenomenon that Blockland and Savage have pointedly referred to as "Networked urbanism".54 Young respondents from various raions confirmed that new communication technologies play indispensable roles in their lives, and hence also for their contemporary understanding of the urban landscape's shifted territoriality.

Conclusion

This article presented a piece of "alternative urban history," something that is different from the official narratives on Kyrgyzstan's capital. Hence, we provided the history of Soviet streets and of the everyday life of young people, whose narratives fit neither the Soviet nor the post-Soviet common textbook accounts. Yet, these stories are extremely important, rich, and unique. Looking back, beyond the role of state entities such as the Komsomol or "Western" musical or consumerist influences, they reveal the complex and powerful territorial aspects within youth socialization and identity formation until shortly after the end of the Soviet period.

There are several preliminary theoretical insights that we can draw from this study. First, the youth street culture of Frunze had much in common with developments that were taking place in cities all across the Soviet Union. This confirms our hypothesis about the importance of the larger contextual

53 Schröder, "From Shanghai to Iug-2."

54 Talja Blockland and Mike Savage, "Social Capital and Networked Urbanism," in Talja Blockland and Mike Savage (eds), *Networked Urbanism: Social Capital in the City* (Aldershot, uk: Ashgate, 2008), 1–20.

processes, such as Soviet industrialization, urbanization, and the state-controlled distribution of resident groups within the urban domain. At the same time, we see how in the process of adaptation to the specific setting of Frunze, the youth street culture there developed its own distinct features.

In that sense, the city was "constructing" young people and young people were "constructing" the city.55 We believe that this former active engagement with space and the romance with the city of one's youth may have the potential of going beyond nostalgic memories – but, in fact, could serve as the grounds for reconnecting current residents to their neighborhoods after the difficult times of post-Soviet transformation and after Kyrgyzstan's two "revolutions" for which Bishkek served as the primary stage in 2005 and 2010.

55 Schröder, "From Shanghai to Iug-2."