The War of Billboards: Hijab, Secularism, and Public Space in Bishkek

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Abstract

In this article, we explore how religion claims its space in the city of Bishkek. The growing community of practicing Muslims asserts the right to be in the city, live according to its religious ideals, and create Islamic urban spaces. Such claims do not remain uncontested and, because religious identity has strong visual manifestation, religious claims become the subject of strong public debate. This contestation overlaps with socially constructed gender hierarchies—religious/secular claims over the urban space turn into men's claims over women with both sides (religious and secular) claiming to know what women should wear. Yet research shows that Kyrgyz women in Bishkek do not really need fashion advice. The Islamic revivalist movement among women in the Kyrgyz capital has since the 1990s created a strong momentum that has a life of its own and is fairly independent. Muslim women wearing a hijab have become very visible and influential urban actors with their own strong claims for the city.

Keywords

Kyrgyzstan – Bishkek – hijab – secularism – public space – national identity – female piety

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Introduction: The War of Billboards

In July 2016, the residents of Bishkek and many other cities and towns across Kyrgyzstan woke up to see billboards with banners depicting three images next to each other. The first image portrayed a group of Kyrgyz women wearing traditional Kyrgyz dresses and *elechek* (a traditional, tall Kyrgyz headdress) (see Figure 1). The second image included a group of women in white Islamic dresses, some with their faces covered, raising their hands in supplication. The third image was very dark: it depicted women in black Islamic garb, all with *niqabs* (Islamic face covers). The sign below asked, "*Kairan elim, kaida baratabyz*?" ("My poor people, where are we going?"). The banners were initiated by the head of an unknown private educational foundation,[1] but were later financially supported by the administration of the president of Kyrgyzstan, Almazbek Atambayev.[2] The images and signs indirectly criticized new trends in the way Kyrgyz women supposedly dress, and the first image was there to show that Kyrgyz women had never covered their faces and never worn black.

The banners immediately sparked controversy in the news and social media with people divided into those who supported the installation and those who

Figure 1 *Banner on Sovetskaya Street in Bishkek critical of Islamic style clothing for women.*[3]

1 "Bannery so sloganom 'Kairan elim, kaida baratabyz?' vyvesili po ukazaniiu glavy chastnogo prosvestilel'skogo fonda," Gezitter.org, July 14, 2016. Accessed August 20, 2016. http://www.gezitter.org/society/51841_banneryi_so_sloganom_kayran_elim_kayda_baratabyiz_vyivesili_po_ukazaniyu_glavyi_chastnogo_prosvetitelskogo_fonda/.

2 "Bannery 'Kairan elim, kaida baratabyz?' nachali v yveshivat' po vsei respublike," Azzatyk.kg, July 22, 2016. Accessed August 20, 2016. http://rus.azattyk.org/a/27872844.html.

3 "dumk: banner 'kairan elim, kaida baratabyz?' mozhet navredit' edinstvy,"

opposed it. An online poll administered by Sputnik.kg on August 29, 2016, generated 659 responses. The results are shown in Figure 2.

The majority of voters among online readers (69 percent) supported the banners, but almost one-third (28 percent) were critical. The criticism of the banners came mostly from practicing Muslims, both women and men, who perceived this to be an attack on their values and on the sacredness of the *hijab* (Islamic veil for women). The Spiritual Board of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan criticized the banners, suggesting that they were a provocation that could harm the unity of the people.4 Similarly, Kadyr Malikov, a prominent religious expert, said that the banners were very dangerous and could lead to the division of society.5 One response came from a group called Naasat Media.6 They produced a video in which several women in hijabs gave their own answers to the president's "Where are we going?" question. Women stated that they were going toward morality, purity, honesty, self-respect, and other core Islamic values and that to wear the hijab was their own choice. A more aggressive social reaction resulted in vandalism: some banners were torn;7 others set on fire.8 Finally, criticism of banners also came from some civil society activists

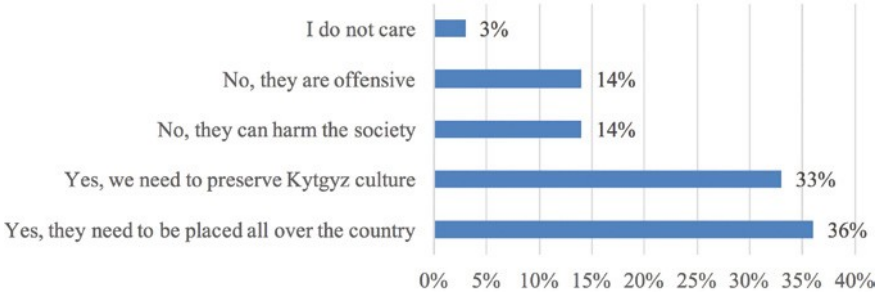

Figure 2 *Online poll: Do we need banners, "Kairan elim"?*9

4 "dumk: banner 'kairan elim, kaida baratabyz?' mozhet navredit' edinstvy," Sputnik.kg, July 13, 2016. Accessed August 20, 2016. http://ru.sputnik.kg/society/20160713/1027634490.html.

5 "dumk: banner 'kairan elim, kaida baratabyz?' mozhet navredit' edinstvy."

6 Nasaat media. Accessed August 20, 2016. https://www.facebook.com/NasaatMedia/videos/1748086732096254/.

7 "Militsiia ishchet khuliganov, sorvavshikh banner 'Kairan elim, kaida baratabyz'," Zanoza.kg, July 14, 2016. Accessed July 29, 2016. http://zanoza.kg/doc/341553_miliciia_ishet_hyliganov_sorvavshih_banner_kayran_elim_kayda_baratabyz.html.

8 "Banner 'Kairan elim, kaida baratabyz?' podozhgli v Batkenskoi oblasti," Sputnik.kg, July 26, 2016. Accessed August 20, 2016. http://ru.sputnik.kg/society/20160726/1028159819.html.

9 "Bannery 'Kairan elim, kaida baratabyz?' razmeshchaiut po vsemu Kyrgyzstanu," Sputnik.kg, July 18, 2016. Accessed August 20, 2016. http://ru.sputnik.kg/Kyrgyzstan/20160718/1027833480.html.

(not necessarily religious), who perceived them to be an instance of state encroachment on the freedom of religion.

Very soon, there emerged yet another interesting response—in the form of "alternative" banners that depicted women in traditional Kyrgyz dress next to girls in mini-skirts and shorts.10 The text below was the same: "My poor people, where are we going?" These images were critical of Western-style clothing and implied a similar argument: traditional Kyrgyz women never wore the styles that the majority of young women wear today. Such banners were installed in a few central locations in the city. It was not clear who financed their installation, but they were discussed in the media and social networks just as actively and controversially as the first banners. The game was on, and Bishkek residents anxiously awaited the state's reaction.

The head of the State Committee on Religious Affairs, Orozbek Moldaliev, defended the first banners as neither oppressive nor anti-Islamic.11 He pointed

Figure 3 *Banners installed in the central parts of Bishkek critical of Western style clothing for women.*12

10 "V Bishkeke poiavilsia novyi banner 'Kairan elim, kaida baratabyz'?" Sputnik.kg, July 28, 2016. Accessed August 20, 2016. http://ru.sputnik.kg/society/20160728/1028232189.html.

11 "Orozbek Moldaliev: V bannerakh 'Kairan elim, kaida baratabyz': nichego provokatsionnogo net," 24.kg, July 13, 2016. Accessed August 20, 2016. http://24.kg/obschestvo/34592_orozbek_moldaliev_v_bannerah_kayran_elim_kayda_baratasyin_nichego_provokatsionnogo_net/.

12 "Novyi banner peredraznivaet nashumevshee obrashchenie 'Kairan elim'," Limon.kg, July 28, 2016. Accessed August 10, 2016. http://limon.kg/news:68646?from=kgnews&place=newstopic.

out that they targeted only women wearing black and reminded the press that Kyrgyz women never wore black except for widows mourning their husbands. He also criticized Kadyr Malikov and others who had allegedly misinterpreted the message. The president condemned all these attacks on his banners. In his criticism of the alternative banners, he defended mini-skirts, suggesting that Kyrgyz women had worn them since the 1950s and that women in mini-skirts do not hide bombs under them.13 This statement made it explicit that the banners were not just about the national identity of Kyrgyz women, but also about fears of terrorism associated with "women in black." Soon, the Mayor's Office of Bishkek gave an order to remove the alternative banners,14 and the war of billboards ended not long after it started.

This controversial story of billboards is a very powerful illustration of how the religiousness and secularity of urban space in Bishkek today are contested. More and more people have started practicing Islam and the hijab is becoming a regular part of the everyday urban scene across the city. The government's fear of radicalization and its attempts to reclaim secularism often cause the more vocal members of the practicing Muslim community to defend their values and everyday practices. A very complex urban discourse emerges. This article explores this discourse and analyzes how the urban space in the capital of Kyrgyzstan is contested and negotiated among religious groups, secular groups, and the government.

Secularism, National Identity, and Extremism

As the focal point of debate on Muslim women, the hijab is subject to many public discourses: on identity, multiculturalism, political Islam, cultural differences, gender roles, power of agency, transnationalism, and globalization, among others.15 The three main public discourses that we focus on in this article are secularism, national identity, and security.

13 "Pust' luchshe khodiat v mini-iubkakh, no nikogo ne vzryvaiut—Atambayev," Kyrtag.kg, August 1, 2016. Accessed August 20, 2016. http://kyrtag.kg/society/pust-luchshe-khodyat- v-mini-yubkakh-no-nikogo-ne-vzryvayut-atambaev-.

14 "Novaia versiia bannera 'Kairan elim, kaida bara baratabyz'tasyn' demontirovana," Knews.kg, August 28, 2016. Accessed August 20, 2016. http://knews.kg/2016/07/28/novaya-versiya-bannera-kajran-elim-kajda-baratabyz-demontirovana/.

15 Louise Ryan, "Muslim Women Negotiating Collective Stigmatization: 'We're Just Normal People'," *Sociology*, 45, no. 6 (2011): 1045–1060.

Secularism

The first discourse is on the conceptualization of secularism. The Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic defines Kyrgyzstan as a secular country. The official definition of secularism was adopted quite recently—in 2014,16 and it is fairly neutral: it does not favor either state or religion, as happens in other contexts.17

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16 Some main points from the *Concept of the State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Religious Sphere for 2014–2020.* Accessed January 12, 2016. http://www.president.kg/files/docs/kontseptsiya_na_rus._prilojenie_k_ukazu_pkr-1.pdf:

The Kyrgyz Republic is a secular state that guarantees its citizens freedom of religion. The religious policy is based on the harmonic coexistence and mutual respect between secular and religious systems of values. The secular principle of state management of the activity of religious organizations means constitutional separation of religion from the state is based on not allowing their interfering in the activity of state institutions. In Kyrgyzstan, nobody can be forced to express or give up their religious views, nobody can be discriminated [against] on the basis of religious belonging or not-belonging. Separation of state from religion happens on following conditions:

- The state is officially neutral, does not affiliate itself with any religion, and does not use any religious ideology as obligatory for its citizens;
- Religious organizations do not interfere in the activity of state institutions, but can file recommendations, petitions, etc.
- Religious organizations do not fulfil any duties of state institutions;
- Religious organizations do not participate in the activity of political parties and movements;
- The state supports strengthening the relations between confessions and between believing and non-believing citizens;
- The state can interfere in the activity of religious organizations only in the cases described by the law;
- State control of religious organizations is based on the principle of respect toward religious feelings of believers.

To protect freedom of religion and individual, public and national interests and to secure stability and safety, the State within the frames of law can:

- Act to prevent and solve religious conflicts;
- Limit the activity of religious organizations that are dangerous for individuals, society and state;
- Control the content of religious education, literature, information in mass-media to prevent spreading of extremist or destructive ideas, religious conflicts, and calls for violence.

17 There are two models of secularism that can be found in other political contexts: French (separatist) and Anglo-Saxon (accommodationist). Both are based on the separation of state from religion, but this separation is interpreted differently. The French model often referred to as laïcité, is based on the protection of state from religion: it bans any form of visual manifestation of religious belonging in the public sphere. The Anglo-Saxon model

Also, because the concept was developed very recently and not widely discussed in public, the common interpretations of secularism in public are quite ambiguous. We can see how people on both sides of the hijab controversy refer to the same constitution and concept of secularism, but interpret it differently. For example, on the controversial question of wearing hijabs in school, a former member of the Kyrgyz parliament, Ainur Altybaeva, said:

> The first article of the Constitution says that Kyrgyzstan is a democratic country where religion is separated from the state. Let anyone believe in what they want to believe. But we should not allow the wearing of religious clothing in state offices and educational establishments because this is also a part of propaganda.18

On the contrary, several parliamentarians wrote official letters to the minister of education with the request to protect the rights of girls wearing hijabs in school and to consider their preferences when the new school uniform was designed.19 They referred to the constitution, which guarantees every person freedom of religion and protection from discrimination on the basis of religion. In their understanding of secularism, the state should not interfere in the religious life of citizens.

In our opinion, local secularism can be better understood from a generational perspective. The majority of state officials today represent the older generation who were brought up in the times of Soviet anti-religious propaganda, and their definition of *svetskost'* (secularism) is more reflective of *Sovetskost'*—worldviews based on the visions of Soviet modernity and atheism.

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on the contrary, is based on the protection of religion from the state: this model has much more space for the presence of religion in all spheres of life including public offices and educational institutions. See Semiha Topal, "Everybody Wants Secularism—But Which One? Contesting Definitions of Secularism in Contemporary Turkey," I*nternational Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 25, no. 1/3 (2012): 1–14; Caitlin Killian, "From a Community of Believers to an Islam of the Heart: 'Conspicuous' Symbols, Muslim Practices, and the Privatization of Religion in France," *Sociology of Religion*, 68, no. 3 (2007): 305–320.

18 T. Osmongazieva, "V 'Ar-Namyse' posporili o vynesenii na referendum voprosa o khidzhabe," *Vechernii Bishkek*, September 12, 2014. Accessed August 20, 2016. http://www.vb.kg/doc/286335_v_ar_namyse_poporili_o_vynesenii_na_referendym_voprosa_o_hidjabe.html.

19 D. Podol'skaia, "Deputaty parlamenta Kyrgyzstana trebuiut ot ministra obrazovaniia uchest' prava devochek, nosiashchikh khidzhab," 24.kg, September 15, 2014. Accessed August 20, 2016. http://arch.24.kg/parlament/186394-deputaty-parlamenta-kyrgyzstana-trebuyut-ot.html.

Julie McBrien, in her own account of the hijab in Kyrgyzstan, describes how successful the Soviet Union was in objectifying modernity and tradition, in creating the strong secular sphere and shaping "modern" Central Asian subjects.20

Kyrgyz National Identity

The second main public discourse is about Kyrgyz national identity and its protection from various foreign influences. The government of Almazbek Atambayev is promoting a locally appropriate model of Islam that does not contradict local customs and traditions and is modern at the same time. Often the hijab is portrayed by officials as an element of foreign Arabic culture that has nothing to do with traditional Kyrgyz female clothing. Parliament member Mairamkul Tilenchieva stated:

> The hijab was never a part of traditional Kyrgyz clothing for women. Today, the Arab and Pakistani dresses are being imposed on us. We have our own beautiful traditional clothing. We should stick to it.21

President Almazbek Atambayev, at a meeting of the Security Council in February 2014, warned that, behind the massive Islamization, is an attempt to make Kyrgyz people lose their national identity and uniqueness:

> To preserve the national heritage and uniqueness, it is important that they would not be replaced by other norms, including the religious ones. If we do not pay attention to that, we will gradually lose our national identity. If someone imposes the so-called Islamic clothing and hijab on us, there will be a time when those who wear traditional or comfortable contemporary clothing will be called unbelievers. In the Holy Quran there is no concept about what clothing is Islamic and what is not. Islam only requires clean and neat dress.22

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20 Julie McBrien, "Mukadas's Struggle: Veils and Modernity in Kyrgyzstan," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15 (2009): S127–S144.

21 A. Kutueba, "Mairamkul' Tilenchieva: Khidzhab nikogda ne byl traditsionnoi odezhdoi kyrgyzov," 24.kg, September 12, 2014. Accessed August 20, 2016. http://arch.24.kg/parlament/186330-majramkul-tilenchieva-xidzhab-nikogda-ne-byl.html.

22 Prezident Kyrgyzskoi respubliki, "Gosudarstvennoe regulirovanie v sfere religii budet tol'ko usilivat'sia, nosuchetomosnovopolagaiushchikhprintsipovsvobodysovestiipravcheloveka," November 3, 2014. Accessed August 20, 2016. http://www.president.kg/ru/news/4818_prezident_almazbek_atambaev_gosudarstvennoe_regulirovanie_v_sfere_religii_budet_tolko_usilivatsya_no_s_uchetom_osnovopolagayuschih_printsipov_svobodyi_sovesti_i_prav_cheloveka/.

Interestingly, some representatives of the Muslim community also perceive the hijab as a way of protecting Kyrgyz identity because, according to them, Islamic dress and hijabs are much closer to the traditional Kyrgyz dress than contemporary Western-style clothing, such as jeans, mini-skirts, shorts, and t-shirts. Old photographs of Kyrgyz men with long *chapans* (coats) and beards and of Kyrgyz women in long dresses, *elechek*, hijab, and *topu*23 for younger girls are commonly present in numerous Facebook posts as evidence of their similarity to contemporary Islamic clothing. Again, just like with the constitution and secularism, the same theme—national identity—is explored by both sides of the discourse, but interpreted differently.

Security

The third public discourse is about security framed as radicalism, extremism, and terrorism. In the context of terrorist attacks happening across the world, all Central Asian states are quite paranoid about such threats and today work actively to prevent them, although all in their own ways. Due to the global media influence, a woman in a black dress with her face obscured with a burka or niqab is a very powerful and threatening image. Even practicing Muslim respondents in our survey admitted the power of such an image and were critical of women dressing in such way. Both global and governmental security agendas contributed to the stigmatization and "othering" of Muslim women in hijab perhaps more than any other public discourse.

These three discourses on secularism, national identity, and terrorism are common not only for politicians. As Montgomery shows, concepts used by politicians and media in Kyrgyzstan become a part of the everyday language of home and street: people use them while making sense of changes taking place in the society and positioning themselves in relation to these changes.24 In our next section, we illustrate one such change by describing how the practice of wearing the hijab and its perception by society have evolved in Kyrgyzstan since the early 1990s to the present day. We will do it from the words of Jamal Frontbek kyzy, the leader of Mutakalim, a foundation that works to protect the rights of Muslim women.

23 A small round or square hat.

24 David W. Montgomery, "Towards a Theory of the Rough Ground: Merging the Policy and Ethnographic Frames of Religion in the Kyrgyz Republic," *Religion, State, and Society*, 42, no. 1 (2014): 23–45.

History of the Hijab in Bishkek

Jamal Frontbek kyzy was among the first practicing Muslim women to start wearing a hijab in Bishkek. She was a typical Soviet city girl who never wore any Islamic dresses during her school days. After completing high school in the early 1990s, she became interested in religion and entered the Islamic University in Bishkek. She described how it was impossible to find any Islamic attire to buy anywhere in the city and how she and her friends used to travel to Jany-Jer—a small village near the city populated by Dargins,25 where they could buy traditional Dargin shawls and long dresses. These were usually worn by old Dargin ladies and looked very bulky and strange on young city girls. Later, Jamal's sister, unhappy with the way Jamal looked in the Dargin outfit, helped her find a local seamstress and, since then, Jamal and her friends have ordered individual dresses and hijabs.

In the 1990s, to see a woman in a hijab on the street was something very extraordinary, and people looked very puzzled, surprised, and, most of the time very critical of it. Jamal describes how people used to call her *babushka* (granny) because of the hijab.

> People were staring at us as if they were in a zoo. Every second person would come and ask why I wear it. On my way to a bus stop, I would be approached or reprimanded like 20 times. It was difficult, but we perceived this as an opportunity to explain and invite people to Islam. They did not understand. My neighbor used to regularly bother my sister asking her about my hijab, until my sister got tired and said that I wear it because I don't have any hair on my head. Our teachers at the university were of great support in these difficult times, they helped us stay strong and reminded of all the *savabs* (rewards) we will receive in the next world for doing this.

At this time, Jamal and her friends discovered that girls were not allowed to wear hijabs in schools and universities. They thought that something must be done and decided to create an organization that would help Muslim women defend their rights. From 1996 to 1999, they tried to convince the Muftiyat and the State Committee on Religious Affairs that this was necessary, and eventually they succeeded. They next established the Mutakalim. This was the first female Muslim organization in the entire post-Soviet space. They got actively

25 An ethnic group of Muslims whom Stalin deported to Kyrgyzstan from the Caucasus in 1930s and 1940s.

Figure 4 *Members of Mutakalim and sympathizers rally in front of the Ministry of Education against the ban of hijab in schools.*26

involved with the issues of girls prevented from wearing hijabs to school and university. Whenever they came across such cases, they took matters to the court and they were always successful. In 2008, the minister of education issued an order that banned wearing hijabs in public schools. Mutakalim received a huge number of complaints from children's parents that year. They again took the issue to the courts and organized several rallies in the city raising the public awareness of the issue. As a result, the minister was fired and his order was cancelled.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, things were gradually changing. Islam was becoming both more a prominent and more visible part of urban life. There were more men wearing Islamic clothes and growing beards, and more women wearing long dresses and hijabs. This was also a period of high rates of internal migration from the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan where Islam was historically much more prominent than in the North and where it was more common for women to wear Islamic-style clothing. By the late 2000s, the hijab had become a normal part of the urban scene in Bishkek, and nobody was surprised or puzzled by it anymore.

26 Photo by Almaz Isman Kalet. The signs say: "Hijab is the woman's honor" and "Hijab is not an obstacle to studying."

In 2002, Jamal was invited to attend a United Nations conference in Europe, but when she was at the airport, the customs officers refused to let her go through unless she took off her hijab, because her passport photo showed her without it. She refused and boarded the plane only at the last minute after she threatened to create an international uproar with the help of the un. Upon her return, she collected 300,000 signatures in support of permission to take passport photos with a hijab on. It then took her several years to have all ministries and governmental bodies somehow involved in this question to give their permission. She was able to get all necessary endorsements except for one from the Ministry of International Affairs, which refused to sign it. In 2007, when Bishkek hosted the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting and expected the arrival of several presidents, Jamal and her supporters decided to organize a rally to fight for their cause and blocked the main road from the airport. They started gathering crowds and this had an effect: the ministry got scared and signed the permission. "We were young and fearless," says Jamal.

Today, according to Jamal, hijabs in schools and universities are no longer a big issue. Now Mutakalim, receives only about 15–20 complaints a year on this matter. The main difficulty Muslim women in hijab face today is related to employment. Many state offices and private companies refuse to hire women in hijabs, citing company dress codes. Mutakalim tries to get involved whenever it is possible. There are also many other options nowadays for practicing Muslim women to be employed in Muslim-friendly organizations and businesses.

The major issue for Muslim women in Bishkek today, according to Jamal, is their internal divisions. As Islamic practices become more popular, there are a greater and greater variety of religious influences and, as a result, Muslim society in Bishkek is becoming strongly divided into groups influenced by the Arab, Turkish, Indo-Pakistani, Egyptian, or Iranian forms of Islam. Women representing these groups often dislike each other and lack solidarity. The city is divided and, interestingly, members of these groups have their own unique way of wearing the hijab. A female insider can easily "read the city" and distinguish among all these various groups by the style of their veil. Mutakalim does not follow any specific branch of Islam; they try to help all women who come to their center. All these groups also have their own places to meet, socialize, and obtain religious knowledge. Most of these meetings take place in the private sphere of homes or on the grounds of some religious foundations because in Bishkek, there are only four mosques with rooms for women. Jamal complained that the city infrastructure is still not considerate of Muslim women. For example, her husband and son went to a swimming pool, but she and her daughter cannot because there was no single swimming pool open for women for even a short period of time.

In 2012, Jamal was among those who helped organize the first ever Islamic Fashion Week, where eight designers presented their work. This event attracted a large audience and strong media attention. The show has become a regular event since then. Long gone are the days when Jamal was buying bulky dresses and veils from Dargin ladies. Now, Muslim clothing is not only easily available, it is becoming a part of a growing consumer culture with specific orientation toward Muslim women. There are many shops that sell Islamic-style dresses. Many of these shops are concentrated in one area—around the Central Mosque in Bishkek. These shops, the large number of women in hijabs who study at the nearby Islamic University, or come to the female prayer space in the central mosque contribute to the overall feeling of an Islamic oasis in the center of a very busy secular city.

Active Muslim women in hijab also make their presence known in other ways. In November 2013, Mutakalim organized a collective bike ride for women in hijabs. Nearly 200 women rode bikes along one of the main city streets toward the blood collection center where they donated blood that was later sent

Figure 5 *Islamic Fashion Week in Bishkek.*27

27 "V Bishkeke vpervye proshel pokaz musul'manskoi mody," Limon.kg, November 23, 2012. Accessed August 10, 2016. http://limon.kg/news:172.

Figure 6 *Activist Muslim women's bike ride in Bishkek.*28

to Maternity Hospital #4. The aim of this event was to encourage women to participate in sports and to attract attention to the problem of anemia among new mothers. The event also showed the proactive stance of many Muslim women in Bishkek.

As this brief overview shows, the hijab in Bishkek has evolved in complex ways from being something abnormal and extraordinary to something that is common, diverse, and proactive. Members of Mutakalim have played a very dynamic role in reclaiming the urban space: they became effective actors and urban agents capable of mobilizing the sympathetic female Muslim community in support of their common cause and interests. We also see how the forms of hijabs became richer in colors, shapes, and semiotics. In our next section, we want to look at the meanings of the hijab for women in relation to their religious subjectivities.

28 Photo by Ulan Asanaliev, "V Bishkeke proshel veloprobeg musul'manok protiv malokroviia," *Ozodaron*, November 7, 2013. Accessed August 10, 2016. http://catoday.org/centrasia/kgru/11209-v-bishkeke-proshel-veloprobeg-musulmanok-protiv-malokroviya.html.

The Meaning of Hijab for Practicing Muslim Women

This section is based on the analysis of interviews and focus-group discussions with practicing Muslim women from research conducted by one of the co-authors29 in 2015–2016, which studied the perception and experience of religious freedom among practicing Muslim women in Bishkek and the Chui Valley. The research was based on a questionnaire given to 440 practicing Muslim women, four focus-group discussions, and seven expert interviews. The main aims of this research were to understand the social stereotypes regarding Muslim women, impediments to religious freedom, and factors affecting the fear and mistrust between secular and religious groups.

Muslim female respondents in this survey perceive the hijab in complex ways. Some describe it as *farz* (obligation), inscribed by Quran for all women. By wearing the hijab, women fulfill their duties to the Creator30 and feel the completeness of their belief.31 At the same time, respondents said the hijab gives women freedom and protection in their everyday lives in society.32 They feel more respectful toward themselves33 and particularly from men.34 They also feel that they protect their own and other families by hiding their female beauty and preventing men's interest.35 It is undoubtedly an important marker of their identity: with the hijab they remind themselves and others about who they are.36

Wearing the hijab is described as a sacred practice connected with the search for God. Very few women come to it right away. The traditional scenario mentioned by several respondents includes: first, interest in Islam, then praying one time a day and irregular fasting, followed by praying five times a day and complete fasting, attending Islamic gatherings or classes, and only then putting on the hijab. For some women, putting it on for the first time can be perceived as a part of Islamic fashion. For others, it is a result of their search for the truth. Later, many perceive the hijab as a duty to God.37 In the final

29 Temporarily removed for reviewers.
30 FGD with women in Bishkek, December 25, 2015.
31 FGD with women in Bishkek, January 9, 2016.
32 FGD with women in Belovodskoe, November 13, 2015.
33 FGD with women in Bishkek, January 9, 2016.
34 FGD with women in Bishkek, January 9, 2016.
35 FGD with women in Bishkek, January 9, 2016.
36 FGD with women in Bishkek, January 9, 2016.
37 FGD with women in Bishkek, November 25, 2015.

stage, wearing it affects their way of life: it is expected to stop women from un-Islamic behavior and motivate them to be more moral and tolerant.38 One respondent explained:

> My daughter in school used to attend wrestling. When she entered the Medical Academy, she started wearing the hijab. She says how sometimes she is tempted to use her strong wrestling skills when solving the conflicts, but her hijab stops her.39

Women describe the hijab as something that disciplines them and even helps in their studies: "Without the hijab, I was always focused on the way I looked. Now, when my hair is covered, I can concentrate better on my studies."40 However, some respondents mentioned that many women in hijabs do not understand the essence of religion, that it is to be reached internally with one's heart, not externally with the garment itself. So they do not change and continue behaving improperly, thus discrediting other women in hijab:41

> We ourselves are guilty of secular extremism. Our rudeness, lack of courtesy, poor education and poor understanding of the meaning of hijab reinforce the negative image of Muslim women.42

Some respondents mentioned that the hijab helps them hide certain features of their body they are not happy with: "The hijab is good both for thin and ample-bodied women. For example, my granddaughter is fifteen and she is quite heavy for her age. The Islamic dress helps her hide that and she feels more confident in the streets."43

Many secular groups believe that Muslim parents force their children to wear hijab and perceive this as a violation of children's rights.44 Muslim female respondents reject such claims and suggest that girls who put on hijab under parental pressure usually take it off soon: "My niece put on hijab because her parents insisted. But after marriage she took it off."45 They suggest that children in Muslim families wear the hijab because their mothers do and because they

38 FGD with women in Bishkek, January 9, 2016.
39 FGD with women in Belovodskoe, November 13, 2015.
40 FGD with women in Belovodskoe, November 13, 2015.
41 FGD with women in Bishkek, December 25, 2015.
42 FGD with women in Bishkek, January 9, 2016.
43 FGD with women in Kara-Balta, December 12, 2015.
44 Interview with expert.
45 FGD with women in Kara-Balta, December 12, 2015.

themselves believe that this is their religious duty.46 The majority of respondents who have daughters said that for those children who decided to wear the hijab in school it was their own decision. Parents understand that wearing the hijab can create the sense of discomfort due to peer pressure.47 That is why many Muslim parents do not insist and even, as in the case of one respondent, prohibit their daughters from wearing it in school.48

Respondents complained that society often perceives them as uneducated, limited, and suppressed by their husbands because of hijab,49 and they argue strongly against such stereotypes. One-quarter of survey respondents were, in fact, university students. Women who did not work frequently said that this was their own choice toward fulfilling their family obligation, not their husband's dictate.

Several forms of moral and social discrimination were mentioned. "I trade bread in the market and my neighboring trader wears a hijab. I often hear how people call her a ninja-turtle."50 According to respondents, this happens because the number of women in hijab is still very small,51 which makes them easily noticeable in a crowd and thus more vulnerable. However, some Muslim respondents suggest that women without a hijab experience more discrimination than they do, while they themselves are more respected.52

Women also defend themselves against the accusations of losing national identity:

> We are blamed for copying Arabs. However, we do not blame secular women for not covering their hair and for short haircuts, in which they copy the Europeans. Historically, Kyrgyz women always covered their head. In Kyrgyz tradition, women should never have short hair. In fact, to cut woman's hair short was a way of public punishment and humiliation.53

At the same time, many respondents agreed that one of the main reasons for the confrontation with secular groups is the black color of dress and hijab with niqab, which people associate with suicide bombers and ISIS. In Bishkek black is usually worn by women from the Salafi group, while women of other Muslim

46 FGD with women in Belovodskoe, November 13, 2015.
47 FGD with women in Bishkek, December 25, 2015.
48 FGD with women in Bishkek, December 25, 2015.
49 FGD with women in Bishkek, January 9, 2016.
50 FGD with women in Kara-Balta, December 12, 2015.
51 FGD with women in Belovodskoe, November 13, 2015.
52 FGD with women in Bishkek, January 9, 2016.
53 FGD with women in Belovodskoe, November 13, 2015.

groups wear it very rarely. Ryan describes how British Muslim women challenge the stigma of posing a security threat by distancing themselves terrorist groups, by trying to show Islam from a good side, by socializing and getting along with non-Muslim communities and by adjusting their clothing style (e.g., wearing jeans and hijab).54 Similarly, respondents in our survey distance themselves from radical Islam and reflect on their clothing style: "We should not wear black dress and, by that, create fears and reinforce stereotypes."55 Some respondents, including Jamal Frontbek kyzy, do not favor hiding their faces. They suggest that this makes people afraid, reinforces the negative image of Islam, and attracts unnecessary attention to all Muslim women. Maria Louw, in her study of Muslim revivalism in Kyrgyzstan, proposes that, in the context of radical change, the majority of Kyrgyz Muslims strive for a balance, for a golden mean between blind radical belief and cynical pragmatism.56

Most participants in our survey did not position themselves against the secular residents of Bishkek. As we can see from their statements, the majority are not fanatical in their adherence to the hijab; they do not always contrast it against the secular lifestyle. The relationship is much more complex: they aspire to be a part of society, but not at the cost of their Islamic moral principles, which disapprove of certain Western-like lifestyles.57 As pointed out by Montgomery, the boundaries between the two communities are very vague, with multiple overlapping fields and crossing paths.58 Although on a personal level, the decision to veil themselves might be of great individual significance and, thus, seemingly radical for family and friends, on the community level, it is by now a normative practice that places a woman in the specific societal niche and assigns certain social expectations. How women fit into these societal roles is the subject of our next section.

Being a Muslim Woman in Bishkek

The questionnaire survey, from which this article draws, was conducted in Bishkek and several other settlements in the Chui Valley. The survey consisted

54 Ryan, "Muslim Women Negotiating Collective Stigmatization."

55 FGD with women in Belovodskoe, November 13, 2015.

56 Maria Louw, "Even Honey May Become Bitter When There is Too Much of It: Islam and the Struggle for a Balanced Existence in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey*, 32, no. 4 (2013): 514–526.

57 Ryan, "Muslim Women Negotiating Collective Stigmatization."

58 Montgomery, "Towards a Theory of the Rough Ground."

Table 1 *Age distribution of survey respondents.*

18–25	26–35	36–45	46–55	55+
36%	21%	20%	14%	9%

of two parts: revealing the current situation with religious freedom for Muslim women and looking for recommendations to improve the situation. The sample included 440 women who attend various religious classes and gatherings organized by the Mutakalim. Not all respondents were wearing hijabs, but they all were interested in Islam: some were still learning and others had more experience with Islamic religious practices. Some 95 percent of respondents were ethnically Kyrgyz. The majority were young, as can be seen from Table 1.

One-third (33 percent) of respondents were unemployed and one-quarter (25 percent) were students. Private businesses (17 percent) and working in a religious organization (8 percent) were the two most feasible options for practicing Muslim women. Another 7 percent worked in the sphere of education and 4 percent for the state.

As for the question of what religious issues are the most important for respondents today, the biggest percentage (37 percent) was that of the hijab in school. Despite the improvements in this sphere and fewer cases of banning it, it was still important for the respondents. Three other issues were almost equally important: mistrust and fear among religious and secular groups (22 percent), discrimination of Muslim women's rights in general (21 percent), and disagreements among women belonging to different Islamic groups (20 percent).

In regard to the question of how much they know about the freedom of religion, 17 percent said that they know a lot, 65 percent a little, and 21 percent knew nothing. On a more specific question of how they understand the freedom of religion, the majority (50.1 percent) described it as the freedom of choice in religion and freedom to practice it without discrimination. Other respondents produced more specific visions, such as practicing Islam as it should be practiced (2.5 percent), freedom to dress according to beliefs (0.9 percent), freedom to obtain religious education (0.7 percent), when society is familiar with Islam and does not oppose it (0.7 percent), when the rights of all Muslims are protected (0.7 percent), democracy (0.5 percent), and freedom to call people to Islam (0.2 percent). One-third of respondents (34.7 percent) could not give an answer to this question.

The majority of respondents (55.8 percent) have never experienced pressure or discrimination because of their religious identity; 21.5 percent experience

Table 2 *How respondents explain the social pressure and discrimination against them.*

No answer	40.1%
Misunderstanding and lack of knowledge about religion	21.8%
Because of extremist, groups, terrorism and ISIS	15.3%
Lack of secular and religious education	5.0%
Because of ISIS	4.5%
Atheism	3.9%
Black dress and niqab	1.8%
Lack of mutual understanding between secular and religious groups	1.4%
Growth in the number of religious groups	0.7%
Other	5.5%
Total	100.0%

it sometimes; and 22.7 percent experience it frequently. For those who experienced it, most of this pressure was moral or verbal, such as humiliation, sneering, and jeering (92 percent). However, 7 percent of respondents had also experienced physical discrimination. Table 2 shows the explanations that respondents offered for they faced discrimination. Misunderstanding and lack of knowledge about religion, and the association of Muslims with extremists and terrorists were the most common answers.

Women who experienced discrimination have in the past taken their complaints to—or said they would consider contacting—the following organizations: religious bodies such as the Muftiyat, Kaziyat, and local imams (33.3 percent), local administrations (28.3 percent), police (24.9 percent), or nongovernmental organizations (8.8 percent).59 As we can see, the state and civil society sectors are still trusted by practicing respondents. This finding also comes through strongly in their recommendations for future improvement of the situation. As for who should be responsible for the protection of Muslim women's rights, the most important bodies were the Muftiyat (46.9 percent) and the state (44.4 percent). NGOs were also in the list (8.6 percent). Table 3 contains the list of organizations respondents were ready to collaborate with in the future:

All major recommendations on how to improve relations between them and the secular world were connected to strengthening the knowledge base: 40 percent of recommendations suggested educating the secular population

59 Some 4.5 percent of respondents did not have an answer to this question.

Table 3 *Survey respondents are ready to collaborate with these organizations.*

Muftiyat	43.3%
Central government	20.5%
Police	13.8%
Local administration	10.4%
International organizations	7.1%
Local NGOs	4.9%
Total	100.0%

about religion, 32 percent to educate religious women about secularism, and 27 percent to increase knowledge about tolerance. Survey respondents also saw their own role in this process: particularly in explaining the secular groups the tenets of religion (17.6 percent), organizing religious classes and trainings (14.2 percent), and helping the society unite (9.8 percent). Other visions were more faith-based: to invite them to Islam (5.1 percent) and to uproot atheism (3.7 percent). Respondents also suggested engaging with mass media (2.4 percent), actively protecting the rights of women (1.7 percent), and improving one's own behavior in order to show Islam from a positive side (1.1 percent).

One of the most important and controversial questions about the city space and religion today is that of prayer rooms for women in the mosques. There is a common belief in Kyrgyz society that women should pray at home, while mosques should be exclusively for men. Interestingly, the majority (44 percent) of women support this opinion and did not request designated spaces in the mosques. However, 38 percent of respondents disagree: they want special rooms where they can pray (at least while traveling or during work hours) and where they can socialize.60 Similarly, 40 percent of respondents (versus 43 percent) believe that it is unfair that there is no female department in the Muftiyat. Often, women cannot go to the Muftiyat with specific questions, because they cannot openly discuss such questions with a male religious scholar or expert. It would be much easier for her to discuss such matters with a female religious practitioner. Thus, 64 percent believe that opening such a department would be beneficial for them.

As the survey results in this section revealed, being a Muslim woman in Bishkek or the Chui Valley is not that difficult, but it is not that easy, either. About 40 percent of women experience discrimination and 7 percent even experience violence. However, what is important is that women do not

60 18 percent did not have a clear opinion on this question.

necessarily see the state as an oppressor, and they are ready to collaborate with it to improve their own position in the society. Having reviewed the history of the hijab in Bishkek, its meanings for practicing Muslim women, and their religious experiences with it, we would like to come back to the analysis of the billboard controversy, from which this whole story started.

Objectification of Female Body and Power of Women's Agency

In the heat of debate provoked by the images depicted on the controversial billboards in Bishkek, one interesting question somehow escaped public attention: Why is it that the president's banners and their alternative visions depict only women and not men? In the public discourse, one hears a great deal of critical comments about men wearing Pakistani-style garments, but somehow images of men do not appear in any platforms. Why has the woman's hijab, not the man's beard, become the main focus of visual contestation?

The answer might be quite simple, yet quite universal. The main controversy, perhaps, centers on the hijab in Bishkek for the same reasons that it focuses on it in other urban contexts: it might all be about the traditional male patriarchy and objectification of women. Behind all these debates between secularists and Islamists on the issues of constitution, national identity, and terrorism, lurks the age-old struggle for man's control over the female body.

Ryan refers to Fortier, who describes how women's bodies are used to symbolize the transgression of social boundaries.61 So, in Bishkek on one side, we have the strong patriarchal figure of President Atambayev who has power and money to project on the whole country his vision of how women should and should not dress, or former prime minister Temir Sariev who openly criticized the hijab. For them, women who wear it transgress the limits of a "normal" secular dress codes and that is what they want to control. On the other hand, we have such public male figures as Tursunbai Bakir uulu, a former member of parliament and social media activist, who strongly propagated Islamic dress code for women and fought the prime minister after his attacks on hijab. For him and other Islamists, it is women in mini-skirts who transgress the boundaries of Islamic norms and must be reprimanded.

The effort to control how women dress is not recent nor is it unique to Kyrgyzstan. Feyzi Baban, discussing the controversies of the hijab ban in

61 Ryan, "Muslim Women Negotiating Collective Stigmatization," Fortier, "Remembering places and the performance of belongings", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 16, no. 2 (1999): 41–64.

Turkey, describes how control of a female body has double symbolism: a woman's body is perceived as the carrier of religion and is an important subject of Turkish modernization.62 An educated young woman in a hijab is perceived as posing a direct assault on the century-long Turkish modernization effort. In Central Asia, men in power were trying to control the way Central Asian women dress in the pre-Soviet, Soviet, and now in post-Soviet contexts. In fact, as Julie McBrien shows, the Soviets succeeded in eliminating the religious influence in Central Asia only after they unveiled women because, she concurs, the woman embodies the religion.63 Interestingly though, the act of unveiling also became an act of emancipation, and, during the last 70 years of Soviet rule, Kyrgyz women who even in the pre-Soviet times were quite independent compared with women in more settled Central Asian cultures, became even more empowered.

So, one must consider that it is not a traditional Kyrgyz woman who is veiling herself today, but a post-Soviet modern subject with a strong background in (for older women) or legacy of (for younger women) Soviet female emancipation. Despite efforts by secularists and Islamists to control her, a Kyrgyz Muslim woman refuses to be objectified by either side. She has her own visions and ways of getting toward her goals. As interviews and focus-group discussions in this research show, very few women start practicing Islam and wearing the hijab under pressure of their fathers, brothers, or husbands. For the majority, it is their own conscious choice, the outcome of an internal search, various life struggles, and influence from their female peers. Farideh Heyat shows that for women in Kyrgyzstan, Islam became a source of moral support in the context of the deep moral crisis produced by the post-Soviet chaos, while the hijab helped them safeguard their female dignity.64 For a Kyrgyz woman, being veiled became both an act of piety and a "means of realigning cultural landscapes and of creating herself as a modern individual through, within, and in reaction to 'Western,' 'Soviet,' and 'Islamic' normative frameworks."65

Similarly, Habiba Fathi, in her study of *otines* (female Islamic teachers) in Central Asia, shows how women refuse to be classified as passive objects, but find themselves at the heart of the social order as honorific figures, guardians of faith, who played important roles in preserving Islamic knowledge during

62 Feyzi Baban, "Secular Spaces and Religious Representations: Reading the Headscarf Debate in Turkey as Citizenship Politics," *Citizenship Studies*, 18, no. 6/7 (2014): 644–660.

63 McBrien, "Mukadas's Struggle."

64 Farideh Heyat, "Re-Islamisation in Kyrgyzstan: Gender, New Poverty, and the Moral Dimension," *Central Asian Survey*, 23, no. 3/4 (2004): 275–287.

65 McBrien, "Mukadas's Struggle," 140.

Soviet times, and further expanding and distributing this knowledge in the post-Soviet context.66 Thus, they re-Islamize Central Asian cities and towns.

The history of the hijab, exemplified in the history of such organizations as Mutakalim, shows that since the early 1990s, activist Muslim women in Bishkek were themselves fighting for their rights: rallying people into the streets, taking government ministries to court, blocking roads, filing petitions, and sponsoring blood drives. This is what makes Kyrgyzstan's veil controversy unique: the proactive position of women and their will and ability to stand up for themselves and choose their own path.

Manja Stephan-Emmrich and Abdullah Mirzoev show that in Dushanbe, the hijab became a cultural strategy that helped women protect their modesty, adapt to urban life, gain access to the economic sector traditionally dominated by men, and develop trust as important economic resources.67 By "fashionalizing" the hijab and wearing it in many colors and forms, Tajik women were also able to connect to the global market for Islamic styles and recreate themselves as followers of "modern Islam." Robin Wright, in his essay titled "Pink Hijab," describes Dalia Ziada, a representative of what he calls the "pink hijab generation" in Egypt—women who are both committed to faith yet resolute about their rights.68 Ziada is a female Muslim activist fighting for civil rights using methods of civil disobedience. For Ziada and her friends, a colorful hijab is not a symbol of suppression, but "social armor that enables Muslim women to chart their own course, personally or professionally." It is an equalizer that gives women more power in a men's world. It is both a stamp of authenticity and symbolic demand for change.

Yet in analyzing the active role of women's agency, we should not confuse it with feminism. Jamal Frontbek kyzy, in her interview, clearly stated, "I am not a feminist. There is no feminism in Islam. I am simply a human-rights defender for Muslim women." Jamal does not rebel against men per se. Christine Jacobsen, in her study of Norwegian Muslim women, discusses the failures of feminist theories to fully portray the individual religious subjectivities in the female Islamic revivalism.69 She suggests that it is impossible to understand

66 Habiba Fathi, "Otines: The Unknown Women Clerics of Central Asian Islam," *Central Asian Survey*, 16, no. 1 (1997): 27–43.

67 Manja Stephan-Emmrich and Abdullh Mirzoev, "The Manufacturing of Islamic Lifestyles in Tajikistan through the Prism of Dushanbe's Bazaars," *Central Asian Survey*, 35, no. 2 (2016): 157–177.

68 Robin Wright, "The Pink Hijab," *Wilson Quarterly*, 35, no. 3 (2011): 47–51.

69 Christine Jacobsen, "Troublesome Threesome: Feminism, Anthropology, and Muslim Women's Piety," *Feminist Review*, 98, no. 1 (2011): 65–82.

the hijab through the "rebel" versus "conformist" discourse, which is often employed by feminists in the study of women in Islam. Rather, the hijab is a part of the "technique of self" that manifests and helps women become obedient to God, submit to religious norms, and even reaffirm the unequal Islamic gender constructs. Instead, "liberation," according to Jacobsen, should be read in relation to the language of authenticity and autonomy: for Muslim women in Norway and in Kyrgyzstan today, Islam is their own choice and this is what gives legitimacy to their religious practice as authentic and reflexive.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to return to the main theme of this special issue—reclaiming Bishkek. In our article, we have tried to show how urban life in the capital of Kyrgyzstan is very dynamic and complex. The freedom that Kyrgyzstan has and many other neighboring Central Asian capitals lack creates the conditions where all kinds of claims become possible. Religion, as one of the most influential forces affecting the urban community of Bishkek's residents today, also produces its claims for the city. It contests secular, nationalist, security, and other claims. The growing community of practicing Muslims assert their right to be in the city, live according to their religious ideals, and create Islamic urban spaces. The growing number of mosques, madrasas, halal shops, and the like form part of a new urban infrastructure.

Such claims do not remain uncontested. Because religious identity has strong visual manifestations and all residents at some point in their life have to position themselves in relation to religion, religious claims become the subject of strong public debate. The Soviet atheist legacy explains why the secular community does not want to give up its position and stake its own counterclaims on the urban space. The controversy of billboards is a perfect illustration of secular–religious urban contestation.

As in many other parts of the world, this contestation overlaps with socially constructed gender hierarchies. Religious and secular claims over the urban space turn into male claims over women, with both sides insisting they know what women should wear. Yet as our research shows, Kyrgyz women in Bishkek do not need fashion advice. The Islamic revivalist movement among women in the Kyrgyz capital has, since the 1990s, created a strong momentum that has a life of its own and is fairly independent. Muslim women wearing the hijab have become very visible and influential urban actors with their own claims to the city. At the next level of complexity, Muslim women do not represent one homogenous group, but a large variety of Islamic influences—all with their

own unique visual appearance and competing claims for the city. The resulting effect is a great diversity of urban environment that contributes to the cosmopolitan feel of urban experience.

Epilogue

Following the controversy of public debate on the provocative banners, in July, half of them were replaced by new banners showing Kyrgyzstan's Olympic team going to Rio de Janeiro—another source of "national pride" (see Figure 7). The team returned home from the 2016 Olympics with only one medal and even that was soon revoked because of doping accusations. Pathetic as it is, perhaps the banner controversy tells us is that it is time for Kyrgyz politicians to stop beating their proud national chests, making populist statements, and instead start addressing serious issues related to corruption, economic stagnation, migration, and numerous others.

Figure 7 *New banner on Sovetskaya Street with the Kyrgyzstan Olympic team.*70

70 "Bannery s khidzhabami zamenili na foto olimpiiskoi sbornoi Kyrgyzstana," Zanoza.kg, July 14, 2016. Accessed August 20, 2016. http://zanoza.kg/doc/341502_bannery_s_hidjabami_zamenili_na_foto_olimpiyskoy_sbornoy_kyrgyzstana.html.