

**Active Citizens in a Weak State:
'Self-Help' Groups and the Post-Soviet Neoliberal Subject in Contemporary
Kyrgyzstan**

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Abstract

This article explores the new political subjectivities that are emerging in disadvantaged communities in Kyrgyzstan following post-Soviet state transformation and retreat. It explores the ways in which the collapse of the Soviet-era bureaucracy and emergence of a marketizing yet rent-seeking state bureaucracy has facilitated the emergence of 'active citizens' in self-built shanty towns in two locations in Kyrgyzstan – the capital, Bishkek, and the Issyk Kul resort region in the east. Based on participant observation and research interviews with members of so-called 'self-help groups' in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, in which residents co-organise to lobby local government for basic amenities and pool funds to raise money for community infrastructure and services in the absence of a functioning state, the chapter makes two contributions to understanding the nature of citizenship in the context of weak, post-Soviet states. First, it suggests that, rather than seeing self-organised citizens as a threat to stability – a perspective common to non-liberal governments – these initiatives are supported and encouraged by the Kyrgyz authorities, since they perform tasks and provide services in lieu of the weak state. Autonomous citizens who can take responsibility for their own welfare are useful when the state cannot provide adequate services. Hence, leaders of weak states are able to recontextualise global neoliberal discourses of active citizenship, which emphasise autonomous, rational citizens, in order to legitimise their functional inabilities. Second, it seeks to problematise the binary distinction between the 'passive Soviet citizen' and the modern, post-Soviet active citizen, evident in government and international NGO discourses, and suggests that the idea of the 'passive Soviet citizen' is a discursive trope utilised to distinguish desirable from undesirable subjectivity in the post-Soviet market state.

Keywords: Kyrgyzstan; citizenship; state transformation; welfare; neoliberalism

1. INTRODUCTION

It's half past eight on a hot August evening in 2011, and we are seated cross-legged on cushions around a low, makeshift table in the yard of a household in the Ak-Orgo *novostroika* (new-build) settlement on the outskirts of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Portly, head-scarfed women dressed in long, colourful skirts bring platters of steaming stew, bowls piled high with home-baked bread and side plates of chopped tomatoes and cucumbers from the garden. A gaggle of half-naked children runs rings around the table squirting each other – and occasionally us – with water pistols. The table, sagging under the weight of supper, slowly fills as more women and men arrive, laughing, embracing the host and the other guests, until twelve of us are squeezed tightly next to one another. It feels like a celebration, but the purpose of the meeting is a serious one: after dinner, the monthly finance meeting of the local self-help group will take place. “We can't talk about our problems on an empty stomach,” grins Azat, the self-help group support worker co-ordinating the meeting.¹

This article considers the ways in which citizens self-organise in states that are unable to deliver sufficient levels of public goods, using the example of contemporary Kyrgyzstan. It explores the role of so-called ‘self-help groups’ in this process – groups that are distinct from the professional activities of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) but which nevertheless form part of Kyrgyzstan's budding civil society since they operate between the two spheres of the family and the state.² More specifically, it considers the ways in which the collapse of the Soviet-era administration and emergence of a marketizing yet rent-seeking state bureaucracy has facilitated the emergence of ‘active citizens’ in self-built shanty towns, or *novostroikas*, in two locations in Kyrgyzstan – the outskirts of the capital, Bishkek, and the small village of Ornok, in the Issyk Kul resort region to the east. Seeking to transform individuals from passive, alienated residents to active and engaged citizens, these so-called ‘self-help groups’ can be seen as a enable some of the city's poorest and most disenfranchised residents to co-organise in order to lobby local government for basic amenities and pool funds to raise money for community infrastructure and services in the absence of a functioning public sector. This is clearly an important form of empowerment, which inculcates a sense of the self as a legitimate member of the Kyrgyz polity in an otherwise ostracised and sometimes vilified social group. However, the creation of political subjects that are no longer reliant on the state also serves to absolve the crisis-ridden Kyrgyzstani government of the responsibility for improving the chronic poverty of many internal migrants.

Created approximately a decade after Soviet collapse, today more than 120 self-help groups operate in Bishkek alone, and local NGOs are continuing to expand the network.³ Their activities receive funding and support both from international organisations such as Brot für die Welt and Kyrgyzstan's State Agency on Local Self-Governance and Interethnic Relations, as well as the Ministry of Justice.⁴ In 2011, I lived for six weeks in Bishkek's oldest *novostroika*, Ak-Orgo. During this time, I met numerous members of local self-help groups, attended one

¹ Names have been changed to maintain anonymity.

² For the roots of this idea, see Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, New York: The Library of America, 2004 [1840].

³ Emil Nazritdinov, Bermet Zhumakadyr kyzy and Diana Asanalieva, “Myths and Realities of Bishkek's *Novostroikas*”, in Marlene Laruelle and Johan Engvall, eds. *Kyrgyzstan Beyond “Democracy Island” and “Failing State”: Social and Political Changes in a Post-Soviet Society*, Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2015, p.159.

⁴ Ministerstvo Yustitsii Kyrgyzkoi Respubliki, “Programma Razvitiya Sotsial'noi Zashchity Naseleniya Kyrgyzkoi Respubliki na 2015-2017” [Development of the Social Protection Programme for the Population of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2015-2017], 20 June 2018, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/97348>.

of their monthly meetings and conducted research interviews with 10 participants. I also visited members of a second self-help group in the eastern Issyk Kul region and conducted three research interviews, attended a self-help group meeting and had a number of informal conversations with local group members. Based on these ethnographic-oriented empirical materials, I aim to show in this article that new forms of political subjectivity are emerging in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan's most disempowered communities. These new subjectivities bear much resemblance to the neoliberal subject, as they emphasise the importance of becoming an active citizen, in contrast to the figure of a passive Soviet-era citizen, who expected welfare hand-outs and was unable to help him/herself. In order to facilitate the adoption of this new subjectivity, self-help group leaders have located the origins of these practices in those that were common during pre-Soviet times, namely practices of *ashar*, which enables them to frame the practices of self help in a patriotic and locally relevant narrative. The production of supposedly 'active citizens', who can contribute to society and are responsible for their own needs, are important for states where the government considers itself no longer best placed to deliver public services directly to citizens. They are also important for states where the government is unable to deliver public services.

The article seeks to contribute to two areas of knowledge. First, it suggests that, rather than seeing self-organised citizens as a threat to stability – a perspective common to non-liberal governments – these initiatives are supported and encouraged by the Kyrgyz authorities, since they perform tasks and provide services in lieu of the weak state. Autonomous citizens who can take responsibility for their own welfare are useful when the state cannot provide adequate services. Hence, leaders of weak states are able to recontextualise global neoliberal discourses of active citizenship, which emphasise autonomous, rational citizens, in order to legitimise their functional inabilities. Second, it seeks to problematise the binary distinction between the 'passive Soviet citizen' and the modern, post-Soviet 'active citizen', evident in government and international NGO discourses, suggesting that the idea of the 'passive Soviet citizen' is a discursive trope utilised to distinguish desirable from undesirable subjectivity in the post-Soviet market state.

The article is divided into four sections. The first section explores the links between the concept of the 'weak state' and the concept of the 'neoliberal state'. It suggests that although the idea of the neoliberal state presumes a minimal level of state welfare and an increased level of citizen engagement performing the functions now considered inappropriate for the state, such conceptions of state function also serve as useful legitimising narratives for low levels of welfare provision in states where the government lacks capacity. The second section considers the specificity of Central Asian statehood, tracing its emergence from the open steppe, through Russian and Soviet colonialism. It considers the challenges of bureaucratic transformation faced by the early post-Soviet Kyrgyz state, showing how market reforms have hindered the development of effective state services. The third section explores the role of the self-help groups in filling the void left by the absence of the state in the novostroikas, drawing on the ethnographic and interview data collected in 2011. The final section traces the operationalisation of the binary concepts of 'active citizenship' and 'passive Soviet-era mentality' in the discourse of my interview respondents, demonstrating how elements of neoliberal subjectivity have been adopted by impoverished citizens in Kyrgyzstan's weak state.

2. WEAK STATES AND NEOLIBERAL SUBJECTS

Joel Migdal defines weak states as those with low capacities to ‘penetrate society, regulate social relationships, extract resources, and appropriate or use resources in determined ways’.⁵ In the context of the Central Asian weak state, scholars have focussed primarily on the capture of state institutions by regional clans, factions and elites.⁶ However, Bob Jessop highlights the inability of the state to provide public goods as a key aspect of state failure, which can occur ‘through administrative failure, legitimacy crisis, or loss of legitimacy, so that the collective goals specified in state projects about the nature and purposes of government are not attained’.⁷ As he points out, this definition relies on a conception of statehood primarily as a form of apparatus. While I acknowledge that stateness is manifested in a variety of forms, not least, following Jessop, in the ability to control territory and population, it is the failure of the state to deliver basic public goods that forms the starting point of the present article.

In later work, Migdal argues that states are composed of both images and practices, the former of which is used to legitimise and provide meaning for the latter. The image of a modern state tends to be that of a ‘dominant, integrated, autonomous entity that controls, in a given territory, all rule making, either directly through its own agencies or indirectly by sanctioning other authorized organizations – businesses, families, clubs, and the like – to make certain circumscribed rules’.⁸ For the state as an image, performances of state strength, such as parades and celebrations, become extremely important.⁹ Yet the actual practices of statehood are varied and diverse across different states and may work to bolster or undermine the state’s projected image. Indeed, while the central state may project itself as capable of delivering security, welfare and other public goods, its practices may barely reach the people living at its margins. As Madeleine Reeves notes in the context of Kyrgyzstan, ‘much of the work of rendering the state socially and symbolically visible, in the form of ritualized performance on national holidays or grandiose building projects, corresponds with (perhaps even diverts attention from?) empirical failures in state provision’.¹⁰

The retreat of the state from the provision of public services is, however, not always a marker of state weakness. Indeed, the re-orientation of state functions away from service provision is a global trend, observable in both developed democracies and non-democracies. Driving this trend is a neoliberal logic, defined as the conviction that the free hand of the market is the best mechanism through which to resolve social problems and that state functions should therefore be scaled back to allow markets to form in their place.¹¹ In his cross-national study of public

⁵ Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988, pp.4-5.

⁶ Pauline Jones Luong, *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Power, Perceptions and Pact*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; Kathleen Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia: Its Impact on Regime Transformation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Scott Radnitz, *Weapons of the Wealthy: Predatory Regimes and Elite-Led Protests in Central Asia*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010.

⁷ Bob Jessop, *The State: Past, Present and Future*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015, p.42.

⁸ Joel Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p.16.

⁹ John Heathershaw, “The Global Performance State: A Reconsideration of the Central Asian ‘Weak State’” in Madeleine Reeves, Johan Rasanayagam and Judith Beyer, eds. *Performing Politics in Central Asia: Ethnographies of the State*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.

¹⁰ Madeleine Reeves, “Ambivalent citizenship in post-Soviet Central Asia”, paper presented at the Round Table on Citizenship and Post-Communism, Department of Russian and East European Studies, Indiana University, 2009.

¹¹ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p.20; Daniel Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics*, Princeton: Princeton

sector transformation, Mike Geddes has argued that a ‘cross-national convergence’ in governance practices is taking place. These tendencies are, first, the declining role of the public sector, both in service provision and in local politics; second, a shift from the role of the state in the redistribution of wealth across society to a greater emphasis on individual entrepreneurship and responsibility; and third, an increase in partnerships between local government and private or voluntary sector organisations as sites for government decision-making. He argues that ‘neoliberalism is the essential context in which to understand the shift towards local governance’.¹²

Hence, we find an augmented necessity for citizens in both weak states and in neoliberal states to shoulder more of the burden for social welfare provision, as in both cases – albeit for different reasons – the state does not perform this task itself. Indeed, a panoply of government initiatives in states around the world is transforming the role of the citizen in society away from one who relies on state welfare and towards one who assists the state in the provision of scarce welfare to the ‘deserving poor’.¹³ Research in European countries has shown trends towards the production of ‘active citizenship’ expressed both indirectly, through various government initiatives that encourage citizens to volunteer their time, and directly, through requirements to prospective citizens.¹⁴ ‘Active citizenship’ has become a buzzword across the European Union for increasing participation and improving society.¹⁵ Citizenship education has been integrated into school curricula around the world, and is defined by UNESCO as ‘educating children, from early childhood, to become clear-thinking and enlightened citizens who participate in decisions concerning society’.¹⁶ This new active citizen should be a flexible, resilient and entrepreneurial consumer of public services who not only is able to make informed choices about the kinds of services she needs, but also is able to take responsibility for her surroundings, her welfare and the welfare of her family.¹⁷ Wendy Brown has argued that this new form of citizenship involves a two-way process of individualizing and totalizing responsibility: ‘As neoliberal citizenship sets loose the individual to take care of itself, it also discursively binds the individual to the well-being of the whole — demanding its fealty and potential sacrifice to national health or economic growth’.¹⁸

In the context of states such as post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, the concept of citizenship as a reciprocal ensemble of rights and responsibilities that bind state and society together has little

University Press, 2012, p.331; Jamie Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p.20.

¹² Mike Geddes, “Neoliberalism and Local Governance: Cross-National Perspectives and Speculations”, *Policy Studies*, Vol.26, No.3/4, 2005, p.373.

¹³ Margaret Somers and Fred Block, “From Poverty to Perversity: Ideas, Markets, and Institutions over 200 Years of Welfare Debate”, *American Sociological Review*, Vol.70, No.2, 2005, pp.260-287.

¹⁴ Imrat Verhoeven and Evelien Tonkens, “Talking Active Citizenship: Framing Welfare State Reform in England and the Netherlands”, *Social Policy and Society*, Vol.12, No.3, 2013, pp.415-426; Friso Van Houdt, Semin Suvarierol and Willem Schinkel, “Neoliberal communitarian citizenship: Current trends towards ‘earned citizenship’ in the United Kingdom, France and the Netherlands”, *International Sociology*, Vol.26, No.3, 2011, pp.408-432.

¹⁵ European Economic and Social Committee, “Active Citizenship: For a Better European Society”, 2011, <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/resources/docs/eesc-2011-35-en.pdf>.

¹⁶ UNESCO, “Citizenship Education for the 21st Century”, n.d., http://www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/mods/theme_b/interact/mod07/task03/appendix.htm.

¹⁷ John Clarke, Janet Newman, Nick Smith, Elizabeth Vidler and Louise Westmarland, *Creating Citizen Consumers: Changing Public and Changing Public Services*, London: Sage, 2007; Aihwa Ong, “Mutations in Citizenship”, *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol.23, No.2-3, 2006, pp.499-505; Jonathan Joseph, “Resilience as Embedded Neoliberalism: A Governmentality Approach”, *Resilience*, Vol.1, No.1, 2013, pp.38-52.

¹⁸ Wendy Brown, “Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Human Capital and Identity Politics”, *Constellations*, Vol.23, No.1, 2016, p.4.

practical meaning when a citizen's relationship to the state varies according to the language one speaks, the wealth one possesses and whether one is a migrant.¹⁹ Furthermore, as discussed below, the state is hardly able to fulfil its provision of basic services to society. Hence, discourses of active citizenship have found fertile ground both on the side of citizens, who deploy it as an aspirational concept to give political meaning to their struggles for basic social goods, and on the side of the state, which uses it as a means to legitimise low levels of welfare provision and to channel civic agency into constructive and non-threatening channels. The following section considers the transformation of the post-Soviet Kyrgyzstani public sector and shows how the emergence of a chronically rent-seeking and underfunded bureaucracy has left space for the (re)production of discourses and practices of active citizenship.

3. TRANSFORMATIONS OF STATEHOOD IN CENTRAL ASIA

The idea of statehood takes on a unique dimension in the Central Asian context, since these five post-Soviet states first experienced life as a territorially bound sovereign polity only when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Prior to that, they had existed as entities known as Soviet Socialist Republics, which, while nominally independent, remained tied to the USSR in terms of foreign and economic policy, as well as their commitment to state socialism as the only legitimate form of political organisation. Thus, today's Central Asian states, as bureaucracies, as territorially bound sovereign units and as national ideas, are not yet thirty years old.

Until the establishment of the Soviet Union in Central Asia, the region was characterised by great social, ethnic and cultural heterogeneity. Nomadic tribes and trading routes criss-crossed the harsh steppe, and a few settled havens were formed in Transoxiana (present-day Uzbekistan), with much of it only becoming part of the Russian Empire in the second half of the 19th century. The open, un-demarcated geography was punctuated by a small number of emirates and khanates which later paid tribute to the Russian Tsar. Nevertheless, the bulk of the region's population had little contact with the Russian colonisers, and remained in large part beyond the reach of the expansion of European modernity. Hence, traditional nomadic lifestyles and deterritorialised forms of political organisation persisted. As lucidly expressed by Adrienne Edgar in relation to the Turkmen ethnic group, 'Instead of a spatial landscape of inter-connected villages and towns, they conceived of a network of interconnected kin groups and ancestors, a genealogical tree, whose branches had no necessary relationship to specific geographical locations.'²⁰ Meanwhile, governance in the settled areas during this time, as Manz notes, was enacted through local imams or merchants who 'wielded power through family and patronage networks and acted as a link between the local population and the Turko-Mongolian ruling classes.'²¹

The Soviet-led process of National Territorial Delimitation sought to change this. Emerging in the 1920s from the violence of revolution, civil war and Islamic grassroots resistance, a large team of Soviet geographers, linguists, ethnographers and anthropologists embarked upon the task of formalising the differences between the various ethnic groups populating the region and fixing them into discrete geographical units. In order to do this, they produced vast amounts of knowledge about the linguistic and ethnic groupings and their regional distribution via surveys,

¹⁹ Madeleine Reeves, "Ambivalent citizenship in post-Soviet Central Asia", op.cit.

²⁰ Adrienne Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004, p.42.

²¹ Beatrice Manz, "Historical Background" in Beatrice Manz, ed. *Central Asia in Historical Perspective*, Westview Press, CO, 1998, p.11.

maps, genealogical charts and reports. The aim was to foment a sense of national consciousness in these hitherto loose and disparate groups so that they could begin the slow march along the Marxist developmental *telos* towards a post-national form of communism.²² This was a profoundly difficult task, some of the challenges of which are exemplified in the following episode:

‘A young Kara-Kirghiz [Kyrgyz] from Ferghana arrived in Tashkent to attend the Inpros [Institute for Enlightenment]. First he went to the Kirghiz [Kazak] Inpros, but as he spoke Uzbek they told him to go to the Uzbek Inpros. At the Uzbek Inpros, they told him he looked like a Kara-Kirghiz [Kyrgyz], and that he should go the Kara-Kyrgyz [Kyrgyz] Inpros. In the end he was accepted nowhere and returned to Ferghana’.²³

Nevertheless, in 1929, the borders of the five new nations were fixed, and by 1936 they had all achieved full republic status within the Soviet Union. The birth of the Central Asian states we know today, one of which is the subject of this article, was thus a profoundly contrived and artificial process, the legacies of which are felt in the periodic episodes of ethnic conflict that continues today.

As Heathershaw and Schatz have remarked, states can be strong in some respects and weak in others.²⁴ Indeed, Soviet legacies have imbued their post-Soviet incarnations with a unique set of strengths, namely the existence of large bureaucratic state structures, including legislatures, executives and judiciaries, high literacy rates among the population and the expectation that the state should provide a certain modicum of public goods. Yet following Soviet collapse, the new government of Kyrgyzstan could not afford to pay for the provision of similar levels of public services that had been available under the USSR, meaning that the quality of basic services, such as education and healthcare, declined.²⁵

After fewer than thirty years of independence since its secession from the Soviet Union, as well as two revolutions and bouts of ethnic violence in the southern regions bordering Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstani state infrastructure is fragile and easily corruptible. The optimism of the early post-independence years saw international organisations swiftly attempt to transform planned economies of the Soviet era into free market ones, with the International Monetary Fund offering loans conditional on the liberalisation of the economy. By the second half of the 1990s, the Kyrgyz economic system was transformed, with the privatisation of 97 percent of trade, 80 percent of industry, and approximately 50 percent of other sectors.²⁶ Kyrgyzstan was one of the quickest to implement free market reforms and was the first former Soviet republic to join the World Trade Organization in 1998. However, as with other post-socialist economies, the process of privatisation was not conducted in a fair and transparent manner and state assets were sold off to a few people, creating an extremely wealthy oligarchic class which continues

²² Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005, pp.8-9.

²³ Quoted in Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003, p.119.

²⁴ John Heathershaw, and Edward Schatz, “The Logics of State Weakness in Eurasia: An Introduction”, in John Heathershaw and Edward Schatz, eds. *Paradox of Power: The Logics of State Weakness in Eurasia*, Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 2017, p.3; see also Bob Jessop, *op.cit.*, p.47.

²⁵ David Scott, *The Management of Public Services in Central Asia: Institutional Transformation in Kyrgyzstan*, Abington: Routledge, 2016, p.2.

²⁶ Mahabat Baimyrzaeva, “Kyrgyzstan’s Public Sector Reforms: 1991–2010”, *International Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 34, 2011, pp.555–566.

to hold sway over Kyrgyzstani politics. As Baimyrzaeva writes, ‘business elites now often seek political office to secure immunity from prosecution, among other reasons, and, vice versa political elites use their positions and government institutions to pursue their private economic interests.’²⁷

Administrative reforms did not commence until the end of the 1990s, due to the financial turmoil of the 1990s and focus on creating a market economy and democratic political system. Linda Cook states that there are three issues of welfare reform which are specific to post-communist countries. First, under Soviet communism, many citizens depended on state jobs for income and few had private savings; hence, to downsize the public sector meant making many people unemployed without adequate social security in place. Second, from an ideological perspective, most people believed it was the state’s responsibility to provide goods and services, and popular backlash erupted across the post-Soviet space against reforms that were perceived to go ‘too far’. Thirdly, corporatist structures created by the Soviet state to assist with welfare had vested interests in prolonging the system and tried to prevent change. Thus, it was not until 1997 that public sector reform began in earnest, and they sought to implement a New Public Management style of public administration.²⁸

Decentralisation has been an ongoing feature of public sector reform in Kyrgyzstan since the adoption of the Constitution in 1993, but structures of local government remain weak, easily corruptible and possess little capacity to implement policy. According to a 2006 survey, 45% of respondents felt that local government suffered from high levels of corruption.²⁹ In the White Paper outlining the Kyrgyz government’s strategic development from 2018–2022, the improvement of local self-government is mentioned but no details are given.³⁰ Indeed, analysts agree that the reforms have not been able to create a functioning public sector able to deliver basic goods to citizens.³¹ Baimyrzaeva recalls the statement of a former finance minister, Akylbek Japarvo, who claimed that ‘in Kyrgyzstan’s 17 years of independence between 1991 and 2007, in total 270 various strategies and concept papers had been adopted, and about 120 of them had been annulled, prompting him to suggest a moratorium to stop adoption of various strategies’.³²

In terms of economic development, while national GDP is increasing, the overall economic outlook is poor, with hundreds of thousands of people leaving the stagnant economy to work for higher wages in Russia. According to the World Bank, remittances form nearly 33% of Kyrgyzstan’s national GDP, making it the second most remittance-dependent country in the world after Tonga.³³ According to the Asian Development Bank, a quarter of Kyrgyzstani citizens lived below the national poverty line in 2017.³⁴ Public sector and professional jobs are

²⁷ Ibid., p.557.

²⁸ Linda Cook, *Postcommunist Welfare States: Reform Politics in Russia and Eastern Europe*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007.

²⁹ David Scott, op.cit, p.6.

³⁰ “The Development Program of the Kyrgyz Republic for the period 2018-2022”, 2018, p.7,

https://www.un-page.org/files/public/the_development_program_of_the_kyrgyz_republic_for_the_period_2018-2022.pdf.

³¹ David Scott, op.cit; Mahabat Baimyrzaeva, op.cit; Colin Knox, “Public Sector Reform in Central Asia and the Caucasus”, *International Journal of Public Administration*, Vol.42, No.2, 2019, pp.168-178.

³² Mahabat Baimyrzaeva, op.cit, p.559.

³³ Sam Bhutia, “Russian remittances to Central Asia rise again”, *Eurasianet.org*, 23 May 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/russian-remittances-to-central-asia-rise-again>.

³⁴ Asian Development Bank, “Poverty in the Kyrgyz Republic”, 2019, <https://www.adb.org/countries/kyrgyz-republic/poverty>.

also poorly paid. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index rated Kyrgyzstan 132th out of 180 countries in 2018.³⁵ Levels of public trust in state institutions are correspondingly low, with many average people regarding the elite with cynicism and suspicion, believing them incapable of creating a secure Kyrgyzstan.³⁶ According to McMann, market-oriented reforms have served to increase government corruption as officials can demand bribes for the provision of much needed public services.³⁷

In sum, the enormous task of transforming the state socialist bureaucracy to a market-oriented public sector has only been partially successful, and an inefficient, underpaid and rent-seeking civil service remains.³⁸ Hence, it is perhaps unsurprising that groups of self-organised citizens have been investing their own time and money in strategies to improve their local environment, on the realisation that the government is unable to step in. The following section explores the activities of the self-help groups in two areas – urban Bishkek and rural Issyk Kul.

4. SELF-HELP GROUPS IN THE NOVOSTROIKAS

Novostroikas are the settlements built on the outskirts of cities since the collapse of the USSR in 1991. In Bishkek, they occupy around a third of the city's territory and population. Usually inhabited by unregistered internal migrants fleeing violence and poverty in other parts of the country,³⁹ the novostroikas have a bad reputation among the general population and are often represented in the media as hotbeds of crime and delinquency.⁴⁰ Comprising a mixture of mud shacks and brick houses, the legal status of the novostroikas is often unclear, with arriving migrants often having purchased land from officials who frequently did not register the sale or illegally distributed the land. This legally questionable status has made it easier for local officials to ignore the provision of state services.

Infrastructure in the novostroikas is either minimal or absent: there is frequently no piped water or gas, and roads are often little more than dirt tracks on which it is impossible to drive more than a few miles per hour. Public services, such as schools and hospitals, are also inadequate and overcrowded. At the time of my research in 2011, Ak-Orgo – the city's oldest novostroika – had no street lighting beyond one main road and no parks or public spaces. Endemic corruption in local government compounds the novostroikas' plight: according to a recent estimate, more than half of the budgeted projects to improve infrastructure and amenities were abandoned, with 'a significant proportion of the city budget... simply stolen by corrupt officials aligned with contractors and never reached novostroika residents'.⁴¹ This is the environment in which Kyrgyzstan's self-help groups were born.

[Figure One about here]

³⁵ Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index 2018", n.d., <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2018>.

³⁶ Azamat Junisbai and Barbara Junisbai, "Institutional Trust in Kazakhstan versus Kyrgyzstan: How Divergent Trajectories Matter", PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo, 2018, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/ru/node/10147>.

³⁷ Kelly McMann, *Corruption as a Last Resort: Adapting to the Market in Central Asia*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014.

³⁸ Saltanat Liebert, "Challenges of Reforming the Civil Service in the Post-Soviet Era: The Case of Kyrgyzstan", *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, Vol.34, No.4, 2014, pp.403-420.

³⁹ Eliza Isabaeva, "Migration into the 'Illegality' and Coping with Difficulties in a Squatter Settlement in Bishkek", *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, Vol.138, No.2, 2013, pp.139-154.

⁴⁰ EmilNazritdinov, Bermet Zhumakadyr kyzy and Diana Asanalieva (2015) 'Myths and Realities of Bishkek's Novostroikas' in Marlene Laruelle And Johan Engvall (eds.) *Kyrgyzstan beyond "Democracy Island" and "Failing State"* (New York: Roman and Littlefield International) p.146.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.158.

The idea for the self-help groups was conceived at the turn of the millennium by Bishkek-based NGOs Erayim and Arysh. It was initially based on the ideas of Bangladeshi economist Mohammed Yunus, founder of the micro-finance initiative, Grameen Bank. In 2000, a delegation of Kyrgyzstani NGO workers travelled to Bangladesh and visited various projects launched through the principle of micro-finance, in which groups of impoverished Bangladeshi women, who would normally have no chance of receiving a bank loan, would borrow small sums of money from a district bank to start a local business.⁴² Successful projects launched by the Bangladeshi women included community child-minding, cooking lunch for workers on building sites, and making traditional garments to sell in tourist markets. With the proceeds from their enterprises, the women pay back the loan to the bank in small instalments at about half the rate of interest that regular banks would charge. The Kyrgyz visitors were impressed by the ways in which the poorest members of Bangladeshi society had been empowered to lift themselves out of poverty, but felt that the concept could go much further. After all, of the problems the NGO staff were seeking to address in Kyrgyz society, material hardship was just one; they also wanted to address the chronic failure of the state to provide basic services and instil a sense of democratic citizenship in the novostroikas' disenfranchised communities.⁴³

Back in Bishkek, they formulated their own variant of Yunus's ideas, taking into account the customary Kyrgyz practice of *ashar*, that is, the traditional mutual assistance at the local level to people in need.⁴⁴ According to Kyrgyz tradition, during the 18th century, when semi-nomadic tribes were raising horses, cattle and yaks in the mountain valleys of Tian Shan and Pamiro Alai, practices of collective fund-raising were commonplace, for example for kinfolk who had lost a breadwinner or assisting in the construction of houses for the elderly. Indeed, in pre-Soviet Central Asia, this kind of mutual aid was the only kind of aid available because there was no state to administer welfare. However, from the beginning of the 20th century, capitalism, urbanisation, and the Soviet occupation and its regional project of state formation began to destroy the resilient communities that had built up on the mountainside over centuries, and the practice of *ashar* was lost.⁴⁵ The Kyrgyzstani NGO workers researched *ashar*, and made it the core principle of the Kyrgyz self-help group.⁴⁶ By practicing a form of pre-Soviet *ashar* in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, participants are able to feel that they are engaging in a non-political and patriotic activity inherited from their ancestors. In this way, the neoliberal logic of microfinance and active citizenship has been re-packaged and embedded within local meanings in order to legitimise the self-help project *vis-à-vis* a domestic Kyrgyz audience.

The work of Kyrgyzstan's self-help groups can be divided into three main spheres: micro-finance, community work and lobbying. The financial sphere takes the ideas of Yunus as a starting point and expands them to enable borrowers to take control of their own terms and conditions. Every month, members pay a small subscription, the amount of which is decided collectively via a consensus discussion at the first meeting. In the Bishkek-based self-help group I observed, members opted for just 100 som (about £1.30), but over the seven years of the group's existence they had built up a bank of over 200,000 som (around \$3,000). Members

⁴² Interview, Kyrgyzstani NGO member 1, Bishkek, August 2011.

⁴³ Interview, Kyrgyzstani NGO member 2, Bishkek, August 2011.

⁴⁴ Interview, Kyrgyzstani NGO member 3, Bishkek, August 2011.

⁴⁵ Rafis Abazov, *Historical Dictionary of Kyrgyzstan*, Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004. See also Madeleine Reeves, "The Ashar-State: Communal Commitment and State Elicitation in Rural Kyrgyzstan", in John Heathershaw and Edward Schatz, eds. *Paradox of Power: The Logics of State Weakness in Eurasia*, Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017, pp.216-231.

⁴⁶ Interview, Kyrgyzstani NGO worker 2, Bishkek, August 2011.

borrowed regularly from the bank, from small amounts, to help pay for a family birthday or to purchase a new television, to large amounts, to finance the laying of water pipes or to fund a child's university education. At the meeting I attended, all but two members were paying back loans of varying sizes and for a wide range of projects: one member had opened a local apothecary (there was one very small and poorly equipped hospital in the area, and no ambulance services); another had started a sewing collective together with several of the group's daughters; another woman had built a public banya (washroom) with her husband; two members had opened local grocery shops; another had started a furniture repair business; another woman had trained as an accountant; and the only male group member at the table had paid for his doctorate in physics. The rate of interest was decided in a similar fashion to the subscription sum – the self-help group members paid 1% interest on the loans they took from the collective kitty - a huge contrast to 20% interest paid on the Grameen Bank's 'income generating' loans.⁴⁷

The community work enacted by the self-help groups chiefly revolves around rectifying the lack of amenities in the *novostroikas*. The self-help group I observed in Bishkek had laid gravel on their street, filling potholes and levelling the road, and constructed a couple of street lights on wooden poles hammered into the ground. They saved the disused plot of land at the end of their street from purchase by property developers, thanks to an ongoing letter-writing campaign to the local administration, and turned it into a playground for their children, building the rudimentary play equipment themselves.⁴⁸

The third area of activity is lobbying, that is, writing letters and collecting signatures to send to the local authorities regarding the lack of amenities, such as land for public use, piped water and gas, or rubbish collection. Through tireless letter-writing and collection of several hundred signatures, a coalition of self-help groups in Ak-Orgo managed to increase the level of rubbish collection from fortnightly to weekly.⁴⁹ When asked about the relationship between the self-help groups and the state, one NGO representative replied, 'Oh, they like us. It means that they have to do less work themselves!'⁵⁰

At another self-help group meeting in the small village of Ornok in the mountainous, lakeside region of Issyk Kul, members recounted how they met regularly with local government officials to discuss how to resolve problems together. Members of the group recalled their struggle to get piped water to their village: after 18 months of letters, petitions and protests, a 3 kilometre pipe was finally laid, bringing water for the first time to the two streets that housed over 80 people, including the members of the group. The whole project cost 2.5 million som (a little over \$3,500), but the local government was unable to pay. In order to receive clean piped water to their homes, the villagers had to foot 20% of the bill, while a loan from the World Bank paid off the rest of the sum. In fact, the able men of the village even helped to dig the trench in which the water pipe was to be laid – an act which demonstrated the community's commitment to improving their fortunes – and thus helped to strike the co-operative deal between the local authority, the water board and the bank.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Interview, self-help group member 1, Bishkek, August 2011; interview, self-help group member 2, Bishkek, August 2011; interview, self-help group member 3, Bishkek, August 2011.

⁴⁸ Interview, self-help group member 3, Bishkek, August 2011.

⁴⁹ Interview, self-help group member 4, Bishkek, August 2011.

⁵⁰ Interview, Kyrgyzstani NGO worker 1, Bishkek, August 2011.

⁵¹ Interview, self-help group member 1, Issyk Kol, August 2011; interview, self-help group member 2, Issyk Kol, August 2011; interview, self-help member group 3, Issyk Kol, August 2011.

As the example above suggests, self-help groups often co-operate with the local authorities, acting as project managers, investors and manpower. The discussion shows that rather than seeing self-organised citizens as something potentially destabilising and requiring government regulation, these initiatives are supported and encouraged by the Kyrgyz authorities, since they perform tasks and provide services in lieu of the weak state. Autonomous citizens who can take responsibility for their own welfare are useful when the state cannot provide adequate services. Hence, leaders of weak states are able to recontextualise global neoliberal discourses of active citizenship, which emphasise autonomous, rational citizens, in order to legitimise their functional inabilities. Furthermore, the lack of basic amenities have been the cause of many protests in the novostroikas: for instance, Sanghera and Satybaldieva have delineated some of the strategies of protest when the right to land is denied.⁵² It is clearly much more advantageous to local government to channel discontent into the constructive format of the self-help groups rather than risk political instability via social unrest. The final section explores how self-help group members construct themselves as ‘active citizens’ and contrast their new subjecthood to the passive Soviet mentality.

5. FROM PASSIVE SOVIETS TO ACTIVE CITIZENS

As discussed in the first section, the neoliberal state, as it has come to exist in the Western world, ‘involves reducing the direct role of States in the economy and social relations, in favour of a new economy of social relations which emphasises autonomy and individual responsibility at all the local levels where autonomy and responsibility can be brought into interaction’.⁵³ The task of governance then becomes one of how to create these new social relations. According to Aihwa Ong, these neoliberal logics compel citizens to act in accordance with the ‘market principles of discipline, efficiency and competitiveness’.⁵⁴ The construction of new political subjectivities plays an important role in the fomentation of political power at the local level, since such subjectivities ‘contribute to the emergence of new political engagements and new social movements’.⁵⁵ In particular, the idea of the active citizen has been profoundly important around the world as a normative construction of how an individual should behave both in relation to her local community and to the state.

The concept of citizenship has historically been a profoundly ‘westocentric’ concept, predicated upon the existence of institutionalised mechanisms of political participation, an independent judiciary to safeguard civic rights in the event of violations, and a functioning state bureaucracy able to deliver social goods.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the idea of citizenship has been transmitted around the world through networks in international NGOs and intergovernmental organisations as formerly state socialist and other postcolonial bureaucracies reconfigure their relationship to society.

In Kyrgyzstan, various international organisations, as well as local initiatives, have been seeking to inculcate a sense of active citizenship, seeking to portray it as a glue that would bind

⁵² Balihar Sanghera and Elmira Satybaldieva, “Ethics of Property, Illegal Settlements and the Right to Subsistence”, *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Vol.32, No.1/2, 2012, pp.96-114.

⁵³ Jacques Donzelot and Colin Gordon, “Governing Liberal Societies – the Foucault Effect in the English-speaking World”, *Foucault Studies*, Vol.5, 2008, p.59.

⁵⁴ Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006, p.4.

⁵⁵ Lisa Blackman, John Cromby, Derek Hook, Dimitris Papadopoulos and Valerie Walkerdine, “Creating Subjectivities”, *Subjectivity*, Vol.22, No.1, 2008, pp.1-27.

⁵⁶ Nira Yuval-Davis, “The ‘Multi-Layered Citizen’”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol.1, No.1, 1999, pp.119-136.

state and society together.⁵⁷ In 2002, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) designed and introduced a citizenship education scheme in partnership with the national Ministry for Education to be taught in the country's schools, focussing on tolerance, rights and responsibilities and other social issues.⁵⁸ More recently, USAID has been working with local governments around the country to help them improve service delivery and enhance 'civic engagement'.⁵⁹ In 2016, the United Nations Development Programme launched an initiative exhorting people to become active citizens by monitoring the activities of local government in the sphere of welfare provision.⁶⁰ In Bishkek, annual civic forums have been held under the banner 'I Do Care' (mne ne vse ravno), in which opportunities for civic engagement are presented and citizens' roles in shaping the future of the country are discussed. And the Soros Foundation has also implemented a programme entitled 'Grazhdanskoe Uchastie' [civic participation] under the banner 'Active Citizens – a Developed Country!', which funded the opening of youth centres and projects aiming to involve citizens in the development of public spaces.⁶¹

One of the ways in which the concept of the 'active citizen' is brought into being in the post-Soviet context is by contrasting it with the so-called 'passive Soviet mentality'. Whether this corresponds to historical fact, that is, whether Soviet citizens were indeed lazy individuals who waited for benefits to be doled out from the generous, paternalistic state, is irrelevant – the aim of this trope is to distinguish the modern, desirable citizens from the outdated, undesirable ones. In the case of Russia, Vladimir Putin has frequently deployed this distinction in order to legitimise reductions in welfare provision.⁶² In a similar vein, the government of Kyrgyzstan has also called for citizens and civic groups to get involved in conducting oversight of government activity and promoting socially oriented projects.⁶³

In the novostroikas, interview respondents were keen to highlight the negative personal characteristics imbued by the Soviet system. According to one respondent, the welfare offered under communism and the dependent mentality it inculcated is the root of the problems in contemporary Kyrgyz society: 'The Soviet system made people lazy. They knew that they would not have to do anything and the state would still provide for them. Under communism, social welfare was free; we didn't need to try in order to receive the basic necessities of life. Now that system is gone and nothing is free, but the old Soviet attitude is still there.'⁶⁴ Similarly, another respondent placed the blame for economic privation onto the citizens

⁵⁷ See, for example, "Grazhdanskie aktivisty prizyvayut obshchestvo k edinstvo" [Civic activists call for unity], *Radio Azattyk*, 24 June 2015, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/27090277.html>.

⁵⁸ Kamilla Bahbahani, "Citizenship Education in Kyrgyzstan: Building a New Democracy", *Curriculum Development and Classroom Practice*, Vol.11, No.2, 2012, pp.145-157.

⁵⁹ USAID, "Community and Municipal Governance Initiative", 2019, <https://www.usaid.gov/kyrgyz-republic/fact-sheets/community-and-municipal-governance-initiative>.

⁶⁰ Ainura Kaparova, "Stan Aktyvnyym Grazhdanom!" [Become an active citizen!], UNDP Kyrgyzskaya Respublika, 22 March 2016, <http://www.kg.undp.org/content/kyrgyzstan/ru/home/ourperspective/ourperspectivearticles/2016/active-citizens-improve-the-lives-of-others.html>.

⁶¹ Fond Soros Kyrgyzstana, "Programma 'Grazhdanskoe Uchastie'" [Civic Participation Programme], 2016, <http://soros.kg/programmes/grazhdanskoe-uchastie>.

⁶² Catherine Owen, "A Genealogy of Kontrol' in Russia: From Leninist to Neoliberal Governance", *Slavic Review*, Vol.75, No.2, 2016, pp.331-353.

⁶³ "O chyom govoril prezident c predstavatelyami NPO: uchastniki delyatsya pervymi vpechatleniyami" [What the president discussed with NGO representatives: participants share their first impressions], *Res Publica*, 19 July 2018, <http://respub.kg/2018/07/19/o-chem-govoril-prezident-s-predstavatelyami-npo-uchastniki-delyatsya-pervymi-vpechatleniyami/>.

⁶⁴ Interview, self-help group member 4, Bishkek, August 2011.

themselves and this residual ‘Soviet’ attitude: ‘Many Kyrgyz people don’t know how to help themselves, so they have fallen into poverty.’⁶⁵ What was striking was the distinct lack of blame apportioned to the authorities for the poverty of its citizens.

One of the stated goals of the self-help group concept is to try to change the perceived passive mentality by educating people to be active. The NGO Erayim makes explicit use of the dichotomy between active and passive citizens, writing on their website, ‘WPU Erayim use the ideology of transition from passivity and inaction of the beneficiaries to one of empowerment in addressing local issues in all its projects’.⁶⁶ Similarly, the NGO Arysh states that public services should be delivered on the basis of the ‘involvement of internal migrants, government agencies and stakeholders to build equal cooperation for obtaining guaranteed high-quality public services’.⁶⁷ In line with global discourses of neoliberal statehood, welfare is thus painted not as something one should expect from a functioning state, but something that one has to actively contribute to in order to receive.

Participating in one’s welfare provision is also seen as an important aspect of civic training. According to one of the NGO workers I interviewed, ‘Democracy means doing, contributing. For democracy to happen, the people must be active. This is the most important lesson of the self-help group.’⁶⁸ Indeed, participating in self-help groups raises awareness of possibilities for political participation: 15 of the city’s self-help groups’ most active members sit on electoral commissions during presidential elections, acting as observers and counting votes.⁶⁹

Many respondents were keen to emphasise the life-changing aspects of membership in the self-help group. A young mother in the Ak Orgo group explained, ‘Before I joined Nooruz, I sat at home all day. I only did housework and watched television. I couldn’t read properly, I didn’t earn money, I didn’t even know my neighbours. Now I sew traditional Kyrgyz rugs and sell them in the bazaar in the city, I have helped to save our local playground that was going to be bought by developers, and when I am sick, I know that there are people who will help me. I can write the protocols for our group and record the finances.’ It is worth reading this quote alongside that of Barbara Cruikshank, who has argued that ‘self-esteem is a technology of citizenship and self-government for evaluating and acting upon our selves so that the police, the guards and the doctors do not have to.’⁷⁰ In this light, it becomes obvious how active citizens are vital resources in states that are unwilling or unable to provide essential public services.

[Figure Two about here]

Other research has identified the way in which economic and social hardships have wrought neoliberal subjecthood into being in Kyrgyzstan. Elmira Satybaldieva writes that ‘the neoliberal narrative of the self operates in the context where many working class people have little choice but to become “entrepreneurs” (or self-employed), as major factories and industries

⁶⁵ Interview, self-help group member 4, Bishkek, August 2011.

⁶⁶ Erayim, “About Erayim”, n.d., <http://www.erayim.org/en/about-us/about-erayim.html>.

⁶⁷ Obshchestvennoe Obedinenie “Arysh”, “OO Arysh: Istoriya Organizatsii” [“Arysh” – Organisation History], n.d., <http://aryshkg.kloop.asia/o-nas-3/>.

⁶⁸ Interview, self-help group trainer, Bishkek, August 2011.

⁶⁹ Interview, self-help group member 2, Bishkek, August 2011.

⁷⁰ Barbara Cruikshank, “Revolutions within: self-government and self-esteem”, *Economy and Society*, Vol.22, No.3, 1993, p.330.

collapsed after 1991'.⁷¹ Concurring with Satybaldieva, this article has shown how impoverished and disenfranchised citizens in Bishkek's novostroikas have had little choice but to embrace neoliberal discourses of active citizenship, placing responsibility for welfare on themselves and absolving the state in the process.

6. CONCLUSION

This article has considered the way in which citizens conceive of and enact their political subjecthood when the state's ability to provide social goods is low. This has implications for our understanding both of domestic political processes in Kyrgyzstan and of the capacities of global neoliberal discourses to reproduce and recontextualise themselves in environments that appear distant from those in which they were initially developed. To review the domestic implications, my research into the activities of the self-help groups in Bishkek and Issyk-Kul demonstrates that the local government depends to an extent on the enterprising spirit of self-help group members. Firstly, they serve to galvanise the ponderous mechanisms of state bureaucracy into action – it is hard to ignore the stream of letters delivered in person detailing the desperate deprivation of its citizens. Secondly, they highlight areas of inadequate infrastructure or service provision that the sometimes deliberately myopic authorities might otherwise choose not to see. Thirdly, in the absence of necessary competence on the part of the state, self-help groups put in some – if not all – of the legwork in terms of the actual realisation of social projects. This demonstrates that the self-help groups are not only helping their members improve their surroundings, but are also helping the government in the process. Mutual aid and citizens' self-organisation are therefore not necessarily a threat to government, but are in fact profoundly useful for the weak, neoliberalising state.

To review the implications for our understanding of neoliberalism, this article has demonstrated the inherent malleability of the doctrine, both as a discourse and as a set of practices. It has shown that when the domestic institutions of citizenship are absent, these globalised discourses of neoliberal subjecthood are 'authorized by NGOs whose clients are subjected to act in accordance with the values of "discipline, efficiency and competitiveness"'.⁷² In this way, global discourses of active citizenship can be recontextualised in diverse environments and attached to practices that work to absolve the weak state of responsibility for welfare, infrastructure and public service provision. However, this should not be seen as a universally negative development. Instead it is a complex and contradictory one since, as I have demonstrated above, the appropriation of this form of subjecthood provides a sense of dignity to otherwise highly disenfranchised individuals while at the same time 'letting the state off the hook'.

⁷¹ Elmira Satybaldieva, "Working Class Subjectivities and Neoliberalisation in Kyrgyzstan: Developing Alternative Moral Selves", *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol.31, 2018, p.35.

⁷² Lamia Karim, "Demystifying Micro-credit: The Grameen Bank, NGOs, and Neoliberalism in Bangladesh", *Cultural Dynamics*, Vol.20, No.1, 2008, p.6.



Figure One: When the funds run out – the tarmacked road suddenly stops, leaving a dirt track through the novostroika (photo credit: C. Owen)



Figure Two: Self-help group meeting in Ak Orgo, Bishkek. Photo credit: C. Owen.

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