

**PLAYING THE ‘GAME’ OF TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY:
NON-ELITE POLITICS IN KYRGYZSTAN’S NATURAL RESOURCE
GOVERNANCE**

JANYL MOLDALIEVA

Maastricht University

Boschstraat 24

Maastricht, 6211 AX, Limburg

Netherlands

Tel: 031 43 388 44 00

janyl.moldalieva@maastrichtuniversity.nl (corresponding author)

JOHN HEATHERSHAW

University of Exeter

Rennes Drive, Exeter, EX4 4RJ

United Kingdom

Tel: 01392 724185

J.D.Heathershaw@exeter.ac.uk

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Abstract

This article demonstrates the role of non-elites in the struggle for transparency and accountability in Kyrgyzstan’s mining sector. Most existing accounts foreground elite strategies and political machines in the governance of post-Soviet societies. Drawing on recent anthropological work on post-Soviet politics and applying it critically to the literature on neopatrimonialism, this article sheds light on the adoption of political game strategies by community members (non-elites) to advance their interests and challenge elite dominance within the case study mining communities. This finding responds to recent calls to interrogate the activities of non-elites at the margins of neopatrimonial contexts. The article advances a research agenda on how practices by non-elites shape the multiple meanings and enactments of transparency and accountability by elites in natural resource governance. It also points to the need to explore how and why “communities” exert their “agency” in governing natural resources within post-Soviet contexts.

Key words: transparency, accountability, mining, communities, governance, Kyrgyzstan

Introduction

What happens to putatively liberal practices and institutions when they are enacted in largely illiberal contexts? This article examines how transparency and accountability (TA) work in contexts where resources are governed by informal patronage relations and elite-enforced formal rules (often labelled neopatrimonial, patronal or simply authoritarian). It sheds light

on the adoption of political game strategies by community members (non-elites) to advance their interests, both personal and collective. Dominant narratives of Central Asian politics have mainly discussed elite strategies and central state institutions in the governance of their societies (Collins 2006; Ilkhamov 2007; Luong 2002; McGlinchey 2009; Radnitz 2010; Wilson 2005). This top-down discourse on post-Soviet politics could lead one to view TA as (1) a series of institutions deployed instrumentally by elites to strengthen their political machines and systematize their power, and/or (2) superficially 'symbolic' in that TA cannot possibly work in an environment characterized by informal patronage and elite-enforced formal rules. This article takes a different perspective in addressing non-elites and the margins of politics. With a growing body of research on Central Asia, we argue that non-elites articulate community interests and exert agency in neopatrimonial contexts (Wooden & Stefes 2009; Sanghera & Satybaldieva 2012; Doolot & Heathershaw 2015; Gulette & Heathershaw 2015; Ismailbekova 2017; Spector 2017; Furstenberg 2015).

We pose the questions: How do local communities (non-elites) resist elite dominance within Kyrgyzstan's resource governance space? What strategies do they use to engage in natural resource governance? What are their implications for transparent and accountable natural resource governance? Guided by new research on neopatrimonialism and non-elite agency, this article proposes two hypotheses for consideration. First, citizen engagement in natural resource governance takes place at the intersection of formal and informal institutions, and between public and hidden spaces, whereby TA (might) emerge in the shadow of neopatrimonialism. Second, non-elites rework political space for their engagement in natural resource governance through utilizing opportunity structures and developing networked relations with other governance actors. The article explores these hypotheses empirically in an attempt to address the aforementioned questions. We argue that

non-elite agency is present both where TA are being used *instrumentally* in ‘virtual politics’ by local actors (Wilson 2005), and where TA goods are pursued *substantively* by non-elites against their putative patrons. TA norms are therefore not themselves prime values of politics but reflective of the patterns of contestations between elites *and* non-elites.

This article is based on ethnographic and interview data collected for the first author’s doctoral research in 2015-2016 in Kyrgyzstan among 50 participants from government, civil society organizations, mining companies, independent experts and community members. The field research was conducted in Bishkek and two mining sites – Aral and Orlovka. Communities were selected based on the hybrid criteria of “most similar” and “most different” cases (see Teune and Przeworski 1970). We selected a set of unique cases that would help extend conceptual considerations and serve as empirical grounds for understanding the phenomena under investigation (TA in natural resource governance). Access to the study settings and participants were considered in selecting communities to ensure possibility of data collection. Two communities – Orlovka and Aral – both under the jurisdiction of different local self-governments (LSGs) were studied in this dissertation. Orlovka is a town of *rayon* significance¹, and is located 120 km east of the country’s capital city – Bishkek, whereas Aral is a village, located 260 km from Bishkek. These study areas have the history of community protests and are primarily considered as gold-mining sites (with availability of other mineral resources), but at different stages of mining.

Three Generations in the Study of Post-Soviet Politics

Comprehensive study of Kyrgyzstan’s natural resource governance requires situating the case within the context of the country’s political regime. Political regime refers to “rules and basic

¹ According to the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic #168 from 27 September 2012 “About Transforming Individual Urban-type Settlements of the Kyrgyz Republic and Categorizing them as Village or City”, Orlovka became a city of *rayon* significance.

political resource allocations according to which actors exercise authority by imposing and enforcing collective decisions on a bounded constituency” (Kitschelt 1992, 1030). TA are discursive, institutional and practical products of political relations. Our understanding of TA in Central Asia is therefore derivative of our understanding of politics and political regimes in Central Asia, a sub-region which constitutes one stream of a wider post-Soviet delta. In short, Central Asia remains resolutely post-Soviet despite the ebb and flow of its flow fully 30 years after the fall of the USSR. Therefore, any analysis of TA in Central Asia must engage with the analytical framework of post-Soviet politics.

In the post-Soviet region certain periods or generations of analysis may be observed. An initial focus on transition in 1990s was succeeded in the 2000s by attention to hybrid regimes and neopatrimonialism and new interest in older concepts of authoritarianism and kleptocracy (Dawisha 2014; Hale 2014). Famously, in the first generation, transition theory, following O’Donnell et al. (1986), politics was assessed according to three precepts: the extent to which (1) formal institutions, conformed to the (2) standard of liberal democracy, at (3) the national scale. In the second generation of hybrid regimes and neopatrimonialism (Ledeneva 2006; Levitsky & Way 2010), the assessment shifted to (1) combinations of formal and informal institutions², comprising (2) democratic and authoritarian features, at (3) the national scale. Thus, while the first two precepts of the so-called transition paradigm were challenged in political science the third precept was not.

For Central Asia too, this ‘second generation’ of post-Soviet analysis has set the terms of the debate for more than a decade. Scholars of Central Asia, including Kyrgyzstan, characterize political regimes in the region as being shaped by co-existing informal and

²The reference to informal institutions in the existing literature includes practices such as patronage, vote rigging and selective application of formal rules, and informal organizations such as factional networks (Ilkhamov, 2007; Isaacs, 2010).

formal rules, elite power, personalized relations and patronage networks, often referred to as neopatrimonialism or patronal politics (Collins 2009; Cummings 2004; Ilkhamov 2007; Ishiyama 2002; Laruelle 2012; Lewis 2012; Luong 2002; Radnitz, 2010). Neopatrimonialism alludes to the rule of a person rather than an office (see Weber 1968), and is enforced through personal patronage, not through ideology or law (Bratton & Van de Walle 1994). Informal relations of loyalty and dependence pervade the formal political administrative system (Clapham 1985; Eisenstadt 1972; Snyder 1992). Although such a political system evolves around personalized relationships inside and outside the realm of politics and the state, it does not exclude informal collective behavior to “rally around some impersonalistic cause” (Hale 2014, 20; Laruelle 2012, 310).

Such regional studies index the wider debates of the discipline of political science and the neo-institutional economics which has served as the principle intellectual context for its development. The study of politics has thereby concentrated on ‘mighty actors’ – i.e. elites’ appropriation of rents and manipulation in resource distribution (Acemoglu et al 2005; Sokoloff and Engerman 2000; North et al 2009) – and national politics (Arellano-Yanguas 2008; Moore 2004; Newell & Wheeler 2006), which revolved around the agency of elites as holders of crucial resources (Hunter 1953; Mills 1956). In Central Asia, although power is highly personalized to a single political entity or multiple elites (see Ishiyama 2004), no single actor, even elites/patrons, is powerful on his/her own but must build and manage pyramids or networks of power (see Hale 2014; McGlinchey 2009). Radnitz (2010), working clearly within this second generation of research and connoting Hale (2005), argued that ‘subversive clientelism’ may emerge from within the regime and such counter-hegemonic elites may mobilise opposition to the national elites from the margins. Based on this spatio-hierarchical analysis of power, the political regime in Kyrgyzstan approximates to a neopatrimonial

regime with some degree of competition among elites, but still based on the rule of “big man” (Ishiyama 2004, 46-47). Kyrgyzstan’s status as a hybrid regime is, by this understanding, due to its smaller, more fragmented distribution of wealth among competing elites (Laruelle 2012, 311). Moreover, elites are defined as relevant due to their formal and informal power in the national context.

These second-generation studies advanced considerably the study of politics in the Post-Soviet and Central Asian regions by drawing attention to the informal, the neopatrimonial and the authoritarian and how these elements may intertwine with formally democratic constitutions. While the earlier work on informal institutions in Central Asia focused on clans (see Collins 2006), scholars consider contemporary politics to be rather driven by economic interests, “influence groups” (Isaacs 2010) and elite networks, which were established across tribal and clan identities (Radnitz 2010). The significance of informal institutions was highlighted in a number of instances related, but not limited to negotiations and elites’ attempts to buy off public support (Budds and Hinojosa 2012; Engvall 2015; Laruelle 2012; Markowitz 2013). However, despite these considerable contributions, the limitations of these approaches are found in that third element of first-generation transition scholarship which remains unchallenged by the second: the fixation with the national level of analysis and, by extension, state elites. Perhaps as a by-product of methodological nationalism, political scientists’ spatial imaginary remained caught in the ‘territorial trap’ (Agnew 1994, Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). According to this precept, the politics that matters is that of the central state and political regime with sovereignty accruing to this state and society too demarcated by the boundaries of the national. Even research which begins at the margins is ultimately forced to come back to the centre to say something about the politics of the top. The exclusion of non-elites and the failure to account for non-national

actors' interaction in elite model of power has long been challenged in democratic theory (see Dahl 1958; Wendt 1987) but is rarely considered in the empirical research of Political Science, especially in neopatrimonial and authoritarian contexts.

The putative third generation of analysis is made distinctive by new theoretical moves on the third dimension – that of space. This article embarks from the premise that this focus on the nation-state is increasingly difficult to justify in a context in which material and symbolic linkages between the global and local are more common and the speed of the interactions along these vectors are accelerated. It is not that the state disappears in this global context but that it is not always the arbiter of the flows, goods and norms from one place to the next, either across its borders or within them. New spaces emerge as conduits for political interaction and objects of contestation. A great deal of this work has been led by anthropologists and/or the product of political ethnography. What this work shares is a refusal to frame the political in terms of the central political regime; rather politics is found, and *remains*, at the margins. These margins include Reeves' (2005) Ferghana Valley borders, Beyer's (2016) Kyrgyz customary law, Liu's (2015) urban governance in Osh, Ismailbekova's (2017) local politics, and Reeves et al. (2014) on inherently ambiguous state performances. But this marginal politics which lies beyond centred state space is not merely local. The margins of politics may also be transnational and include offshore companies and extraterritorial jurisdictions (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017), spaces of migration (Reeves 2012), moral economies opposing neoliberalism (Sanghera and Satybaldieva 2012; Spector 2017), and social movements against extractive industries (Doolotkeldieva 2015; Wooden 2013). As Spector (2017) notes, in her study of Kyrgyzstan, growing economic and political importance of the *bazaar* may be understood 'as confirmation of a global trend in which individuals increasingly rely on themselves as governments have become discredited as social

welfare providers' (2, 31) None of these works makes their object of analysis the political regime; each analyses politics spatially from the local and transnational margins of the state.

3. Political Game Strategies: Non-elite Agency

We build on both the second and third generations of political analysis of post-Soviet Central Asia to inform a theoretical approach to non-elite agency. While Radnitz (2010) remains focused on elites in his study on mobilization, Wooden (2013), nodding to the third generation, urges researchers to study the role of non-elites in post-Soviet countries. A hierarchy is presumed here but may also be questioned. Political games involve both elites (often denoted as patrons) and non-elites (clients). "Patronage relations both manipulate and exploit other forms of social organization and values," Ismailbekova (2017) notes, "but both patrons and clients actively participate in this manipulation, conspiring to somehow render the relationship a moral one" (3). Critical theorists like Cindi Katz (1996) also call attention to "minor politics", especially in theorizing everyday political struggles. Minor politics, here, simply refers to the political practice of refusal by 'oppressed' minor groups (e.g. the marginalized in society) to the rule and logics of elites that precipitates crises and thus social transformations (see Deleuze and Guattari 1986; Katz 1996; Van Wezemael 2008). In other words, there is a need to pay attention to non-elite community practices that could (or is) potentially transform(ing) the nature of TA in natural resource governance.

In the case study communities, non-elite practices evolved through engagement in political games where non-elite and non-national actors compete alongside elites. Political games occur when social interactions are driven by conflicting and/or competing interests and in the context of resource limitations (Smith 1965). Actors have different levels of access to resources. There is a particular sponsor who controls the game and determines the available strategies and the payoffs (Bagnoli and McKee 1991, 244). In neopatrimonial

settings, it is often the elites, as patrons, who are the sponsors of these games. However, both elites and non-elites could initiate political games within and outside of the formal government arena, depending on the relative payoffs of the respective games and their positions in them (see Smith 1965). It is predominantly assumed that political games are driven by motivations to gain power. However, Downs (1957) argues that actors might be interested in payoffs (other than power) such as money and social prestige.

Another factor that animates political game is competition among localities (Cox and Mair 1988). The literature has long indicated that competition over the resources themselves is a primary cause of contestations in natural resource governance (Bulte and Damania 2008; Luong and Weinthal 2001; Mehlum et al. 2006). The dynamics of local development may threaten authority and power of local *baymanaps* [rich men] and hence they are more likely to fight against changing their 'habitat'. This would elicit opposition of other players who strive to gain access to resources in order to change the status quo. Nonetheless, every actor within the community, whether capitalist firms, politicians or people, are dependent on each other in reproducing certain social relations within a particular space (Cox and Mair 1988). Actors often use each other's economic interdependence to gain political influence over one another (Wagner 1998). They can adopt different strategies that shape their behavior and actions in political games (Suny 1999, 139). The most intriguing component of political games is a strategy (Smith, 1965). Translation of actors' ideas into actions is heavily dependent on strategies. Studying actors and their strategies helps us understand political games in resource governance and their implications for TA (see Saurugger 2013).

Drawing on this literature, the politics of natural resource governance in neopatrimonial settings may be assessed in terms of three strategies of the political game. The first strategy of non-elites with respect to elites is to reproduce the discourse of the elite,

thereby *acknowledging* the patron. It is a central strategy of elites to seek this affirmation of their authority from clients. James Scott (1990) classically identified this affirmation as the ‘public transcript’ under which may lie a ‘hidden transcript’ of dissent. Agency lies not merely in the hidden transcript but in the minor politics of resigning to authority in the public transcript (Heathershaw 2009, 12, 60). TA are no less a domain of this minor politics of public and hidden transcripts than any other field or normative and material contestation. Officials in Kyrgyzstan adopt the logic of TA to ensure their political survival and maintain the existing political regime. They stimulate such change instrumentally through producing formally “symbolic”³ or “virtual” moments (i.e. inviting other actors to govern) and informally, maintaining neopatrimonial ties by selectively employing TA to enhance their interests (Wilson 2005). But to assume that these moves and their associated discourse are wholly under the command of elites would be a mistake. Ismailbekova (2017) goes so far as identifying democracy in these moments, as a patron is required to gain the consent of clients through the provision of goods to clients and adherence to the moral logic of patronage. Most political scientists would resist the merger of neopatrimonial and democratic authority, but we may learn from ethnographic research by recognizing that these strategies are reciprocal and prone to manipulation by both elites *and* non-elites.

The literature on neopatrimonial politics in a post-Soviet Eurasia identifies a second strategy: that patrons (and clients) create *networks*, mostly hierarchical, through which resources are distributed and coercion is applied (Hale 2014). They create opportunities in exchange for various forms of loyalty (Laruelle 2012). In such networks, personalized reach tends to stretch out to include individuals in a wide variety of other institutions – equals and

³ Edelman (1985) introduces symbolic nature of participation, arguing that politics determine what people desire, fear and consider possible. The use of symbolic here does not mean purely simulated.

some lower-level actors who have ties to multiple actors within the same network (Hale 2014, 21-24). Through these networks, actors play political games to control resources (see Kohli 2004; Green 2010; Berman 1998). In natural resource governance, the state and licensed companies position themselves as legitimate actors that have rights to access and use resources through these networks, creating hierarchies, keeping gates and brokering resources. State patrons consider that they have the sole authority to set or change rules. However, as fieldwork data shows, non-elites may contest this authority.

Third, patrons launch *social mobilization* to pursue their interests and respond to competition among patronage networks through taking advantage of the system that is muddled in between formal and informal rules (Medard 2002; Gazibo 2012; Braton and Van de Walle 1994; Snyder 1992). In this article, social mobilization towards TA refers to a process of collective action towards social change (Jenkins 1983, 532). In neopatrimonialism, protests would be considered as the strategy of elites; however, Wooden & Stefes (2009) refer to them as a new bottom-up political culture that emerged in Kyrgyzstan – “where political change is achieved not through polls and the ballot box, but through protests and bullhorns” (254; see also McGlinchey 2009). The limited research on social mobilization in Kyrgyzstan argues that elites and non-elites adopt social mobilization and networking strategies to contest power-holders (Wooden 2013; Doolotkeldieva 2015; Ismailbekova 2017; Radnitz 2010).

The remainder of the article now turns to empirical research on the use of these three political game strategies – publicly acknowledging the patron (in section 3); establishing non-elite networks (in 4) and launching social mobilization (in 5) – before a section of comparison between the cases where we discuss the variety of non-elite agency and its place in both epiphenomenal and substantive practices of TA.

3. Official Transparency and Accountability: Acknowledging the Patron

Fieldwork data provides descriptions of how the patron is acknowledged in official TA activities associated with natural resources in Kyrgyzstan. An interview with a deputy of *jergiliktuu kenesh* [local legislative body/local council] in Orlovka, as captured in the quotation below, shows the use of TA logic such as public meetings and disclosure of information by a local (executive) government, but for sharing limited information:

The LSG head would invite us to a meeting to share news about the funds received from the mining company. But he would not share the detailed expenditure budget, saying that our questioning was considered as interference into local government's administrative work. Besides, the LSG head would conduct most of the meetings with the mining company himself behind the closed doors (LC Interview #1, September 2016).

TA in this practice are very limited, almost virtual, and mediated by elites. The 'patron' acknowledged is not merely the local official, but this person is part of a network which includes the foreign mining company; the non-elite's suspicion is immediately apparent about these local-global connections – between LSG and a foreign mining company.

Unsurprisingly, paid-for protest was also visible. According to the accounts of some interviewees, there were instances when community support for anti-mining was mobilized through elite's distribution of cash rewards in exchange for joining protests. These were partially linked to local elites, seeking personal gains through inciting community protests. "Local *baymanaps* [rich men] in Aral were initially opposed to mining. They did not want to lose access to cheap labor, because local people would have alternative employment opportunities at the mining site", notes a specialist of civil society organization (CSO) (CSO Interview #1, October 2016). According to the accounts of the mining company in Aral,

certain brokers proposed to help with mobilizing public support in exchange for N amount of money (MC-A Interview #1, August 2016). The mining company representative further elaborated:

We have declined the offer of certain individuals to facilitate questions on behalf of us with the community. This would have jeopardized our potential to gain community trust...We operated in a chaotic environment where we had to communicate privately with government officials if we wanted to work in this country and negotiate every step we needed to take after the issuance of a license (MC-A Interview #2, August 2016).

This quotation indicates that public rules of issuing a license are accompanied by closed-door processes between the company and the government. Such hidden transcripts are rarely visible in public but prevail over the formal laws. Again, TA are virtual, that is, derivative of substantive and complex political contestation.

Multiple interviewees deployed the public transcript of a highly circumscribed, elite-led and law-bound TA. A CSO representative stated: “the laws on environmental protection and licensing help to cut down corruption in the sector and make it rather difficult for the companies and government to foster their personal agenda...” (CSO Interview #2, October 2016). One of the mining company representatives commented: “the government has set strict environmental regulations. In order not to be in trouble, we ensure our compliance with the set rules” (MC Interview #3, September 2016). Further logics of TA appropriated by the government include public meetings and development funds for what is officially denoted as “transparent sub-national revenue management”, and the command by elites for “frequent public meetings with local communities” (Interview with the State Committee

Representative #4, November 2015). A CSO representative acknowledged these government efforts to work more in a transparent and accountable manner and commented:

In the aftermath of mining conflicts, government improved its performance related to transparency and accountability. Due to public disapproval of mining, it issued, in several instances, orders to stop the work of mining companies. They asked our help with printing and disseminating information about mining to local communities through our public reception centers (CSO Interview #3, November 2015).

These public transcripts affirm the authority of patrons, which may be multiple and dispersed in any given setting. However, such public transcripts do not go unquestioned and are occasionally challenged by ‘hidden transcripts’ bursting into the public domain and demonstrating the agency of non-elites – an agency which is present but limited and latent in the public transcripts and events of TA.

4. Establishing Networks

The second strategy used by the community members at the research sites and to be discussed in this sub-section relates to establishing networks, often across an array of local, national and foreign actors. It was observed that community members in both Aral and Orlovka adopted this strategy to champion their interests and contest for TA in resource governance. For these actors, TA were substantive in that at least one political goal was to increase the provision of information and to hold elites to account for their activities.

In Aral, multiple small networks of community members were established based on *uruu* [line of descent] and *kvartal* [districts]. It was expected that networks would typically be established between elites and non-elites in neopatrimonial societies, fragmented along the lines of political and economic status of residents. Initial anti-mining networks were polarized within the village and mainly driven by local elites (former deputies of *jergiliktuu*

kenesh, school director, leaders of *kvartal* and *uruu* and *aksakaldar sotu* [court of elders]). In many instances, interviewees mentioned Chokoi *uruu*⁴ as leaders of resistance networks in the village, because their land was located close to the mining site. They were at risk of losing their income source due to potential impact of mining on their land and livestock. They sought alliances with women and youth councils⁵ to gain more public support for resistance.

Similar to patrons, community activists in Aral fostered ‘ideology’ on an informal level to strengthen their political position. This ‘ideology’ distinguished networking of activists as *el uchun* [for people] and *elge karshi* [against people]. Those who did not support public demands were considered *elge karshi* and ‘spoilors of people’s unity’. The ‘ideology’ of *el uchun* signified the role of people in resource governance. “We thought that with claiming rights of people, we could attract other compatriots to join us and strengthen our position. We have been ignored for long by this corrupt government” – noted a village leader (AC Interview #7, March 2016). With devising this resistance to be about people, activists professed the ‘ideology’ of *el uchun* to expand their network and exert their agency.

The networks reached as far as foreign mining companies and eventually involved non-elites in resource governance. Villagers found out that a mining company Talas Copper Gold (TCG) was given a license for exploration after two years since it had started working. They reached out to *jergiliktuu kenesh* to learn more about this, claiming their right to know about what was happening in their village. A deputy of *jergiliktuu kenesh* commented: “we contacted a local vendor company to get in touch with TCG and organize a public meeting”

⁴ Doolotkeldieva’s research (2015) also showed the role of Chokoi line of descent in anti-mining resistance.

⁵ Women and youth *kenesh* [council] were not institutionalized structures. A few activists formed loosely structured group, which could recruit other acquaintances and activate the affiliated group members when needed. In Aral, organization of trainings for women by Talas Copper Gold activated women *kenesh*, which later became a group and received funding to conduct some educational work with women in the village.

(AC Interview #5, July 2016). Several villagers shared that *ayil okmotu* [local executive government] had some form of established relations with a vendor company, which seemingly served as a communication link between them and the foreign mining company representatives in Bishkek. The villagers requested to meet in person with the company management and independent environment experts.

We tried to establish ties with the representatives from *Jogorku Kenesh* [Parliament] and the National Academy of Science to seek support on a national level. Several of us went to Bishkek to *meet Jogorku Kenesh* deputies and state our concerns for starting mining without involving people in discussions. One of us knew a person from the National Academy of Science. We asked them to come to our village to conduct an independent environmental impact assessment (AC Interview #8, July 2016).

Community activists engaged in relation building with actors in the capital to mobilize support for addressing TA from the livelihood dimension. Meanwhile, some well-off community members, mainly land and livestock owners, created their local networks to resist mining. These methods included spreading rumors about harmful impact of mining and manipulating public opinion through appealing to the sense of resource nationalism (“Kyrgyzstani people should use the land and its resources, instead of giving them to foreigners”).

In Orlovka, community members established personalized cross-class relations with *jeryliktuu kenesh* who had networking relations with a mining company. They used these networking relations to access political space where decisions were made. One youth activist noted:

We knew that a few local deputies worked with the mining company representatives.

We established closer relations with them. Our common goal was to work together

towards socially just and safe mining practices that contribute to economic development (OC Interview #9, August 2016).

Unlike in Aral, youth activists in Orlovka initiated building one cross-class network⁶ (vs. multiple) with other youth in the neighboring villages, LSG and their acquaintances at the mining company. Since the choice of strategy depended on access to information (Smith 1965), community members used their contacts at *jergiliktuu kenesh* and a mining company and their knowledge about how “political-bureaucratic labyrinth” worked to navigate through the system⁷ (see Tattersall 2013). Youth activists aptly utilized informal services of intermediaries (denoted as brokers in Doolot and Heathershaw 2015), which were often used by patrons to leverage local support, to connect to the system of governance and pursue their interests. These brokers were people who worked at the mining company and *jergiliktuu kenesh* and acquaintances of youth group at regional government structures such as finance and tax offices with knowledge about how the system worked. Accordingly, compared to Aral, youth activists were successful in building stronger networks ‘within’ and outside of Orlovka.

Observations of the group meetings at a football field in Orlovka revealed that there were several youth patrons heading this network, including the key leader who was a lawyer and knowledgeable about legal governance processes. Relations within this group were more networked and mostly horizontal, especially when it came to generating ideas and strategizing actions. There was a power-sharing mechanism within the group. The youth leader commented: “we have divided responsibilities for leadership internally. Bolot [fictional

⁶ The importance of establishing networks that cut across tribal and clan identities were also highlighted in Radnitz’ (2010) study of the 2002 uprising in Aksy.

⁷ This is referenced in the literature as a political strategy of peripheries (see Nuijten, 2003; Doolot & Heathersaw, 2015).

name] heads our youth non-governmental organization and works on enquiries of public related to mining, whereas I work with the LSG on transparency in budget allocation” (OC Interview #15, August 2016). This network included several young women who liaised with media. One of them shared:

There was an article published about mining in Orlovka. It described youth activism as mob of protestors and framed our fight as meaningless. We knew that this article was ‘ordered’ by interested parties to discredit us. I invited then another media representative to come to Orlovka and capture the real story (OC Interview#11, August 2016).

The quotation unveils new trends of networking in Orlovka, whereby the community partnered up with the media to scale up their ‘outreach’. While villagers in Aral rejected any interaction with the media, community members in Orlovka utilized it to popularize their agenda. Hence, Orlovka’s non-elite, activist networks showed signs of both a substantive popular conception of TA and political sophistication in their strategies to bring this about.

5. Launching Social Mobilization

The third strategy explored in case study communities is that of social mobilization. Villagers in Aral used public spaces such as culture house and schools to mobilize people and conduct public meetings about resource governance. An activist from Aral noted:

We requested access to the mining site during the exploration stage, so that we were aware about what was being done. We discussed local employment terms with the mining company and required our involvement throughout mining processes (AC Interview #15, December 2015).

The quotation reveals that villagers in Aral were able to ‘break into’ the space of power-holders, who would typically decide how resources should be governed on their own. In this

example, TA are substantive goods pursued (successfully) by non-elites. However, they appear to be derivative of localism against the claims of elites. Another community member stated:

“Transparency and accountability are possible if government and companies listen to us. Why should it be just the government or company setting the rules? This is a land where we live, and we will join forces to manifest that it is our right to take part in deciding how this land will be used” (AC Interview #12, August 2016).

Several interviews with participants of protests similarly indicated that by mobilizing against mining, they tried to change the decision-making chain – when government would issue a license and the mining company would start working without engaging with the community. Continuous protests in Aral led to TA-related achievements such as promotion of the right to participate in decision making.

However, Aral’s political radicalization was subject to complex realities on the ground. One of the complexities was the involvement of security services or police officers in community contestations to seek their own benefits. In March and October 2011, villagers organized two major violent attacks at the exploration camp, demanding TCG to leave. Interviewees noted that leaders of protests were under surveillance. Several protest leaders shared:

My phone conversations were recorded. I received several anonymous warnings over my phone to stop protests. When we were heading to meet with activists from another village, where protests started against mining, police stopped us on our way. They knew about our meeting (AC Interview #9, October 2016).

Law enforcement agencies seemed to have some kind of relations with a mining company. The company provided support to local police to fix their building roof. How could this be interpreted? The mining company trying to get police to be their *krisha*⁸? Our underpaid police probably did not mind some backstage cash flow (AC Interview #14, October 2016).

Surveillance of activists is a common mechanism in authoritarian states. Interactions of transnational mining companies with law enforcement agencies and security services in the extractive sector produce ‘hybrid’ practices of the coercive protection of mining operations via an internationalized indirect rule (see Honke 2013).

Considering the quotations above, elite practices in Aral may be interpreted in three ways: (1) police structures ‘extracting’ resources (e.g. cash or infrastructure support) from mining companies; (2) mining companies willingly supporting police to serve as a ‘protectorate’ of its mining operations; and (3) the state discharging its responsibilities of governance to a mining company and launching surveillance against protestors. Villagers noted the keen involvement of local and regional police structures in monitoring the mining situation in Aral. “Regional police would rarely pay attention to the issues that we bring to their attention. With the start of mining, they were overly eager to visit us at no occasion” (AC Interview #11, November 2016)⁹. However, continuous anti-mining contestations by non-elites, sometimes with substantive claims for TA, changed power-holders’ ‘business as usual’ approach to resource governance. As one of the civil society experts noted,

⁸ Patron/protector

⁹ By the same token, Doolotkeldieva’s (2015) research in Aral found that police and security services did not prevent attacks from happening, but they “became very active in-between these episodes” (187). According to the activists, “local police and security officers exploited citizens’ resistance as an opportunity to extort money from the company and hence turn a blind eye to citizens’ complaints” (Doolotkeldieva 2015, 187).

“government and company had to stop any mining-related activities and come to the village several times to negotiate with protestors” (CSO Interview #4, December 2015). This demonstrates the emergence of non-elite agency with potential to transform practices towards transparent and accountable resource governance.

In Orlovka, social mobilization for TA was more substantive. Community members employed social mobilization strategy to stage protests as informal means of addressing local community interests and engaging in TA-related processes. Several protests took place due to various reasons in Orlovka. Residents considered the October 2012 protests to be of a bigger scale and significance, partially due to the effect it had on stopping the mining company’s work at site for a fixed period of time – until negotiations were reached with locals. Community members had different reasons to join the protest and their demands included: employment of local residents, environmental protection, deserving salaries for miners and better working conditions at the mining site. One of the youth activists said: “we have a group of youth leaders in Orlovka and neighboring villages, who are informal rulers of the area. We called our guys to join our protest against Alтынкен [mining company] to demand employment for locals (OC Interview # 2, July 2016). Here, generalized local grievances appear to have led to substantive TA claims.

Community members learned¹⁰ from other examples of successful mobilization how to stage protests and (re)negotiate the informal terms of a contract. One of the youth activists commented: “we found out that a community in the South succeeded in renegotiating the terms with a mining company after their protests. We applied the same approach” (OC Interview #6, July 2016). Activists noted that they wanted to create *effekt tolpi*

¹⁰ Constructivists note that learning might have construction effects on identities and interests. The symbolic interactionists, guided by the work of George Herbert Mead, would also state that identities and interests are learned in social interaction (see Wendt, 1992, 326).

[crowd effect] through social mobilization in order to ensure that the government and mining company would address their concerns (OC Interviews #10, 12, July 2016). Such learned norms of cooperation evolved independently from the state (McGlinchey 2009) within and across communities, which have implications for approaching TA as a mobilization as well as cooperation mechanism.

In addition to achieving impersonal goals (e.g. employment opportunities for the local population as a whole), several youth leaders in Orlovka used TA-related arguments to win local elections. Having come to power, these youth leaders challenged patron-client linkages and sought accountability of the Mayor's Office. Youth local council deputies stated:

There are several of us who joined the LSG with no political experience. We are outsiders in the system, and we can therefore question actions of other deputies.” (OC Interview #8).

In one of the sessions, we blocked the decision of the Mayor's Office, because it would have approved the company's performance without holding a public hearing and discussing the case (OC Interview #2, July 2016).

As noted by other interviewees, the youth leaders, who became a part of formal power, used their affiliation with the LSG to pursue their own (private) interests. Local government and community members referred to them as “a group of young people slowly changing the system to make it more accountable”, but also as “youth taking care of the community need as well as their own” (OC Interview #1, LSG Interview #2, July 2016). The latter is interpreted as a sign of political rationality in a political game, since all players desire power

as “a necessary condition for satisfying their goals” (Conn et al. 1973, 236). The instance of Orlovka showed that the youth group exercised agency, which in parallel led to reproduced neopatrimonial logic – with the use of formal and informal rules to pursue public and private gains (Ismailbekova 2017).

In both case studies, the TA logic was brought into use by community members for pragmatic reasons, but on an ad-hoc basis (see Sklansky 2012; Stier 2004)¹¹. Their use of strategies fostered practices that deployed TA both as a rationale to remove the authorities and take power (in Orlovka) and limit the power of the authorities and mining companies (in Aral) to sustain local livelihoods.

6. Rethinking Transparency and Accountability

The fieldwork data illustrates that in the TA domain, the interactions of actors were more multi-purposive than solely tied to more transparent and accountable resource governance. In Orlovka, community members employed the networking strategy to advance ideas of the public good such as social justice and local livelihood improvement while also pursuing private interests. But their participation in institutions of resource governance through social mobilization (led by youth patrons) also suggested cooptation and a neopatrimonial political strategy. In Aral, multiple networks linking elites and non-elites, and internal divisions based on *uruu* and *kvartal* within these networks, generated apparent TA momentum instrumentally (Wilson 2005). And yet even here, new public practices of protesting for community rights and direct engagement in negotiations with the mining company should be noted. The context of neopatrimonialism and institutional uncertainties shaped the exercise of non-elite agency and their TA pursuit in both communities but in different ways. It is the purpose of

¹¹ Communities’ utilization of strategies to resist power-holders and exert their agency to champion their interests resembles the logic of minor politics (see Katz 1996; Van Wezemael 2008).

this final section not to determine what causes this variation but to demonstrate the significance of non-elite agency by showing how the differential strategies of these actors correlate with the differential political processes in each case.

Examining the workings of TA requires scrutinizing strategies used by elite and non-elite actors to take actions. Daily actions create power (see Checkel, 1998) and strategies shape those daily practices (Saurugger 2013). Analyzing strategies used at research sites showed how TA were enacted through contested and relational processes, guided by public/private interests and political-economic opportunities. Based on our analysis, Orlovka was a site where networked actor interactions and social mobilization for TA were part of a non-elite strategy to seize power (i.e. instrumental practice of TA). Aral was a site where TA-related claims were more ad hoc but framed more radically as ‘with the people’ (i.e. substantive ‘ideology’ of TA).

Non-elites’ use of (political game) strategies indicated that TA in the context of neopatrimonial settings emerged at the intersection of public and private interests and as a bottom-up process that could shift political boundaries. The non-elite use of social mobilization strategies fostered such meanings of TA as direct engagement and right to know, which contributed to leveraging more immediate and comprehensive control over political elites (Offe 1985, 817). Relatively recent community protests in other parts of Kyrgyzstan also demonstrate non-elites becoming more autonomous from elites in their claims for transparent and accountable resource governance. For instance, three hundred villagers in Solton Sary in August 2019¹², hundreds of protesting residents in Kazarman and Maidan in 2017 and 2018 and protests against uranium in April 2019 forced the government to stop the work of mining companies (Abdildaev 2019; Pannier 2019; MINEX Forum,

¹² Protests in Solton Sary also took place in 2011 and 2015.

2019; Kaktus Media 2019; Madanbekov 2019; Djanibekova, 2018). In Solton Sary, the high death rate of livestock, a contaminated environment and a fight between locals and Chinese workers contributed to the escalation of protests. Villagers created Facebook pages “Naryn eli Solton-Sari uchun!!!” [people of Naryn for Solton-Sari] and “Kitaydin baskinchiligina karshibiz” [Against Chinese invasion] and posted pictures of dead sheep and videos of explosions at the mining site (Kaktus Media, 2019). In the latter example, public mistrust in companies’ compliance with TA, especially related to the environment, prominently shapes resistance to Chinese mining companies as well as to the government. This also raises the issue of “resource localism”, which goes beyond TA, but what is of relevance here is the relation between resource localism and weak governance. Together these foster detrimental political processes including environmental exploitation and pollution, isolation of local community and socio-economic disparities between elites and non-elites. Weak governance is unable to mitigate the rise of resource localism and generates public distrust to government and foreign mining companies.

The failure of the government to obtain local consent and conduct reliable environmental impact assessments prior to approving mining companies’ work increases the role of ordinary citizens to seek TA through alternative ways. Media outlets report:

The mine has been licensed without locals’ consent and the government has not kept the company accountable for practicing eco-friendly methods of mining within the Kyrgyz law (MINEX Forum 2019, para 5).

We are not at fault here, but at the national level they are saying that an investor has come and that we are against him. We will welcome any investor with open arms if they are proposing something safe and environmentally sound that will provide

people with work – says a former worker of Makmalzoloto gold smelting plant, protesting in Kazarman (Djanibekova 2018, para 3)

Further, massive protests in Issyk-Kul and Bishkek in April 2019 were combined with collecting signatures on petition to halt uranium mining at Kyzyl-Ompol. In six days, activists collected 30,000 signatures, which led to immediate government response in favor of ceasing uranium mining (Pannier 2019). These cases constitute a few examples that illustrate the importance of political processes led by non-elites, echoed through mass media and social media, in TA contestations.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the use of political game strategies, especially in selected case studies, resembled the logic of neopatrimonialism. This raises a number of questions: are TA practices epiphenomenal of neopatrimonialism and how are TA practices reworked in the case study communities? On the one hand, both instrumental and substantive TA practices are epiphenomenal of neopatrimonial politics when they are derivative of the political game strategies used by elites and non-elites to pursue their (private) interests. Economic and political gains are at the center of neopatrimonial politics and usually achieved through extended networks of acquaintance and personalized rewards and punishments (Hale 2014). The community case studies demonstrated that these strategies helped them achieve short-term interests within the logic of neopatrimonial politics. For instance, local elites/patrons in Aral initiated public discussions about benefit sharing and environmental violations, using this social base for “subversive clientelism” against national elites (see Radnitz 2010) or to reorder local hierarchies. The report of Zoi Environment Network (2012) on Kyrgyzstan states: “groups of wealthy individuals have organized protests in several villages to incite resistance to mining as a way of protecting

their status quo” (35). Other studies have shown how the local rural elite in Central Asia plays a role in changing political and economic order at peripheries (see Reeves 2014). Protests at mining sites may not represent fully true grassroots aspirations¹³; they could be a “weapon of the wealthy” (i.e. local/national elites) to pursue their own interests such as winning (local) elections and/or protecting themselves from a predatory state (Radnitz 2010). These accounts suggest that protests at mining sites should be carefully analyzed for they enable different elite factions as well as creating opportunities for non-elite agency; the subversive clientelism of rural elites is a part of the political game but it is not indicative of non-elite agency.

Nevertheless, the fieldwork data showed that TA were also substantively deployed partly as a reflection of the neopatrimonial context and partly in opposition to the established discourses and hierarchies of that context. The findings from the cases suggest that TA were remade in practice through actors’ appropriation of strategies with the neopatrimonial logic¹⁴. The empirical case studies illustrated that community members used strategies to minimize drawbacks of vulnerability to the interests of a particular patron or transnational patronage network. Patronage, while associated with negative connotations, should not be automatically considered as counter-productive to TA efforts, or democracy, in Kyrgyzstan (Ismailbekova 2017). Some scholars argue that patronage itself entails norms of political accountability, responsibility and legitimacy (Van Gool and Bekkers 2012, 6). Accountability relations could be extended from small political elite to full-fledged clientelist systems (see Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). The case of Orlovka demonstrated transparent

¹³ Doolotkeldieva (2015) adds that natural resources in Kyrgyzstan became “a residual category of elite struggle and manipulation” (177)

¹⁴ Citizens “rework familiar patronage models and largely appropriate, rather than reject, neopatrimonial politics” (Van Gool and Bekkers 2012, 5).

and accountable behavior of a young and upcoming patron Almaz (fictional name): after becoming a local council deputy, he continued his direct and open engagement with youth. As observed during the fieldwork, Almaz conducted informal gatherings with young people at the football field to share some of the insights related to governance processes and exchange opinions with the fellow men. These open meetings were part of the process that produced the neopatrimonial power of Almaz, and they served as the necessary precondition for enforcing his patronage. As such, non-elites had their own interest in adhering to (selective) TA norms: it was a means to become an elite. In Aral, increased competition among local elites blocked new entrants like Almaz.

Research outside of the post-Soviet region also suggests that TA are more likely to be found substantively in neopatrimonial polities which, like Kyrgyzstan, are not consolidated autocracies. The experience of rural grassroots movements in Mexico and India demonstrates that political opening or instability is conducive to the emergence of TA (see Fox 2007). In India, public contestations lowered substantially barriers for participation and enhanced citizens' access to the "benefits of democracy" (Tummala 2009, 57). Indigenous movements in Peru related to "rights to nature" emerged with democratization and neoliberalization along with political interests concealed behind indigenous movements (Greene 2006). In Australia, indigenous communities were able to legitimize their power through using physical actions and tactics that would delay mining activities and mobilizing support (Trebeck 2007). As the research on collective action shows, actors often use informal structures to come together, especially in the absence of the central actors (Ostrom 1998; Ostrom et al. 1994). Kyrgyzstan is such a context where the central state is weak. According to the accounts of interviewees, in order not to create instability and avoid disturbing mining operations in Orlovka, the government with community leaders found

ways to address the company's violations of rules during their closed-door meeting with the mining company. This signals that informal mechanisms such as closed-door negotiations could be used not only for private deals, but also to ensure compliance of the mining company to TA norms.

Conclusion

This article challenged the elite-centered narrative on resource governance in post-Soviet Central Asia, generally, and Kyrgyzstan, specifically. It discussed engagement of ordinary citizens in TA-related contestations in rural communities. The article revealed that community members at mining sites engaged in TA contestations, because (a) substantively, they perceived land and its resources to belong to people and (b) instrumentally, they could benefit from possible changes that the TA-related contestations might bring. While the former reason indicates constitutive power of discourse and notions of belonging/owning these resources, the latter shows rationality and search for shared public and/or private gains. Furthermore, the findings indicate that some community members may have followed the lead or logic of elites/patrons, but others engaged in (and even manipulated) the political game through appropriating TA for common goals. Communities acknowledged patrons' authority, networked with them, and protested against them to exert their agency.

The cross-case analysis stipulated that at best, TA would emerge as the result of political openings at the intersection of public and private interests, and at worst, they would be epiphenomenal of neopatrimonial politics. However, importantly, the study revealed non-elite agency at both these extremes and the variations in between. The instances of non-elites' involvement in political games signifies that we need to pay closer attention to them in studying the neopatrimonial politics of hybrid regimes.

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