

## Political Parties and Interest Groups Members' Patterns of Social Network Site Usage in Kyrgyzstan

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**Abstract:** Kyrgyzstan, with a high level of political participation and an avant-garde position regarding internet access in Central Asia, broadband and social media penetration in the population, is a critical case for studying social network sites (SNSs) in relation to political participation. This study analyzes the practices and attitudes of SNS users in Kyrgyzstan. Two types of users – members of political parties and members of interest organizations – are interviewed in focus groups about their practices and attitudes towards political content in the social network site Facebook. The findings indicate that, to some extent, the political engagement is indeed occurring within the Facebook environment, suggesting that the popular social networking sites (SNSs) are an avenue for young people to express and share their political views. Facebook allowed users to share their political beliefs, support specific candidates, and interact with others on political issues. Participants' perceptions regarding the appropriateness of political activity on Facebook, as well as the specific types of political activities they engaged in and witnessed within the site, were also explored.

**Keywords:** Kyrgyzstan, Facebook, political participation, new media, interaction, social media, SNS.

### 1. Introduction

In this study, I describe the results of an investigation designed to explore the practices and attitudes of politically active young users of SNSs towards political content on SNS in Kyrgyzstan. Literature about youth online highlights opportunities for identity expression and experimentation. However, there is a relative dearth of research on the ways youth share their political and civic identities online. According to Weinstein, youth with considerable commitments to political and civic issues off-line may be more inclined to ground their online identities in these issues and related expression rather than masking the political and civic facet of their identities. On the other hand, they may perceive risks related to unique features of the online space that prevent them from sharing political and civic views on social networking sites (SNSs) (Weinstein, 2014).

Drawing on focus group interviews conducted with a sample of youth targeted for their political and civic work, I analyzed their practices and attitudes to political

content on SNS and the way in which political activity on SNS may influence general political participation.

## 2. Context

I adopt a broad conception of the term *civic* (as in Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Seider, Gillmor, & Rabinowicz, 2012), intended to capture the expansive range of service-oriented endeavors, political participation, and activism activities in which youth engage to improve their worlds. I use the term *online civic expression* to refer to an individual's "true self-expression" to others via the Internet (as in Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002), when the content relates to their civic views, interests, or participation. This may take many forms, including posting status updates, sharing links, creating online "events", or changing profile pictures.

Online civic expression, whether in the form of a "like," a shared image, or a written post, can lead to or even constitute civic participation (Rheingold, 2012). Given the networked nature of SNSs, online civic expression might also influence - and even spark - engagement from less engaged peers. Johnson, Zhang, Bichard, and Seltzer's (2011) review of empirical studies of civic engagement and SNSs indicates that purposefully using SNSs for civic means also has potential for increasing youth voice and participation.

Emerging SNS-politics research has focused on campaign strategy and the adoption of social media technology by political elites. However little research has investigated the impact that SNS activity has on the political behavior of young people. In particular, Facebook is an important social media site to study because of its high rate of use by the 18-to-24-year-old demographic.

## 3. Research Questions

Facebook is an alternative source of information by offering a number of opportunities to get targeted information for users. However its effectiveness as a tool for increasing political participation depends on how much its users trust the information disseminated through this SNS. It is important to define participants' trust on information on Facebook, because if they do not view the site as a source of information, it is unlikely they will engage in it. Therefore, I asked:

*RQ1: Do participants trust the information they get from Facebook?*

Participants' political activities on Facebook is also one of the primary focuses of this study, that is why I asked:

*RQ2: What political activities on Facebook do participants engage in?*

One of the primary intents of this research is to analyze the practices and attitudes of social media users to political content on SNS. That is why it is important to ascertain whether the participants believe that political activity on Facebook is socially appropriate. Therefore:

*RQ3: Do participants perceive Facebook as an appropriate venue for political activity?*

One of the primary purposes of this study is to analyze whether political activity on SNS alone drives previously inactive citizens to political participation. In order to begin the process of understanding these practices and attitudes and to initiate a focus group interviews into the slacktivism<sup>1</sup> concern, I asked:

*RQ4: Does political activity on Facebook influence general political participation?*

## **4. Method**

### **4.1. Participants and Data Collection**

I invited the most active members of five political parties SDPK, Ata Meken, Respublika, Ak-Shumkar and Zamandash which have Facebook pages and the Youth wings of which are actively using SNS.

The Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) was founded in 1993 by Abdygany Erkebaev, who was replaced by Amzzbek Atambayev as its chairman in 1999. The party formed a coalition with the larger El Party in preparation for the February 2005 parliamentary elections. The SDPK emphasizes a socially oriented development, economic revival and has been a great pleader for the establishment of a parliamentary system. The party played an important role in the Tulip Revolution of 2005 and in large-scale public protests against the Bakiev government in April and November 2006. Prominent members are Roza Otunbayeva the interim President from April 2010 until December 2011 and the current President of Kyrgyzstan Amzzbek Atambayev. Because the party is one of the few parties in Kyrgyzstan that genuinely calls for a liberal democracy, it has good ties with the west. The party is said to have contacts with the Socialist International (SI), but it does not have any status within the SI. The SDPK came in second in the parliamentary elections of 2010 gaining 26 seats. They formed a coalition with the Respublika Party and the Ata-Zhurt Party (Europeanforum.net).

Omurbek Tekebayev founded Ata-Meken in 1992 following a split from the Erkin Kyrgyzstan party. He has been the party leader ever since. The party participated in all parliamentary elections, winning seats in the Kyrgyz parliament in 1994 and

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<sup>1</sup> A term that describes participation in Internet-based forms of political participation—such as joining online groups or signing online petitions—that has little to no real-world impact (Morozov, 2009).

2000. Tekebayev was Speaker of Parliament from March 2005 till February 2006, but resigned after a clash with former President Bakiyev. The party favours parliamentary democracy and economic reforms and can be considered centre left. It favours a compromise between various social sectors and government bodies. Ata-Meken is popular mostly in the north of Kyrgyzstan. Therefore the party is trying to strengthen its ranks with members of the Parliament representing different regions, hoping to widen its support bases. In the parliamentary elections of 2010 it finished fifth. The party has 18 seats in the parliament (Europeanforum.net).

Respublika is a new party founded in 2010. Unlike other nationalistic parties, the pro-parliamentary party Respublika embraces Kyrgyzstan's ethnic diversity. Moreover, the party tries to capture the youth vote. In the 2010 parliamentary elections, of the top ten candidates on the party list, the 40-year old leader of Respublika, businessman Omurbek Babanov, was the second oldest, and the youngest being only 25. Babanov (previously deputy prime minister under Bakiyev), is one of Kyrgyzstan's richest citizens, giving the party considerable financial resources. Due to business considerations, Babanov has welcomed closer ties with both Russia and the European Union, the US and Turkey. Respublika came in fourth in the parliamentary elections of 2010 and currently has 23 seats in parliament. Respublika has formed a governing coalition with Ata Zhurt and the Social Democratic Party. Omurbek Babanov currently is the Prime Minister (Europeanforum.net).

Ak-Shumkar did not gain any seats in the 2010 parliamentary elections, even though the party was seen as a genuine contender. The party received only 2.6 percent of the votes, far below the threshold of 5 percent. Ak-Shumkar was founded in 2005 as "Union of Democratic Forces". Its leader, Temir Sariyev, was a candidate in the 2009 presidential elections (receiving 7 percent of the votes). The party wants to give more power to the business community and favours free and fair elections (Europeanforum.net).

The Kyrgyz diaspora has created parties representing the interests of hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyz labour immigrants abroad. The biggest of those parties is called Zamandash, established in 2007. In the 2010 parliamentary elections Zamandash gained 2.1 percent of the vote, gaining no seats (Europeanforum.net).

The members of active interest groups Kalis, Civil Union "For reforms and result", Youth Council, Ak Shumkar Kut and Leader were selected to take part at focus group interview about their civic activities.

All these youth activist groups aim at engaging youth in Kyrgyzstan in political life of the country through information campaigns, mobilization of youth through new media and organization of various events that involve youth. Civil Union "For reforms and result" aims at reforming police in Kyrgyzstan and at engaging youth in elections.

Average 8-10 participants have taken part in each focus group interview. First, I gave them to fill out a short questionnaire (Appendix 1) about their SNS exposure. Then I asked the focus group interview questions listed in Appendix 2. Each focus group interview lasted on average 2-3 hours, it was in both Russian and Kyrgyz languages, and all of them were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

I used an interview guide (Appendix 2) to engage participants in a discussion about their civic work. Related to their use of media, I asked what sorts of media (if any) they use as a part of their participation in civic groups and activities. I asked, "Why do you use these media? What is good/helpful about them? What are some drawbacks or limitations?" I then asked specifically about social media, including Facebook, Twitter, Odnoklassniki and Moy Mir. I inquired about civic-oriented sharing on their personal pages by asking, "On your SNS profiles, do you have any information related to your participation in [group/activity]? What is the purpose of (not) including this information on your profile?" I also asked participants whether they signal anything about their political interests online and again followed up, asking them to explain why. In the current analysis, I focus on participants' responses to these questions.

All participants, total 71 of which 41 (about 60%) indicated that they could access the Internet from their phones. All participants reported that they have both Odnoklassniki and Moy Mir accounts. Half of the participants reported having Facebook accounts, and about 70% of these Facebook users indicated that they check Facebook every day during a normal week. Most of the participants reported that they spend average 1-2 hours on Facebook. Few participants (n=10), reported having Twitter accounts.

In analyzing descriptions of their media use, I recognized that participants described different approaches to using social media for their civic work, particularly related to their expression. I used a thematic analytic approach to explore these expression differences and to identify major patterns characterizing their online expression. I chose thematic analysis because of its appropriateness for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns that capture salient distinctions in a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I began by coding one-third of the transcripts (n = 23) collaboratively to enable constant dialogue about the development and application of codes (Smagorinsky, 2008).

## **5. Findings**

### **RQ1: Do participants trust the information they get from social media and SNS?**

Participants are skeptical about the information they get from Facebook. They see FB as an alternative source of information to traditional media, because they think

traditional media in Kyrgyzstan serve the interests of particular people in power or their owners, and that they are not independent. According to them, SNS are independent and average people are the sources of information on SNS which makes it easier to find truth by reading comments from them.

Most of the participants check the information they get on SNS even if that information is provided by their friends, relatives or colleagues whom they know. However, they do not trust the information posted by the users whom they do not know.

*Bakay, a young member of Ata Meken Political Party: I believe what is posted if a person whom I know posts information on Facebook.*

*Murat from the same party: Now TV channels do not give operative information, everything they give is a trash. For example, during Bakiev's rule, when there were demonstrations happening in the country, the main TV Channel in the country KTR disseminated the information that everything was ok in the country. Diesel.elcat.kg was blocked. Journalists could disseminate information mainly through SNS. So, I believe the information on SNS.*

*Adilet from SDPK Political Party: I believe in information on SNS only 50%, because on SNS people post information without checking its accuracy. Unchecked and inaccurate information becomes a lie afterwards.*

*Bektur from the same party: I cannot say whether I believe in information on SNS or not, because I analyze the information, for example, we get information provided by Russian and by Western information sources and both of them exaggerate the information, but we analyze the information ourselves.*

*Asel from the same party: The same information is given differently in different sources; a journalist is filtering the information and providing it according to his/her worldview, that is why this information should be checked from two or three sources at first. After this one could trust this information or not, but we do not check it, we read only one source and think that it is true information. I do not trust the information on Facebook even if it is written by my relative or a close acquaint. I read information from links, because I think this information is more trustworthy and reliable.*

*Manas from the same party: Generally we get information from TV and Internet and other sources and come home to analyze them. We sit to drink tea at home, one family member saw it on TV, one got it from Internet or newspaper and we analyze it during our talks and our opinion is shaped after that.*

Participants tend not to trust political information they get from SNS.

*Aydin from the same party: If there is an information on SNS about a know-how in technology, you trust it. The type of information that does not have trust is political information. Politics is a multifaceted, that is why nobody believes in them.*

*Almanbet from Zamandash Political Party: Each TV Channel and newspaper belongs to each political party and they give paid information and KTR gives filtered information in order not to panic people.*

*Gleb from Respublika Party: In media there is too much disinformation. For example, when we had a revolution they gave the information which is far from real situations in the country. They just read a fairy-tale. That is why I mostly read Diesel forum, there is a section Politics and Society.*

Participants think that there is mostly unnecessary information on SNS.

*Tabildi from the same party: I do not like the idea of SNS. Especially the fact that most people there use abusive language. Why I need to know what someone ate for breakfast or someone is going to go on a bat with friends? It is not interesting for me to know whose boyfriend he is or what present he gave to his girlfriend on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March. There is a lot of unnecessary information on SNS.*

Participants tend to believe in information on SNS if it has photos or videos.

*Nazira from the same party: When something happens, all people discuss it, comment it, and at the same time post photos of it and I think we get more information on SNS.*

*Aibek from the same party: On SNS nobody is responsible for the information they post. I am suspicious of the information on SNS, I just check it on Google.*

*Nazira: Of course I believe in information on SNS, because if there were no SNS, all information would be disseminated in a format which is suitable for governments. For example, events in Crimea.*

*Ilham from the same party: If there are real facts and plus video, one can believe in it.*

*Maksat from the same party: Generally, you should not believe in news until you see them with your own eyes.*

*Amantur from the same party: Now it is such a time that you cannot trust anyone but yourself.*

Participants are suspicious of the information they get on SNS, because they think that it is easy to manipulate users on SNS.

*Janara from the same party: I believe in some people on SNS. SNS are used by users in their own interests and they manipulate there. They ask you to press 'like' button or to write a comment. For example on Barakelde.kg the administrators manage all comments.*

*Moderator: Is it possible?*

*Maksat: This is an ordinary program written by a human and it is possible to do that.*

*Ilham: SNS also can manipulate in order to get more 'likes' they get registered themselves and put 'likes' and write comments.*

Participants follow events happening in other countries mostly through SNS by reading posts from participants of these events.

*Mirlan from Ak Shumkar Kut Youth Movement: When people post information on SNS, other people also start commenting it and by reading their opinions in comments you also make conclusions for yourself.*

*Syezdbek from the same movement: Now what is happening in Ukraine, all Russian websites are blocked in Ukraine. And how could we know what is happening there? We knew everything from Facebook, all information about what is happening, how many people died etc. You read from different posts and objective pictures comes out itself.*

Participants' attitudes towards SNS show that they tend to see SNS as an alternative source of information to traditional media and to believe that the truth can be found in discussions and comments posted on SNS. They also believe in information on SNS because the people who post that information are their friends.

## **RQ2: What political activities on Facebook do participants engage in?**

Most participants indicated that they use FB to connect to their members and inform public about their activities and events. They also use it in order to create public opinion about particular issues in society. They gave successful examples of using SNS to create a resonance in public opinion.

*Risbek from Kalis Youth Movement: For example, our post about gays in our country was highly discussed. When we posted a video on Odnoklassniki it had many likes and more than 100 comments.*



*Maksat from Jashtar Keneshi Youth Movement: And one more example, today in the morning in Osh there was a meeting of gays about protecting their rights. And Sonunbek who is ex-chief of Youth Council in Osh wrote me a message through FB inviting people to join them against gays. And most people joined them through FB. Now at the moment we are following them on FB. It is happening in Osh Shami hotel in Osh. And people who joined them went to the place where gays were meeting and expelled gays from there. It is very good.*

*Mirlan from the same movement: We can give another example. We danced Kara Jorgo dance in a main square in Bishkek and put the video of it on FB and it was highly discussed on FB and we actively wrote comments.*

*Mirlan2 from the same movement: We mostly post on FB our own activities, and mainly propaganda about patriotism. We post by texts or jokes, in short we post news on our FB page every day. Ulan: We have our own Development Strategy and its 35<sup>th</sup> article says "Actively engage in SNS", especially in our head office. The members who sit in head office are online on FB the whole day.*

*Mirlan2: Some people write to us through SNS. We explain them everything about our organization through FB.*

Almost all of the Youth Movements organize campaigns and events and post videos and photos of their events on SNS and follow the reaction of SNS users.

*Bahridin from Leader Youth Movement: Recently I have visited Osh and met people who followed us on FB and they were motivated by our activities through FB and wanted to do the activities like we are doing.*

*Aikol from the same movement: They ask questions on FB and we answer them. For example, they saw that one of the organizers of the Ak Kalpak day is our organization....*

*Moderator: How did you organize it?*

*Bahridin: We called people to massively dance Kara Jorgo. And SNS helped us to organize this event. And we also went to each university in order to call students to this event. We want to be patriots of our country, because some people came through SNS, but some people understand us better through face-to-face conversation.*

*Aikol: When people gathered in a main square to dance Kara Jorgo, they told us that their sense of patriotism has increased.*

*Bahridin: We posted the video of this event on SNS and our citizens who are living in other countries wrote comments such as "fine fellows", they also wrote that during the last years there were only demonstrations in Kyrgyzstan and for the first time we organized such a positive event.*

*Aiperi from the same movement: At first we were expecting around 500 participants for this event as a flashmob. We distributed information calling people to come to dance Kara Jorgo if they call themselves a “Kyrgyz” and in the end more than 3000 people came. There were too many people. I think that if you want to do something, you can do it.*

*Moderator: Did people comment on the video you posted about this event on your SNS?*

*Aiperi: Yes, they wrote. What I remember from the comments is that: “If a patriotic feeling of one is not awakened after watching all of this, then we cannot call this person a Kyrgyz”.*

*Toychubay: Kara Jorgo dance influenced positively not only people in Kyrgyzstan, but also our citizens who are living in other countries. Kyrgyz citizens living in Korea also organized Kara Jorgo dance event in Nooruz celebrations after watching our event.*

*Bahriddin: After watching our event on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March, Ak Kalpak day, when we organized this dance, people came and asked for our visit cards, contacts.*

Most political parties and youth movements in the sample have PR managers who update their FB pages and post news, announcements, photos and events to their SNS.

*Rasul from Zamandash Political Party: I am a PR manager of the party and I post on SNS information about our meetings, round-tables, events, trainings, seminars, activities, announcements, news, problems for three years now. Ulanbek: Our activities do not reach villages. On SNS we mostly follow Ata Meken political party guys' activities.*

*Nurlanbek: Our party was one of the organizers of Ak Kalpak day on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March. Why did we organize it? First of all we asked this question: why all people in our country celebrate Valentine's day on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February and why don't they celebrate the Ak Kalpak day? It is one of our national values and the youth should know about it. The purpose of this event was to deliver it to youth and not to forget this value. We decided to awaken people's patriotic feelings. We all wore kalpaks and made a big Kalpak and were carrying it the whole day during this event. After we put it on a car and rode around the city even it was cold on that day.*

Participants stated that it was impossible to get media coverage of their activities, because journalists ask for money for their coverage or do not mention the name of the organization saying that it is PR material.

*Murat from Political party Ata Meken: We mostly contact with our new members through SNS. They also apply to us with their questions through SNS. We explain*

*them the ways of becoming our party's member. And they become our members. Nuraziz from the same party: Except for that, we use SNS to disseminate information. It is difficult to get media coverage of our activities that is why we post them on SNS.*

Some participants are skeptical about using SNS for disseminating information believing that SNS is not an effective tool to get people involved in their activities.

*Rinat from Reforma Youth Movement: Well, on the one hand on Facebook sometimes I only write about our work, our ideas, sometimes about the political situation, but lately more and more rarely. Because I realized during the last two years, well ... that Facebook is very difficult to use to mobilize people around our activities. Because we invited people, and for example, at an event at round tables, but no action. People press 'like', i.e. Facebook is a place where it is very easy for people to make decisions, to 'like', to write words of encouragement, to repost, and then they forget it. Because the information flow is large and very intense, and after 10 minutes posts are already forgotten. Therefore, I cannot personally use Facebook for the work. And so it is even more a so-called hobby for me.*

*Atir from the same movement: What is the use of FB in our work? Well, the article came out, we will post it on SNS. But receive around 10 likes. Well, this is not cold, not hot. Positive result was when we organized online petitions on support of police reform. And we disseminated it through Facebook and got the signatures.*

*Rinat: What is the disadvantage of Facebook? If you have a website, a man who comes to your website knows exactly why he/she is there. He/she wants to get information on the reform of the Interior Ministry, he/she gets focused. Members of Facebook or Twitter, as a rule, do not focus on the information. They read everything and yes, respectively, you cannot hold your audience. If I were to prepare a media strategy, I'd better have a good website where a user who comes, will watch and have a thorough reading. Well, I hope I clearly explained.*

### **RQ3: Do participants perceive Facebook as an appropriate venue for political activity?**

Participants think that FB is not an appropriate venue for political activity in Kyrgyzstan at the moment. But they believe in Facebook's potential to be such a venue in the future. They stated that in Kyrgyzstan at the present moment internet connection is not widespread and rural areas are out of information flow. They also said that mostly young people are using SNS and they are not interested in politics. The more politically active part of population is formed of adults who represent a small part of SNS users in the country.

*Risbek from Kalis Youth Movement: SNS is being used in order to disseminate information and I think that it cannot create political participation. SNS are used mostly by young people and they are not interested in politics. People from the Soviet times do not know how to use SNS and young people are busy with rumours on SNS.*

*Rinat from Reforma Youth Movement: The level of education of SNS users is different. On Odnoklassniki a certain category of people are sitting and they are more pro-Russian. And on Facebook and Twitter more educated, pro-Western users are sitting. And I am sitting on Facebook. On Facebook it is very difficult to hold an audience around some ideas because there are so many diverse information, everything ranging from politics ending with global issues of humanity, and the flow of information is very intensive. Personal life, food etc. And an average user just reads your article and immediately forgets it. It is a disadvantage of Facebook. There have been periods in my life when I was sitting there for hours. Some users do not need what we write, if we write about our work, there is not much interest in it on FB, because what people want on SNS is just simple human things to be discussed.*

*Moderator: Do you think they are not interested in your information?*

*Rinat: Many people are not. If you have a website, a visitor who comes to your website knows exactly why he comes there. He wants to get information on the reform of the Interior Ministry, he is focused. Users on Facebook or Twitter, as a rule, are not focused on the information. You cannot hold your audience. If I were to prepare a media strategy for our organization, I would launch a good website where a user who comes will watch and have a thorough reading.*

Participants think that it is difficult to get people involved to their activities through FB, because most users only virtually support their activities and in real life they do not take actions, i.e. do not come to vote, take part in an event or sign a petition etc.

*Rinat: Facebook could be an additional tool to promote our information, but not the main one. Maybe there are certain examples of successful cases when the protesters were mobilized through Facebook in foreign countries. In Russia, Ukraine, Egypt people were mobilized through Facebook. Well, we have some reasons, the level of our activists has not reached their level.*

*Well, I remember when we were collecting signatures during local elections in Bishkek in 2012 when the party for which I was volunteering, used Facebook and SNS, they gained popularity, but in fact on Election Day, all those who were sitting on the social networks and supporting us did not come. We were aware of this risk, but it is not proof that the one who sits on the Internet at the same diesel.elcat.kg*

*forum is very active, they are active on the Internet in a virtual space, and less active in real life, i.e. they just sit there, press 'like' button, think they are clever, philosophize. If 100 users like your event on FB and say 'yes we will come to your event', then of those who are on Facebook and joined the event online, will come about 15 people, maximum 20. Well it is possible to make a good PR through social networks. Same when police reform has made the campaign to collect signatures, we have posted this information, promoted it heavily on FB and collected signatures. But actually we have collected most of the signatures, about 10,000, from the regions through face-to-face meetings.*

Participants think that political parties are using FB in order to make PR for themselves and not to mobilize people to make real changes.

*Manas from SDPK Party: For example, we recently made a statement on fighting corruption. I shared it on our FB page. There are different views within our party, too, but I try to post them on FB.*

*Adilet: Political parties in Kyrgyzstan are busy organizing concerts and other activities. Why are they doing that? They are doing these activities in order to do PR for themselves. The purpose of political parties' activities should not be doing PR, but developing the country. "Zamandash" and other parties which have money are organizing such activities systematically. When our party organizes such events and activities, I do not want to write about them on my FB because it is a cheap PR and boasting.*

#### **RQ4: Does political activity on Facebook influence general political participation?**

The majority of the participants think that the political activity on FB cannot influence general political participation in the country. They think that SNS can deliver average citizens expectations, recommendations and problems to empower holders, but the power holders do not react, because they do not serve public interests and serve only their own interests and they are closed to public. Participants think that even demonstrations and open meetings cannot change anything in the country, let alone SNS. It was clear from the following conversation:

*Gulgaki from Ak Shumkar Party: I always observe on Twitter that people write their problems there and one depute always answers them through Twitter. I think that SNS are an appropriate means for political information, because the messages reach the people who take decisions in our country.*

*Baatyr from the same party: I do not agree with you. We can deliver our words only through demonstrations and meetings.*

*Asel from the same party: Well, people can write their problems on SNS, and the people in power do read them, but do not solve these problems.*

*Baatyr: I have never heard before that somebody delivered his/her message through SNS to the people in power and they solved his/her problem. They do not solve it even if he/she goes to their cabinet at the White House and do you think that they will solve it if he/she writes it on SNS?*

*Gulgaki: It works, if you talk about it again and again through different SNS platforms and then the traditional media will join you and it will reach the government. It is possible to use SNS for political information.*

*Asel: If everyone starts writing to government their own opinions, there will be a chaos.*

*Baatyr: Even if people are gathered in front of the White House, their voices are not heard, and do you think that they will be heard if they write them on FB?*

*Murat from Ata Meken Political Party: I think that average citizens' voices cannot be heard by government people through SNS. It can be heard if there is a close relative working in government or a well-known person.*

*Nurkiz: It is possible to get your message delivered through SNS. But many other people like us are also delivering their messages. That is why they do not read all of them.*

*Risbek from Kalis Youth Movement: Nowadays people are using SNS for political information, but there is no effect. Our politicians have got used to react only when people organize demonstrations. People can hardly get their voices heard by demonstrating again and again.*

*Ayday: I think that it is not an appropriate medium for political information. There are many deputies in my friends' list on FB and they are just posting information about what they have done and not solving the citizens' problems. They are just reading news. FB is being used only as a medium to disseminate information and it cannot create political activeness or participation.*

*Risbek: We have many fans on FB, but when it comes to real life activities you cannot find any of them.*

Even if most participants do not believe in the effectiveness of SNS, they gave successful use of SNS by other activists and they think that the success of a campaign depends on the issue or a problem, whether it is a widespread problem or it concerns only some part of the society.

*Atir from Reforma Youth Movement: In our country FB cannot be seen as a tool to influence. However Baratov was able to turn the SNS in Kyrgyzstan into a tool of influencing. Remember last year he organized a campaign by painting zebras on the traffic, and then another campaign by collecting garbage in the city, it certainly was a funny action and it worked. And government officials and senior officials heard about the announcements of this campaign through information agencies and the funny thing is, the day before the events in the evening they collected trash all over the city, but in the morning campaign participants still found out garbage. In our work, if we want to have those areas that we have chosen, they are not required due to the fact that we are working with the regions and with a population of over 30 years old and this population does not use the SNS. Well, then the technical capabilities in the regions are weak.*

*Reaction of users to your campaign depends on the complexity of the topic, if you publish information there. Just a simple example: "hey people look, garbage is everywhere", it is clear to all and close to everyone. This will also cause a good response if you post information that police had tortured someone who is well-known. If you write complex things like, 'our political Party's ideological platform is based on liberal principles'. It is difficult to get reaction. Or if you post something like, 'The Reform of the Ministry of Internal Affairs should include updated training and recruitment competitions', people on SNS just do not know what it is. And of course we are left without the attention of the majority of SNS users. That is, the reaction depends on the complexity of the topics on the SNS. Rinat: Recently there was a terrible panic by users on SNS, when such information was posted as "Girls beware, there is a maniac in the city", and that panic reached police, and they were forced to give a press conference that no maniac was in the city. This information was disseminated very rapidly on SNS "Girls, beware, maniac escaped from a mental hospital", then there was a version that someone was caught, and then he ran away again. And people believed in this information, no one checked this information. The reporter called the Interior Ministry and asked; users of Facebook did not call. They do not have opportunity and desires. So we see that it is possible to deceive people. That is, social networks can be a very strong tool for manipulation.*

*Atir: Facebook is only a communication tool, if the government itself is closed, if the bureaucratic apparatus degenerates, if they do not care what people think and say, not only Facebook, but open meetings also do not work. That is, the problem is not in the tools, the problem lies in the original openness of public authorities. If it is open, he wants interaction with population, it certainly will use Facebook. And it will be good. But it does not depend on Facebook. Political parties in our country do not serve the interests of people; they want to get into parliament. I'm not negatively perceiving the situation. This is all possible if state agencies are open, of course, they can use Facebook and Twitter. Some officials have already used.*

*Some MPs like Dastan Bekeshov are using very actively, he lives on Facebook. Who else?.. Jeenbekov also lives on Facebook, there are such moments. Dastan Bekeshov is an open person, and he uses Facebook to spread his ideas, talk with others. And those who are closed will not use Facebook. FB cannot be a bridge between public and government unless of course the Prime Minister himself does not come on Facebook. Although during the elections I add friends from politicians such as Sariev and many others. I think that they do not sit there themselves. In our work the result of a meeting is much higher than 20 posts on Facebook. People who come to the meeting hear us and we speak face to face, they express their opinions and thoughts. It is much more stable than the one who pressed 'like' on Facebook.*

However some participants tend to believe that FB is an appropriate venue for political activity, because there are many successful cases when FB was used in order to mobilize people, to create public opinion on a particular issue and take actions, such as initiating a law.

*Risbek from Zamandash Political Party: FB is an appropriate medium for political information. For example, LGBTs in our country are using it very effectively. They also organized a press conference stating that their rights are being violated. And now Torobay Zulpukarov, the SDPK party deputy, is initiating a law which prohibits marriage for LGBTs.*

*Daniyar from Leader Youth Movement: I think that SNS cannot be a bridge between citizens and power holders, because power holders look at citizens only through the windows of their cars when they are going to work and through the windows of their offices at work. And their consultants do not deliver them the truth.*

*Toychubay: If the problem is very important ad you write about it to their personal mail, no one will answer it. But if you write about this problem as a comment on SNS, even if he/she does not read it, their consultants will deliver it, but even if they are informed about this problem, they will not solve it.*

*Manas from SDPK Party: Only young politicians use SNS, but older politicians do not. They are divided according to their regions, for example politicians from Talas get together in Talas, and the ones from Naryn get together in Naryn and solve the problems of their regions.*



The participants who think that FB cannot be an appropriate venue for political activity expressed that in rural areas there are “Ejeshki”<sup>1</sup> who fulfill the function of FB and that they can easily mobilize people there.

*Aydin from the same party: In our country SNS cannot mobilize people for demonstrations. In villages there are “Ejeler” who do propaganda and they can easily mobilize people for demonstrations.*

*Manas: It is not possible to mobilize people through SNS. In every village there are “Ejeshki” who gather demonstrators. There is no Internet connection in villages, no iPhones, and the guys are sitting in streets and talking and activist “Ejeshki” quickly create necessary public opinion among local people. And through SNS one can only disseminate intriguing information about forthcoming demonstrations and the ones who are interested will come as observers. Only spectators are needed.*

*Nazgul from the same party: You cannot disseminate political information through SNS in regions, because most people there are sitting on mail.ru agent and just talking and chatting. They are not interested in political information at all. There are such places in Kyrgyzstan where not only Internet connection is a problem, but also mobile phone connection is absent. Our country is not developed yet to the level when we can mobilize people through SNS.*

*Amantur from Respublika Party: For example, Putin is organizing press conference once a year. And it is not effective to talk to people through SNS. Today it is more effective to go to Main Square and shout there.*

*Nazira from the same party: Recently I read on SNS that our deputy Dastan Bekeshov claimed that all deputies must register on Twitter. It turns out that the deputies also think that they should communicate with citizens and it is easier to do it through SNS because there are different opinions on SNS from different users and it is easier to find the truth there.*

*Amantur: Do you remember there was a voting in Parliament and deputies were given two buttons one button is “for”, the other one is “against” and deputies could not learn that the green button is “for” and the red one is “against”? And do you think how they can use Twitter? (laughing)*

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<sup>1</sup> Specific group of women in villages of Kyrgyzstan who are mostly active during elections and demonstrations. They are paid by political parties or political leaders or interest groups in order to create public opinion around political issues among local people through dissemination of rumors and word of mouth.

## 6. Conclusion

The current study is the first research of the civically active youth in Kyrgyzstan. It focuses on their engagement in different patterns of online expression and on the considerations underlying their expression decisions. The findings from this research suggest that participants are skeptical about the information they get from Facebook. They see Facebook as an alternative source of information to traditional media, because they think traditional media in Kyrgyzstan serve the interests of particular people in power or their owners, and that they are not independent. According to them, SNS are independent and average people are the sources of information on SNS which makes it easier to get accurate information by reading comments from them.

Most of the participants check the information they get on SNS even if that information is provided by their friends, relatives or colleagues whom they know. However they do not trust the information posted by the users whom they do not know.

Participants tend not to trust political information they get from SNS. They think that there is mostly unnecessary information on SNS. They tend to believe in information on SNS if it has photos or videos. Participants are suspicious of the information they get on SNS, because they think that it is easy to manipulate users on SNS. Participants follow events happening in other countries mostly through SNS by reading posts from the participants of these events.

Most participants from political parties indicated that they use FB to connect to their members and inform public about their activities and events. They also use these networks in order to create public opinion about particular issues in society. They gave successful examples of using SNS to create a resonance in public opinion around some issues. Almost all the Youth Movements organize campaigns and events and post videos and photos of their events on SNS and follow the SNS users' reactions. Most political parties and youth movements in the sample have PR managers who update their FB pages and post news, announcements, photos and events to their Facebook pages. Participants stated that it was impossible to get media coverage of their activities, because journalists ask for money for their coverage or do not mention the name of the organization saying that it is PR material. Some participants are skeptical about using SNS for disseminating information believing that SNS is not an effective tool to get people involved in their activities.

As for the findings regarding participants' views on Facebook as a political outlet, the sample generally claimed that FB is not an appropriate venue for political activity in Kyrgyzstan at the moment. But they believe in Facebook's potential to be such a venue in the future. They stated that in Kyrgyzstan internet connection is not widespread at the present moment and rural areas are out of information flow.

They also stated that mostly young people are using SNS and they are not interested in politics. Adults constitute a more politically active part of population, but they are a small part of SNS users in the country.

Participants think that it is difficult to get people involved in their activities through FB, because most users only virtually support their activities and in real life they do not take actions, i.e. do not come to vote, take part at an event or sign a petition etc.

Participants think that political parties are using FB in order to make PR for themselves and not to mobilize people to make real changes.

The majority of the participants think that the political activity on FB cannot influence general political participation in the country. They think that SNS can deliver average citizens expectations, recommendations and problems to power holders, but the power holders do not react to them, because they do not serve public interests and serve only their own interests and they are closed to public. Participants think that even demonstrations and open meetings cannot change anything in the country, let alone SNS.

Although most participants do not believe in the effectiveness of SNS, they provided examples of successful SNS usage by other activists. They think that the success of a campaign depends on the issue or a problem, whether it is a widespread problem or whether it concerns only some part of the society.

However some participants tend to believe that FB is an appropriate venue for political activity, because there are many successful cases when FB was used in order to mobilize people, to create public opinion on a particular issue and take actions, such as initiating a law.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Questionnaire**

1. From which sources of information do you get the news?
2. How many hours do you spend a day on the Internet?
3. Which social network do you use?
4. How many hours do you spend daily on social networks?
5. What do you do in social networks?
6. Are you getting political information in social networks?
7. What SNS do you receive political information from?
8. Did you discuss political information you received in the SNS with others?
9. Do you believe in the political information received in the SNS? Why ?
10. Do you have your own page on Facebook ?
11. How many hours a day do you spend on Facebook ?
12. Are you getting political information on Facebook ?
13. Do you distribute political information on Facebook ?
14. If you distribute, what kind of political information do you distribute?

## **Appendix 2**

### **Focus Group Questions**

1. Do you remember when you first signed up for the social networking sites (Odnoklassniki, Moy Mir, V Kontakte, MySpace, Facebook, Twitter etc.) What motivated you to register in SNS?
2. What is the difference between SNS and traditional media?
3. Do you believe in political information on SNS?
4. Can SNS become an effective means of communication between citizens and powerful elite?

5. Can citizens reach authorities through SNS?
6. Can SNS increase political activism in Kyrgyzstan?
7. How do you think that can be an effective means of communication between citizens, voters and political parties?
8. Do you think that the government should regulate the Internet and SNS like in China, Uzbekistan, UAE and Turkey?
9. Is anonymity on SNS good or bad?