

CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS

An Open Access Journal

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Volume 20, Issue 1

THE YOUTH OF KAZAKHSTAN AND KYRGYZSTAN: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL ACTIVISM

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ABSTRACT

The authors have offered a comprehensive analysis of political activism of the Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan youth, identified its specifics in both countries, defining differences and similarities of political involvement of the younger generation.

Keywords: political activism, political involvement, the youth, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan.

Introduction

Studies of youth political activism are highly topical because, first, political involvement is an inalienable part of the political system, social and political institutions and the level of political culture. Political involvement of the younger generation determines, to a great extent, the efficiency of social, economic and political reforms and the country's future. Secondly, at the turn of the twenty-first century young people played an especially prominent role in the protests that shook the North African and Middle Eastern countries. These protests led to regime changes¹ and the so-called color revolutions of the spring of 2011. In many countries, protest movements are used/misused by destructive radical forces. Thirdly, discussions of the nature and level of youth political activism pushed the problem to the forefront of political science. On the one hand, researchers note the low level of political activism of the younger generation that looks a-political and is gradually losing interest in politics. On the other hand, the forms of its political activism is becoming more numerous and gradually acquiring new forms; information technologies play a new, previously unknown, role and influence political behavior of the younger generation to a much greater extent than before. This means that to identify and analyze the causes and factors that led to new forms and new trends in youth political activism we should rely on conceptual approaches and scholarly methods of studies.

We have selected Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as the subject of our studies because they are coping with more or less identical political problems and yet demonstrate certain peculiarities of functioning of their political systems and methods of ensuring stability. We have identified the role of youth in the political processes, its attitude to the current social, economic and political



events and the ways in which the younger generation influences political decision-making in the corridors of power.

Methods of Studies

In our studies we proceeded from the basic scientific approaches that allow us to identify not only traditional but also new types of political activism of the younger generation, including the theory of political participation, which offers the concepts and typologies of political involvement (S. Verba and N. Nie,² L. Milbrath and M. Goel,³ R. Putnam,⁴ J. Ekman and E. Amna⁵); the theory of democracy and political participation (S. Lipset,⁶ D. Collier and S. Levitsky,⁷ G. O'Donnell and P. Schmitter⁸), the institutional theory and political participation (F. Piven and R. Cloward⁹), the rational choice theory (A. Downs,¹⁰ M. Franklin,¹¹ T. Fedderson¹²), the theory of political efficiency (H. Catt,¹³ A. Cambell, G. Gurin and W. Miller,¹⁴ R. Niemi, S. Craig and F. Mattei,¹⁵ P. Abramson and J. Aldrich,¹⁶ A. Acock, N. Clarke and M. Stewart,¹⁷ S. Finkel,¹⁸ R. Hero and C. Tolbert¹⁹); the socio-economic theory and political participation (S. Verba, K. Schlozman, and H. Brady,²⁰ S. Verba and N. Nie,²¹ R. Wolfinger and S. Rosestone,²² T. De Luca,²³ D. Cambell²⁴), the theory of political socialization (M. Jennings²⁵ and R. Niemi, D. Glasberg and D. Shannon,²⁶ L. Powell and J. Cowart,²⁷ K. Varkey,²⁸ T. Janowski and J. Wilson²⁹).

We have chosen both quantitative and qualitative methods. In 2017 and 2018 we carried out quantitative polls among the young people of Kazakhstan based on new technologies—the online Survio platform with digital processing of the data received. The total number of young people of Kazakhstan (between 14 and 29) is 4,656,466; the corresponding number in Kyrgyzstan is 1,768,017. The sampling in Kazakhstan was 930 young people, in Kyrgyzstan, 384. We relied on a quota sampling based in the age, sex, region, town/countryside and ethnicity. Secondly, in 2018 we carried out quality semi-structured interviews with randomly selected questions from questionnaires with 30 young people in Almaty (between 14 and 29) and the same number of young people of the same age in Bishkek to acquire a more profound understanding of their political affiliations and their ideas about politics. The following questions served as the starting point of our assessment of youth political activism of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and of the comparative analysis of its manifestations:

- 1. How do young people between 14 and 29 in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan understand politics?
- 2. Do the young citizens of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan believe that they can be involved in politics and influence political decision-making in their countries and to what extent?
- 3. What methods do the young people of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan use to demonstrate their political activism?
- 4. What is similar and what is different in the manifestations of youth political activism in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan?

Interest in Politics in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

The results of the quantitative polls among and qualitative interviews with young people from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan suggested that over half of the respondents in Kyrgyzstan (58%) and a much smaller share (40.5%) of the respondents in Kazakhstan turn to the Internet and social networks for sociopolitical information.

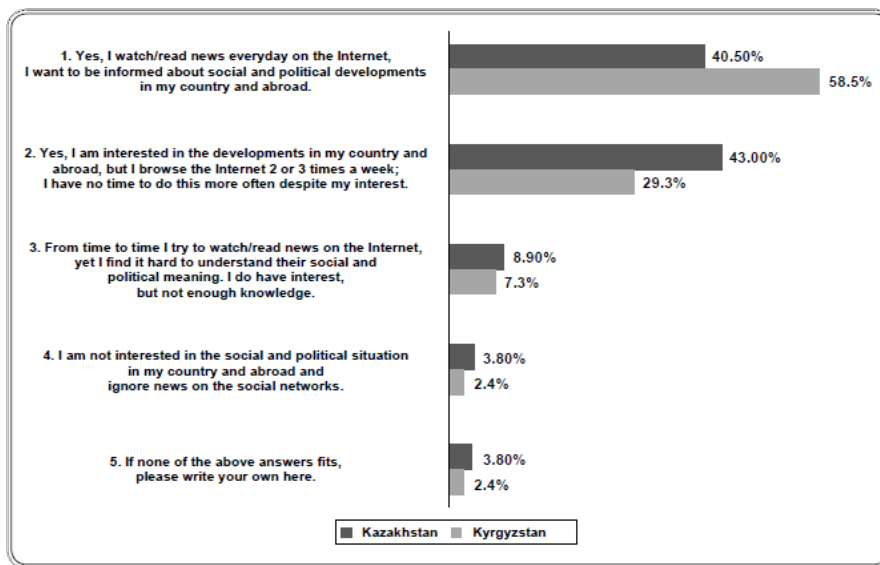
This is probably explained by the following figures: 43% of youth in Kazakhstan said that they had no time to browse the Internet and social networks every day in search of political news; in Kyrgyzstan, only 29.3% complained of a lack of time.

It turned out that 8.9% of the polled in Kazakhstan and 7.3% of the polled in Kyrgyzstan were interested in political news, yet failed to grasp their sociopolitical meanings (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1

Do you Browse the Internet-Media and Social Networks for News?

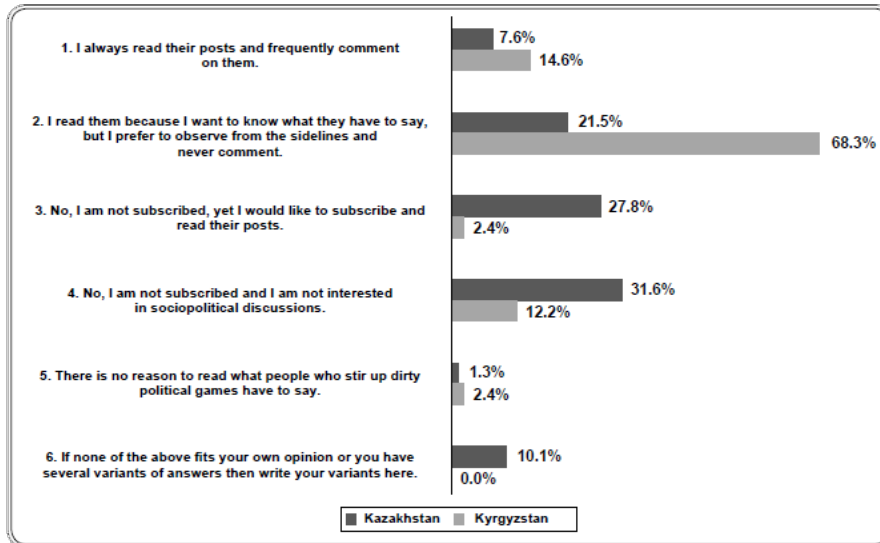




The answers to the question: “Do you read what politicians and political scientists write/say on Facebook about your country’s social and political problems?” invited the following answers: 7.6% of young Kazakhstanis and 14.6% of young Kyrgyz answered that they always read these posts and frequently comment on them; 21.5% of the youth of Kazakhstan against 68.3% of the youth of Kyrgyzstan read posts of politicians and political scientists every day for information and practically never comment on them; 27.8% of the polled in Kazakhstan pointed out that they were not subscribed, yet wanted to be subscribed, to pages of politicians and political scientists. The share of the Kyrgyz respondents who gave the same answer is ten times smaller—2.4% (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2

Do You Read the Posts and Opinions of Politicians and Political Scientists on Facebook about Your Country’s Social and Political Problems?



We should bear in mind that in Kazakhstan the Internet is much more accessible than in Kyrgyzstan: 70% of Kazakhstanis have access to mobile Internet, while 63% use high-speed broadband.³⁰ In Kyrgyzstan only 34% of the total population has access to the Internet.³¹ The results of our studies confirmed that the young people of Kyrgyzstan show a lot of interest in what their politicians and political scientists have to say online. Unlike the younger generation of Kazakhstan, in Kyrgyzstan young people know their political leaders much better; this is probably explained by the country’s geographic and demographic specifics.

Information resources can be described as the main channel through which the younger generation of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan can express their opinions, first and foremost, negative ones. The government blogs, sites and social networks can be used as an alternative source of information about what young people think, and help promptly identify the accumulated contradictions and problems and readily expand the sphere of efficient measures.

Today, when political activism of Kazakhstan citizens is still gaining momentum, the mechanisms of coping with the problem have been already tuned up. In 2009, in Kazakhstan Internet resources were legally defined as media and obliged to observe the

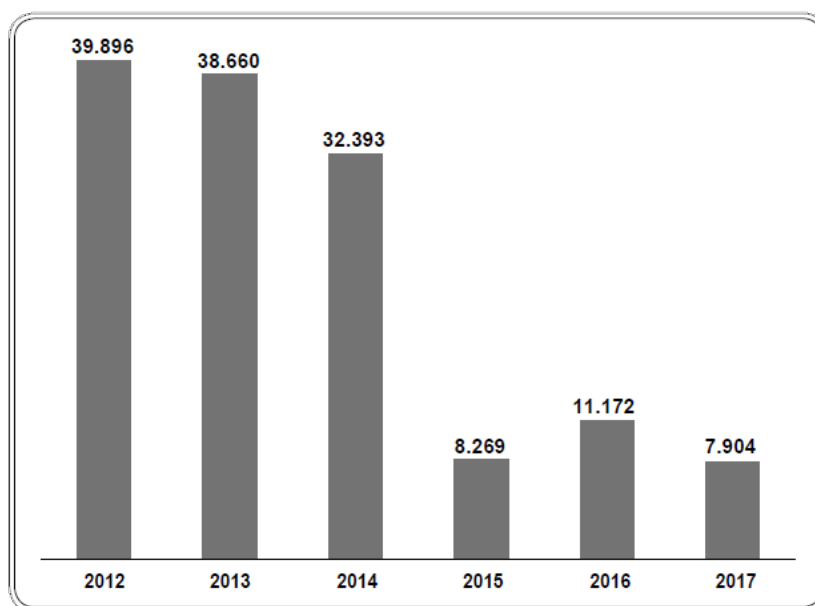


rules applied to all other electronic media. In 2018, the work that had begun in 2016 to tie the IMEI codes of cellular devices to phone numbers was completed. In 2016, it was believed that the IMEI codes of cellular devices should be tied to the phone numbers according to the Law on Counteracting and Fighting Terrorism and Extremism; starting with 2018, all users of mobile telephony are obliged to tie their numbers to their unique identification numbers.³² This is done to preserve stability in Kazakhstan. Its younger generation, however, demonstrates a lot of caution when talking about political events: there is a shared opinion that criticism might end in criminal prosecution. In 2017, anonymous comments on the Internet were banned by law; any comments on the articles and other materials that appeared on the network should be actualized by digital signatures or SMS messages.³³ According to Minister of Information and Mass Communication of Kazakhstan Dauren Abaev, this document stipulated the legal regulation of social relations in the media. At the same time, new registration technologies will keep young people away from discussing the most important social and political issues. In Kazakhstan the share of those “not interested in sociopolitical discussions” (31.6%) is higher than in Kyrgyzstan (12.2%). On the one hand, this might mean that young people are more interested in practical issues than in political discussions and that this does not interfere with the smooth functioning of the political system. On the other hand, this might mean that the younger generation does not trust people in power in Kazakhstan and does not believe that it can influence the government and political decision-making.

For example, our analysis of student appeals on the blogs of the Ministry of Education and Science and wardens of higher educational establishments (see Fig. 3) revealed that only 0.001% of students openly spoke out about their problems on the official pages of the government of Kazakhstan. Students do not trust the efficiency of online communication feedback. Young people doubt that their communications will attract attention and prefer not to waste time on written complaints on the official Internet pages of heads of educational establishments and the government.

Figure 3

Dynamics of the Number of Appeals on the Blogs of the Ministers of Kazakhstan in 2012-2017



The state, however, is consistently narrowing down the already narrow possibilities of using communication resources through which regular people try to inform the government of their problems so that to expand the field of common positive efforts. Today, the number of requests and appeals from people on the blogs of the ministers of the government of Kazakhstan has dropped. In 2015, the requirements to those who placed their appeals on the blogs of the leaders of state structures were adjusted to Art 6 of the Law on the Procedure for Dealing with Appeals of Physical and Juridical Persons (enacted on 01.01.2015); they should be signed or verified by digital signature.³⁴

To lodge their appeal in the virtual reception office, people have to authorize themselves in the system by a unique identification number for physical persons and by business identification number for juridical persons and confirm it by digital signature.

This means that prior to 2015 many of those who lodged their appeals did it anonymously; after 2015 all their personal information becomes apparent; as could be expected, the number of those ready to communicate with authorities dropped. As a result, latent conflicts, irritation and other negative feelings in the youth milieu might remain unnoticed.

Forms of Political Activism

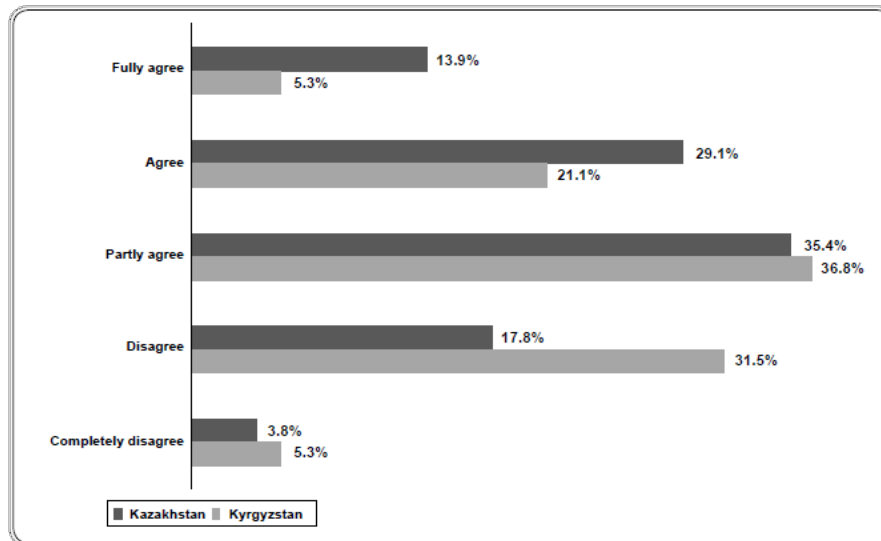
Today, the young people of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are attracted by new forms of political activism realized through



volunteering, involvement in daily offline and online political discussions and informal interest groups.³⁵ This is supported by the fact that 43% of the respondents in Kazakhstan agree that today the active involvement on the Internet has already replaced traditional forms of political involvement and that there is no need to join a political party or a youth organization. The share in Kyrgyzstan is 26.4%. It is sufficient to browse the Internet to receive information, discuss news, express indignation and read posts of politicians and public figures (see Fig. 4). In Kazakhstan, the share of those who disagree with the above is 21.6%; in Kyrgyzstan, 36.8%.

Figure 4

Do You Agree that Today an Active Involvement on the Internet has Replaced Traditional Political Activism?



This means that young people in Kyrgyzstan disagree with the youth of Kazakhstan who regard an active involvement on the Internet as a form of political activism. The polled were convinced that those actively involved online are and will remain so-called sofa critics, or “slacktivists”³⁶ (to use the modern term); they prefer to follow the events; at critical moments they will remain online and will never use other channels to demonstrate their negative feelings.

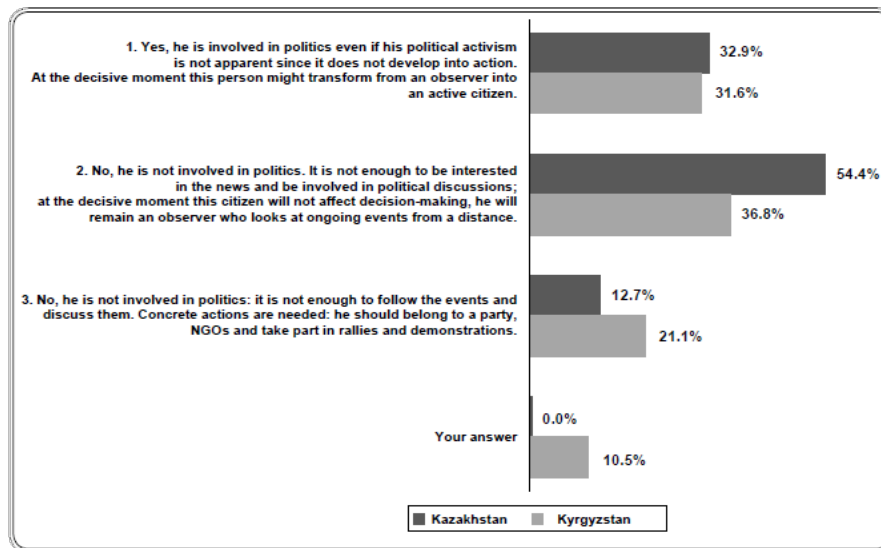
This has been amply confirmed by the answers to the question: “Do you think that a citizen who follows news and discusses and analyzes social and political issues is involved in politics?” In Kyrgyzstan, 21.1% of the respondents believe that virtual political activism is not sufficient; people should be involved in real, offline activism in parties, NGOs, meetings, demonstrations, etc. In Kazakhstan this opinion is shared by 12.7%.

On the other hand, 54.4% of the polled young people in Kazakhstan believe that an observer will remain an observer no matter what, since his position has nothing to do with political activism. At the same time, one out of ten deemed it necessary to point out that active involvement in formal institutions of political activism is needed and that people should demonstrate their negative attitude to state politics at meetings and demonstrations (see Fig. 5).

Figure 5

Do You Think that a Citizen Who Follows News, Discusses and Analyzes Social and Political Issues is Involved in Politics?





According to public opinion, the results of the polls of both countries' youth insist that offline political activism is preferable to virtual involvement. At the same time, people prefer to avoid possible risks and to keep away from political activism, especially if it contradicts the official political course. Mona Eltahawy, an Egyptian-American journalist who lives in New York and who participated in the Arab Spring, is of the same opinion. During an expert interview she gave at the Zagreb Youth Summit (Croatia) she said: Those who never leave the anonymity of the Internet out of fear of being punished for their protests offline are not slacktivists. In Arab countries before the revolution (now known as the Arab Spring) many people discussed politics on the Internet, increased the number of contacts and informal ties through social networks. Later virtual activism developed into action.

This is confirmed by 32.9% of the polled young people in Kazakhstan and 31.6% in Kyrgyzstan, who are convinced that people with an interest in politics, who follow the news on the Internet demonstrate political activism, even if it is low-key. At the opportune moment these people will become active offline participants.

The question: "In which of the listed types of political activism have you taken part?" (see Table 1) drew the following answers: 26.6% of young Kazakhs and 28.0% of the youth of Kyrgyzstan are interested in news, they discuss social and political subjects on social networks and blogs and leave their comments; 5.1% of the young people of Kazakhstan and 7.2% of the young people of Kyrgyzstan answered that they were involved in volunteering, charities and helped poor people or victims of natural disasters.

The youth in Kazakhstan is more active during elections than the young people in Kyrgyzstan (47.8% and 40.6% respectively); on the other hand, young people in Kazakhstan are less interested in membership in political parties, trade unions and youth organizations (4.2%). In Kyrgyzstan the share of such people is 5.1%. The shares of those who prefer to keep away from politics differ greatly: 14.4% in Kazakhstan against 4.7% in Kyrgyzstan.

Table 1

In Which of the Listed Types of Political Activism have You Taken Part? (%)



	Forms of Political Activism	Youth of Kazakhstan	Youth of Kyrgyzstan
1.	I am interested in politics, follow the events and discuss sociopolitical subjects in social nets, blogs and offer my comments under pieces of information	26.6	28.0
2.	I am engaged in charities, volunteer movements, help poor people and victims of natural calamities	5.1	7.2
3.	I vote at presidential and parliamentary elections	47.8	40.6
4.	I am/was a member of a political party, trade union, youth organization	4.2	5.1
5.	I take part in peaceful protests, rallies and strikes	0	10
6.	I am not involved in political life because I am not interested in politics	14.4	4.7
7.	I take part in several types of political activism	1.9	3.3
8.	Other	0	1.1

The Protest Potential of the Youth of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

We have studied the level of protest potential of the younger generation of both countries and tried to find out whether young people are ready to take part in protest actions of all sorts.

Kazakhstan. The question: “Have you ever taken part in peaceful protest marches, meetings, boycotts and signing of petitions?” invited the following answers: All the polled individuals said that they never did and do not want to be involved in the future. Ten percent admitted that they had taken part in protests; during the interviews some of the young people said that involvement in protest actions could hardly be acceptable because this meant siding with the opposition. Others believed that protest rallies and marches could be acceptable, yet they were not ready to take part in them in order to avoid possible criminal investigation, which could potentially undermine their future. Many of the young people are aware of risks; they prefer to stay away from protest actions as useless.

“I will never take part in protests; this is a threat and a big headache. This might affect my husband’s career if my name becomes known” (housewife, 24).

“I will always avoid such actions; I do not want problems. These actions will change nothing. As a peaceful person I do not need the attention of special services and law and order structures. I don’t want to become one of those who come under scrutiny if and when something bad happens” (manager, female, 25).

“In my student years I could have been involved. Today I have children. If I am crippled during such events, nobody will look after my children?” (business woman, 29).

A certain group of the respondents feared that protest actions in Kazakhstan might follow the Ukrainian and Kyrgyz scenario, by which they meant destabilization and interference of other countries into the domestic affairs of their state. One of the respondents believed that rallies were a bad idea: they fanned disagreements between people and the state, undermined national security and threatened authorities, and that they were organized by people seeking profits. It seems that the young Kazakhstanis have opted for this type of political behavior to avoid violations of laws. In 2018, the Esilskiy Court of Astana ruled that the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan movement was an extremist organization.

Kyrgyzstan. Ten percent of Kyrgyz youth gave an affirmative answer to the question “Have you ever taken part in peaceful protest marches, meetings, boycotts and signing of petitions?”

The majority is convinced that there is no criminal responsibility for taking part in protests; this, however, may cost teachers, doctors and civil servants their jobs; but there is no criminal prosecution and their families are not threatened.

“Since 2010 we have more protests than before. This year there are fewer of them, probably because of cold weather (laughter). Protests will begin in the spring. The responses from the state are balanced—this was under President Atambaev. Protestors gather in front of the White House, the media arrive to take pictures for newspapers and social networks. In fact, protests are organized precisely with this aim. When people in power see that there are too many displeased and irritated people, they will try to change something. The top stratum is afraid of criticism; they fear disturbances that may cost them their top posts. Information spreads fast, hence the close attention to social networks” (woman of 26, lawyer).

Young people, nevertheless, are convinced that their involvement in protest meetings will change nothing: there were enough



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rallies and demonstrations during the revolutions of 2005 and 2010, people poured into the streets to change life to the better, yet no changes followed.

“In Kyrgyzstan there is a law that information about prearranged meetings should be provided 12 days before the event. This is why people are not afraid to join. They can be arrested only if they block the roads and interfere with transport flow. People had been detained for 5 days for blocking the roads during a meeting. This caused a lot of indignation on social networks; next time when the roads were blocked during a rally people were merely warned” (lawyer, male, 26).

“In 2005 we lived in a suburb, revolutionaries reached it and plundered all the shops. My parents kept me at home. In 2010, plundering was concentrated in the center of Bishkek; the suburbs remained peaceful. My parents did not allow me to go out: I was 14 and they feared for my safety... My parents and relatives never took part in protest rallies. My father is a policeman and as such was involved in the events of 2010” (student, female, 20).

This means that the younger generation of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan does not want to be involved in protest actions; this decreases a possibility of destructive protest forms. Young citizens are convinced that protests are hardly efficient when it comes to defending their interests; those who want to protest, do this on social networks. In Kazakhstan young people refuse to go out into the streets with protest slogans, let alone violate laws; in Kyrgyzstan the younger generation has become disenchanted with revolutions as politically, socially and economically inefficient. In Kazakhstan, the majority of the youth consider protests a threat that leads to disagreements in society; in Kyrgyzstan, young people look at protests as a natural phenomenon of the country's political development process.

Conclusion

The quantitative and qualitative studies confirmed the following (see Table 2).

Table 2

Specifics of Political Activism of the Young People of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Young People of Kazakhstan	Young People of Kyrgyzstan
Political activism is realized through institutionalized forms of involvement	Political activism is realized through non-institutionalized forms of involvement
Low assessment of the level of their political activism	High assessment of the level of their political activism
Over half of the respondents believe that activism in social networks can replace traditional forms	Over half of the respondents believe that activism in social networks cannot replace traditional forms
Protest is regarded as a threat to social stability	Protest is regarded as a natural way to defend their interests
Avoid active forms of protest as contradicting legal procedures; youth never goes beyond the legal framework	Take part in protests yet the experience of several revolutions in the history of their country taught them to doubt their efficiency and their role as stimuli of social and economic changes
Voting is seen as one of the duties and a sign of patriotism	Voting is a response to current political reforms
Actively read on social networks and on the Internet what other people think, but rarely state their opinions, even if they want to	Actively read on social networks and the Internet what other people think and, if they want, they always express their opinion
The majority of young people prefers to use aliases when writing critical comments about the country's policies	The majority prefers to criticize the policy of the country openly through different channels

Political activism of the youth of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan has a lot of common characteristics:

- (1) The youth is interested in politics, young people are active on the Internet, subscribe to bloggers, political scientists, read commentaries and follow the news;
- (2) In both countries, young people are attracted by new non-institutionalized forms of political activism realized through volunteering, daily political discussions offline and online on social networks, political organizations and informal groups by interests;
- (3) They do not believe that they can efficiently influence political decision-making in their countries through voting, membership in political parties, trade unions and youth organizations;
- (4) They use all sorts of platforms to legally express their interests;
- (5) They choose the most efficient forms of political involvement;
- (6) They deliberately avoid active protests and use social networks to protest, disagree or defend their interests and opinions.

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³⁶A combination of words “slacker” and “activist”, which describes a person actively involved in political propaganda and effort to change the world while remaining in front of his computer. [Back to text](#)

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