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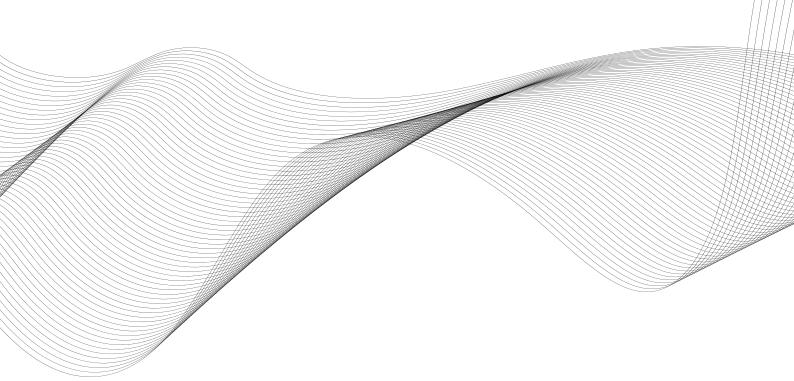Arbeitspapier / working paper

Kyrgyz Diaspora Online: Understanding Political Participation and Transnational Citizenship

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Abstract

In an attempt to address the debate among social science scholars regarding whether or not online political engagement is a legitimate form of political participation and exercise of transnational citizenship, this study investigates the conditions under which migrants engage politically with virtual communities; when and how online participation spills over to real-world social mobilization; and whether cross-border online-offline political participation creates a new form of transnational citizenship. Content analysis of virtual social media groups and pages on VKontakte, Odnoklassniki and Facebook demonstrates that, although migrants are not likely to *routinely* participate in, initiate, or continuously engage with political conversations on these platforms, crisis conditions, such as the October revolution in 2020, the first COVID wave the summer of that same year, and the Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflict in April-May 2021, trigger bursts of political activism on social media which carry over to the real-world in the form of fundraising and protest mobilization.

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Introduction

The internet and social media have become the central means of communication and information distribution for people around the world. This is especially true for transnational migrants since their social networks stretch across various states and continents. In this study, I will investigate cyberspace as a political space where it is possible to observe migrants' political activities, attitudes and preferences, as well as patterns of engagement in politics. Specifically, the goal of this research is to tease out the causal mechanisms of diaspora political participation and to assess, from a comparative perspective, how, when and why migrant populations connect with homeland politics in cyberspace. Given that Kyrgyzstan has a high percentage of citizens residing abroad and, according to the World Bank, is one of the most remittance-dependent economies in the world, the political, social, and economic importance of diaspora engagement with the homeland cannot be overstated for the country.[1]

Drawing on the previous social science literature and attempting to address the theoretical debates and gaps in the existing knowledge, this study addresses the following questions: (i) Under what conditions do migrants engage with virtual communities politically? (ii) Under what conditions does online participation spill over to real-world social mobilization? (iii) Does cross-border online-offline political participation create a new form of transnational citizenship? By exploring how Kyrgyz migrants and diaspora organizations in different parts of the world use different social media platforms, including VKontakte, Odnoklassniki and Facebook, this paper demonstrates that, although Kyrgyz diasporic organizations in different parts of the world engage in various forms of political transnationalism, content analysis of social media posts shows that migrants are not likely to *routinely* participate in, initiate, or *continuously* engage in political conversations on these platforms. However, crisis conditions, such as the October revolution in 2020, the first COVID wave the summer of that same year, and the Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflict in April-May 2021, trigger bursts of political activism on social media and carry over to the real-world in the form of fundraising and protest mobilization.

Defining Diaspora, Political Participation, and Transnational Citizenship

This study is positioned at the intersection of three fields: migration, political participation and citizenship. In order to construct a theoretical framework that guides this research, it is important to define and conceptualise three key terms: diaspora, political participation and transnational citizenship. While the term "diaspora" is familiar to many and the concept has received a lot of scholarly attention, the exact definition remains elusive. In the most simplistic terms, diaspora refers to a part of a population living abroad or an ethnic community divided by state lines.[2]

1 Burulcha Sulaimanova, "International Migration in Kyrgyzstan: Dynamics and Determinants," *Manas Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi* 6, no. 4 (2017): 303-331.

[2] Charles King and Neil J. Melvin, "Diaspora Politics: Ethnic Linkages, Foreign Policy, and Security in Eurasia," *International Security* 24, No. 3 (1999): 108-138.

However, not all ethnic minorities or immigrants and their decedents are necessarily part of a diaspora, since one of the key characteristics of a diaspora is a strong emotional and material connection to the homeland.[3] Moreover, a diaspora is a form of consciousness or a "space of imagination" that is socially constructed through political discourse.[4] The diaspora conscience harbours a hybrid identity that is tightly linked to the homeland through language, religion and historical memory, but at the same time also linked to the minority status in the host society.[5] The intricate and multifaceted concept of diaspora is further complicated by different experiences of migration and settlement. Political ideologies, interests and grievances are shaped by migrants' socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, gender, social capital, legal status and degree of integration in both homeland and destination societies.[6] Labour migrants, students, refugees, seasonal workers and other groups all have different sets of political attitudes grievances and opportunities for political engagement.[7] Therefore, on the one hand, a diaspora is a complex organized community of co-nationals residing outside of the native state that share a social bond with each other; and, on the other, a diaspora is a network of people with diverse identities and interests that takes an active part in various aspects of the political and economic life of the homeland. In the digital era, this hybrid identity transcends physical territorial delimitations; it is reproduced through new types of connectivity that allow individuals to publicly express their identity and political views.[8]

Digital diaspora refers to geographically dispersed compatriots who connect with each other on the internet for the purposes of personal or material benefit, such as matchmaking, information sharing, exchange, and assistance such as finding housing or employment.[9] At the same time, the virtual space also provides a platform for political engagement. For example, the Eritrean diaspora use the internet as a transnational public space where they construct discourse about the history, culture, politics and identity of a state struggling for sovereignty and democracy, as well as organize real-life demonstrations, raise funds, discuss policy and lobby the Eritrean government.[10] For many immigrant communities, the internet is an important medium of political participation through which a sense of citizenship and belonging is cultivated and developed.[11] The rise of the internet, social media and digital technologies have accelerated the increase in the multiplicity of informal channels of socio-political activism across borders. However, who uses it for political participation and under what conditions remain unclear. Therefore, there is an acute necessity to

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[3] Gabriel Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[4] Rima Berns-Mcgown, "Redefining "Diaspora" The Challenge of Connection and Inclusion," *International Journal* 63, No. 1 (2008): 7.

[5] William Safran, "Comparing Diasporas: A Review Essay," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 8, No. 3 (1999): 255-291.

[6] Pnina Werbner, "The Place Which Is Diaspora: Citizenship, Religion and Gender in The Making of Chaordic Transnationalism," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28, No. 1(2002): 119-133; Gina Sánchez Gibau, "Contested Identities: Narratives of Race and Ethnicity in the Cape Verdean Diaspora," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 12, No. 3 (2005): 405-438.

[7] Tanya Basok,. "Post-National Citizenship, Social Exclusion and Migrants Rights: Mexican Seasonal Workers in Canada," *Citizenship Studies* 8, No. 1 (2004): 47-64.

[8] Saskia Kok and Richard Rogers. "Rethinking Migration in the Digital Age: Transglocalization and the Somali Diaspora," *Global Networks* 17, No. 1 (2017): 23-46.; Fiona Adamson, "The Growing Importance of Diaspora Politics," *Current History* 115, No. 784 (2016): 291-297.

[9] Jennifer Brinkerhoff, *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement*. (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 47-48.

[10] Victoria Bernal, "Diaspora, Cyberspace and Political Imagination: The Eritrean Diaspora Online," *Global Networks* 6, No. 2 (2006): 161-179.

[11] Myria Georgiou, "Diaspora in the Digital Era: Minorities and Media Representation," *JEMIE* 12 (2013): 80.

carefully study the relationship between migration, political participation and transnational citizenship.

Political participation at the most basic level encompasses two types of activities: voting and civic activism. Whereas the former is fairly straightforward, the latter subsumes a wide range of activities, including signing petitions, giving money to political groups, marching in rallies and joining protests. Political scientists have long debated who participates in politics and why: some argue that socio-economic status, such as education, income and civic knowledge, determines the likelihood of participation,[12] others argue that the degree of social capital – that is the extent of one's social networks and social ties to the community – is critical for their desire and ability to engage with politics.[13] However, it remains unclear whether or not it is possible to build social capital through a virtual network: do virtual groups and communities reinforce or displace offline networks? Do they function similarly or differently from conventional social organizations? Social science scholars have two opposing views on the answer to these questions: some find that online engagement with political issues is no more than "clicktivism" or "slacktivism," meaning virtual "liking," sharing, commenting, and other forms of social media engagement is essentially useless since it does not produce any tangible policy impact.[14] Yet, other scholars argue that online activities constitute a legitimate form of political participation. They find that joining online groups helps marginalized populations overcome barriers to the formation of real-world offline social networks,[15] as well as helping those who otherwise would not be able to build extensive social ties, which naturally includes migrants who share a common national identity but are dispersed across vast geographies. Additionally, although online political activism may not have immediate policy implications, it leads to increased personal satisfaction, raises awareness, and places certain issues on the political agenda.[16] Debates around online political participation are ongoing, and many questions remain unresolved: Can participation in virtual communities be reduced to "clicktivism"? Under what conditions does it spill over to the real-world? If online political participation spans geographic borders and spills over to the real world, what implications does it have on the formation of transnational citizenship?

These questions bring us to the final key concept, transnational citizenship, and theoretical debates surrounding it. Transnationalism refers to social, economic and political processes that extend beyond one state's borders. In a modern globalizing world marked by population mobility and rapid development of communication technology, transnationalism has become the norm of life

[12] Sidney Verba, And Norman H. Nie, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (University of Chicago Press, 1987).; Raymond E Wolfinger, and Steven J. Rosenstone, *Who Votes?* (Yale University Press, 1980).
[13] Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague, *Citizens, Politics and Social Communication: Information and Influence in an Election Campaign* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).; Doug Mcadam, And Ronnelle Paulsen, "Specifying the Relationship Between Social Ties and Activism." *American Journal of Sociology* 99, No. 3 (1993): 640-667.; Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6, No. 1 (1995): 65-78.
[14] Evgeny Morozov, "Iran: Downside to the" Twitter Revolution"," *Dissent* 56, No. 4 (2009): 10-14.; Malcolm Gladwell, "From Innovation to Revolution-Do Social Media Made Protests Possible: An Absence of Evidence," *Foreign Aff.* 90 (2011): 153.; Kirk Kristofferson, Katherine White, And John Peloza, "The Nature of Slacktivism: How the Social Observability of an Initial Act of Token Support Affects Subsequent Prosocial Action," *Journal of Consumer Research* 40, No. 6 (2014): 1149-1166.
[15] Katelyn Mckenna, and John A. Bargh. "Coming Out in the Age of The Internet: Identity" Demarginalization" Through Virtual Group Participation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75, No. 3 (1998): 681.
[16] Max Halupka, "Clicktivism: A Systematic Heuristic," *Policy & Internet* 6, No. 2 (2014): 115-132.; Max Halupka, "The Legitimisation of Clicktivism," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 53, No. 1 (2018): 130-141.

for migrant communities. For scholars and policymakers, it presents the need to re-conceptualize established definitions and principles of political participation and citizenship. Citizenship is a very complex concept with a number of diverse theories that define it in different ways. These theories can be generally divided into two broad categories: liberal theories which tend to focus on the state and view citizenship as a set of rights guaranteed by the state;[17] and communitarian theories which shift the focus towards society and emphasize membership, belonging and shared identities as the core principles of citizenship.[18] If we want to understand horizontal cross-border political membership and engagement of transnational communities, then the society-based approach of the communitarian theories provides a framework for such inquiry.

Yuval-Davis defines transnationalism as a "multi-layered construct in which one's citizenship in collectivities—local, ethnic, national, state, cross or trans-state and suprastate—is affected and often at least partly constructed by the relationships and positionings of each layer."[19] In other words, transnational citizenship is constituted through simultaneous belonging and participation in multi-layered and interrelated communities, such as translocal diaspora groups, home and host cities and countries, and the virtual space that allows instant connections between each layer. In his comprehensive review of existing scholarship on transnational citizenship, Fox, referring to conventional transnational civic groups, argues that "These [transnational] networks and coalitions create a transnational public sphere from which shared ideas of membership, rights, and mutual responsibility can emerge, but only in cases *and under conditions that have yet to be specified*" (italics added).[20] This comment points to the scarcity of research explaining the mechanisms linking cross-border political participation and transnational citizenship; yet, the scholarly insight on how virtual diasporic communities construct new forms of transnational membership is even more limited. If online political discussions among diaspora members carry over to offline social and political mobilization, then does this online-offline cross-border activism constitute a practice of transnational citizenship?

The questions I posed above have been addressed empirically by a relatively small number of single-case studies. For example, in his study of transnational activism among Romanian expatriates, Mercea found that anti-gold mining protests that occurred in 2013 were to a great extent coordinated and organized via Facebook and Twitter, and that this experience produced a collective identity for geographically dispersed but ideologically like-minded Romanians living abroad.[21] Similarly, based on his study of migrants from Mexico, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic residing in the United States, Paarlberg argued that, although citizens living abroad are unlikely to turnout to vote or are sometimes deprived of such a right, they nevertheless actively

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[17] Thomas Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class* (Cambridge University Press, 1950).; Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (University of California Press, 1998).

[18] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Routledge, 1983).; Eleonore Kofman, "Citizenship for Some but Not for Others: Spaces of Citizenship in Contemporary Europe," *Political Geography* 14, No. 2 (1995): 121-137.; Joe Painter, "Multi-Level Citizenship, Identity and Regions in Contemporary Europe," *Transnational Democracy: Political Spaces and Border Crossings*, 93-110.

[19] Nira Yuval-Davis, "The 'multi-Layered Citizen'," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1, No. 1 (1999): 119.

[20] Jonathan Fox, "Unpacking "Transnational Citizenship"," *Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (2005): 180.

[21] Dan Mercea, "Transnational Activism in Support of National Protest: Questions of Identity and Organization," *Global Networks* 18, No. 4 (2018): 543-563.

participate in politics not as voters but as fundraisers, lobbyists and influencers.[22] At the same time, the internet has for a long time now played an important role in facilitating the activities of migrant civil community organizations. Websites and social media groups were designed to provide migrants with relatively easy and quick access to information (such as job ads, online marketplaces, dating, etc.) and connections with other members of the diasporic community. For instance, the E-Diaspora Atlas project provides a map of networks connecting various migrant-run websites operationalized as nodes.[23] In the last few years, as social media usage via smartphones has proliferated, groups on Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram, and other similar apps have become the most significant tool for online community building.[24] As the literature on migrant transnational activism and citizenship continues to grow, new theories and debates have emerged, but many critical questions remain unclear. Specifically, under what conditions do migrants engage with virtual communities politically? Under what conditions does online participation spill over to real-world social mobilization? And does such online-offline transnational participation create a new form of citizenship? The pursuit of answers to these questions is what motivated this research project.

Transnationalism among Central Asian Migrants

In the Central Asian context, migrant community organizations and their activities have attracted a significant amount of scholarly attention, especially in recent years as the number of Central Asian migrants in Russia, Europe, North America and the Middle East is growing.[25] The Kyrgyz diaspora in Russia has been well-documented, particularly when it comes to the heterogeneity of its associations and functions.[26] For instance, in Moscow there are dozens of heterogenous Kyrgyz migrant organizations that have different membership and objectives.[27] When it comes to political transnationalism, some larger diaspora organizations have clear political motives as they seek to lead the Kyrgyz diaspora as a political community of potential voters and, as such, actively

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[22] Michael Ahn Paarlberg, "Transnational Militancy: Diaspora Influence Over Electoral Activity in Latin America," *Comparative Politics* 49, No. 4 (2017): 541-562.

[23] E-Diasporas, Dana Diminescu, http://Www.E-Diasporas.Fr.

[24] Farooq Kperogi, *Nigeria's Digital Diaspora: Citizen Media, Democracy, And Participation* (University of Rochester Press, 2020).; Ivan Kozachenko, "Transformed by Contested Digital Spaces? Social Media and Ukrainian Diasporic 'Selves' in the Wake of The Conflict with Russia," *Nations and Nationalism* 27, No. 2 (2021): 377-392.; Ahmed Al-Rawi and Shahira Fahmy, "Social Media Use in the Diaspora: The Case of Syrians in Italy," in *Diaspora and Media in Europe*, Ed. Karim H. Karim and Ahmed Al-Rawi (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 71-96.

[25] Rustamjon Urinboyev, "Establishing an "Uzbek Mahalla" via Smartphones and Social Media," *Constructing the Uzbek State*, Ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lexington Books, 2017), 119-120.; Natalia D. Tregubova and Maxim L. Nee. "Beyond Nations and Nationalities: Discussing the Variety of Migrants' Identifications in Russian Social Media," *Changing Societies & Personalities* 4, No. 3 (2020): 323-349.; Ekaterina Demintseva, *"Educational Infrastructure Created in Conditions Of Social Exclusion: 'Kyrgyz Clubs' for Migrant Children in Moscow,"* Central Asian Survey 39, No.2 (2020): 220–35.; Caress Schenk, "Migrant Rights, Agency, And Vulnerability: Navigating Contradictions in the Eurasian Region," *Nationalities Papers* 48, No. 4 (2020): 637-643.

[26] Alexandra Filatova, "Types and Functions of Diasporas. Kyrgyz Communities in Moscow" (Master Thesis, National Research University Higher School of Economics, 2019).

[27] Filatova, "Types and Functions".

mobilize migrants during elections, even busing them to voting stations in cities across Russia.[28] Existing studies made important contributions to scholarly understanding of the characteristics and functions of Central Asian diasporic communities in Russia, which allowed us to further look into how these organizations utilize virtual space to fulfil their objectives.

Looking at migrant engagement in politics, Ruget and Usmalieva argue that Kyrgyz migrants in Russia are unlikely to engage in politics for two reasons: 1) lack of opportunity, including lack of free time, loss of citizenship and limited access to information; and 2) lack of political opportunity structure in Kyrgyzstan stemming from, on the one hand, a minimal effort by political parties to get migrant votes and, on the other hand, the low political efficacy of migrants and their unwillingness to participate in politics due to widespread corruption and nepotism.[29] In their more recent work Ruget and Usmalieva investigate whether the use of digital technologies, particularly smartphones, politically empowers Kyrgyz migrants in Russia. The findings show that, although members of the Kyrgyz diaspora, like other diasporic groups around the world, use mobile phones to connect with diaspora members aboard and family and friends at home, they do not use smartphones to engage in political discussions or activities either at home or in their host country. [30] This confirms the authors' earlier conclusions about the low level of political transnationalism among Kyrgyz migrants.

The use of smartphones and social media was also at the centre of Urinboyev's research on the transnationalism of Uzbek migrants in Russia. He argued that smartphones enable migrants not only to keep in touch with their families and friends back home but also to build a "telephone-based Uzbek mahalla" in Moscow.[31] Similar to Kyrgyz smartphone users in Moscow, Uzbek migrants also gain access to information about jobs, documents, residence registration and work permits via social media apps. Urinboyev argues that smartphone communication allows migrants who originate from the same village or neighbourhood to recreate social relations even if these individuals may be thousands of miles away from home or from each other.[32] In other words, smartphones and social media are technologies of transnationalism that allow migrants to establish a virtual place where their home village and fellow villagers in various parts of Russia are all present. Urinboyev further argues that these smartphone-based transnational communities represent a mode of everyday resistance to the repressive political environment in Russia;[33] however, whether or how Uzbek migrants use social media for political engagement at home remains unclear.

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[28] Asel Doolotkeldieva, "The 2020 Violent Change in Government in Kyrgyzstan amid the Covid-19 Pandemic: Three Distinct Stories in One," In *Between Peace and Conflict in the East and the West*, Ed. Anya Mihr (Springer, 2021): 157-174.

[29] Vanessa Ruget And Burul Usmalieva. "Social and Political Transnationalism among Central Asian Migrants and Return Migrants: A Case Study of Kyrgyzstan," *Problems of Post-Communism* 58, No. 6 (2011): 48-60.

[30] Vanessa Ruget and Burul Usmalieva. "Can Smartphones Empower Labour Migrants? The Case of Kyrgyzstani Migrants in Russia," *Central Asian Survey* 38, No. 2 (2019): 165-180.

[31] Rustamjon Urinboyev. "Smartphone Transnationalism in Non-Western Migration Regimes: Transnational Ethnography of Uzbek Migrant Workers in Russia," in *Labour, Mobility and Informal Practices in Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe*, Ed. Rano Turaeva and Rustamjon Urinboyev (Routledge, 2021): 89-113.

[32] Urinboyev, "Smartphone Transnationalism," 89-113.

[33] Urinboyev, "Smartphone Transnationalism," 89-113.

The pioneering research on Central Asian diasporas' online (and offline) transnationalism discussed above has made an invaluable contribution to scholarly understanding of the phenomenon. However, despite its undeniable relevance in today's political arena, there are still many open questions and debates about migrants' political participation via the internet, particularly social media. Specifically, are virtual transnational communities limited to informal self-help exchanges and translocal/transnational social networks that help migrants cope with repressive conditions in the host country, or do they under certain circumstances become politically active in the affairs of the homeland? What conditions serve as catalysts for political engagement in virtual communities? How does the political environment of the host country affect such possibility?

Methodologically, existing studies tend to be limited in scope to either a single case study of one particular website or one destination city, usually Moscow. Therefore, a comparative study of multiple geographic regions and multiple virtual channels of communication is urgently needed. By utilizing comparisons of different types of social media and cross-regional migrant locations, this paper contributes to the empirical understanding of patterns of Kyrgyz migrants' transnational political engagement. In other words, this study will empirically evaluate under what conditions and in which contexts digital technology facilitates transnational political engagement.

Research Methodology

This study utilizes an inductive comparative research design and aims to investigate the differences in political engagement among migrants from different host regions (including Russia, the US, the EU, and countries in the Middle East) and across different types of social media platforms: Facebook, VKontakte and Odnoklassniki. I used a mixed-method approach that included software-assisted content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis of Kyrgyz migrants' virtual communities and groups on the three social media platforms mentioned above. I downloaded and analysed textual data from the websites over the May 2020 – October 2021 timeframe. These specific platforms were selected because they contain a lot of publicly available content which is accessible to any internet user. The reason for choosing only publicly accessible open groups is that, unlike private WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram and other messenger apps that require member invitations, specific platforms selected for this study have a low barrier for migrants to join, so the samples will include individual contributors with both high and low social capital, as well as different levels of social media usage opportunities and skills. The main limitation of this approach is that it does not capture all relevant virtual spaces and, thus, whatever results this study yields should be taken with a grain of salt since different categories of individuals depending on their age, class, gender, ethnicity, occupation or other socioeconomic characteristics might be engaged in political conversations elsewhere beyond the sampled virtual spaces. A second key limitation of this study is that, since the groups included in the sample are public, their members may be cautious about posting political content due to the fear of surveillance and persecution.

The first step of the project was to identify the relevant groups on Facebook, VKontakte and Odnoklassniki using keywords such as "Kyrgyz," "Kyrgyzstan," "кыргыз," "кыргыздар," "кыргызы," "кыргызстацы," "кыргызская диаспора." The search was limited according to three

criteria: 1) the type of resource was limited to "groups" and "pages" on Facebook, "groups" in Odnoklassniki, and "communities" in VKontakte; 2) the number of members or subscribers had to be upwards of one thousand, i.e. the group had to reach to a substantial number of people; and 3) all selected groups had to be public, meaning anyone could access the content freely. This selection process did not specifically target only explicitly expatriate groups since any group containing the nation or country name in Cyrillic or Latin languages could be included. All virtual communities that were identified in this manner are presented in Table 1. One of the challenges encountered during this process is that VKontakte and Odnoklassniki had groups with very high membership rates (and I suspect a large number of inactive users or bots) but were managed by one or two persons whose identity was concealed. A review of the posts in these groups revealed that their only purpose was the advertisement of goods and services and that no inter-member discussion actually occurred, so these groups or pages were omitted from the research sample (the list of eliminated groups is in Table 2). It is important to note that "pages" on Facebook that are run and managed by diaspora organizations were included in the sample even though some of them had slightly less than one thousand members. The second step of the analysis was an aggregation of all textual data from group discussions on each website. This data was categorized by social media platform and organized into three separate folders: VKontakte, Odnoklassniki and Facebook. Next, I performed content analysis using NVivo software to calculate word frequency distribution and conduct key term searches. The content analysis was followed by a careful manual review of the posts, images, links and comments in each of the groups for the identification of discursive patterns and their categorization with specific date stamps.

Lastly, it is important to mention that this study does not investigate any individual commentary made on social media or specific activities of any particular diasporic organization or community. Instead, the purpose of this research is to look at the bigger picture by exploring the aggregate textual data, as well as to interpret general patterns of migrant engagement on social media platforms.

Patterns of Everyday Engagement on Social Media

There is a wide variety of virtual migrant communities present on social media platforms. For the purposes of this study, groups whose membership exceed one thousand members[34] were sampled across the selected social media platforms: Facebook, VKontakte and Odnoklassniki. VKontakte and Odnoklassniki are similar to Facebook in terms of their features and interface but are geared towards Russian-speaking users. Unsurprisingly, Facebook contained Kyrgyz migrant groups from different regions, including the United States, Western Europe, East Asia and the Middle East, whereas groups on VKontakte and Odnoklassniki were based in various cities of Russia (Table 1).

The analysis of word frequency distribution (Figures 1, 2, and 3) shows that the topics discussed on all three social media platforms are quite similar and prominently feature employment-related

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[34] Facebook pages with a smaller number of members were sampled when they were managed by a specific diaspora organization.

content as signaled by frequently used words such as "работа" (work) or "жумуш" (work in Kyrgyz), "требуется" (needed), "зарплата" (salary) and "деньги" (money), as well as specific professions that are common among Kyrgyz labour migrants, such as "повар" (cook), "уборка" (cleaning), "такси" (taxi), and "доставка" (delivery). The second most prominent category is documentation and legal questions with keywords such as "документы" (documents), "паспорт" and "загран" (both referring to passport), "посольство" (embassy), and "помощь" or "жардам" (help in Russian and Kyrgyz), and most recently "COVID" and "vaccine" since PCR tests and vaccine documentation have become commonly required for international travel. The third category includes questions surrounding housing as represented by frequently used words like "комната" (room), "район" (region or neighbourhood), "квартира" (apartment), "оплата" (payment, which may refer to rent), "метро" (subway) and "место" (place). Group members and users often discussed their own experiences with these three main categories of issues and shared informal knowledge about how to deal with or circumvent bureaucratic hurdles that many migrants experience with both home and host country authorities. Therefore, the exchange of informal knowledge among members of migrant communities and networks is undoubtedly one of the main purposes in using the virtual space. These results are consistent with previous research on migrant usage of social media in general and that of Central Asian migrants specifically.[35]

Figure 1. Facebook Groups and Pages: Word Frequency in Posts and Comments

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[35] Rajiv George Aricat, "Mobile/Social Media Use for Political Purposes Among Migrant Laborers in Singapore," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 12, No. 1 (2015): 18-36.; Rianne Dekker and Godfried Engbersen, "How Social Media Transform Migrant Networks and Facilitate Migration," *Global Networks* 14, No. 4 (2014): 401-418.; Vanessa Ruget and Burul Usmanalieva. "Can Smartphones Empower Labour Migrants? The Case of Kyrgyzstani Migrants in Russia," Central Asian Survey 38, No. 2 (2019): 165-180.

Figure 2. VKontakte Groups: Word Frequency in Posts and Comments

Figure 3. Odnoklassniki Groups: Words Frequency in Posts and Comments

A deep dive into the discussions in these virtual spaces reveals other important patterns of transnationalism that goes far beyond the typical apolitical self-help type of content. Specifically, some of the most "liked", shared, and commented on posts included those that promoted a sense of national pride and nostalgia for the homeland. For instance, on the Facebook page of the Kyrgyz diaspora in New York I observed a long discussion about the proper name of a popular salty dairy snack common all over Central Asia and some parts of the Middle East and usually referred to as "kurut" in Kyrgyz or "kurt" in Uzbek. The post was meant to promote a snack product that was to be launched in the US market, and the intense discussion that this post elicited from the group members symbolically represents migrants' engagement with questions of their national identity. Similarly, posts and re-posts from news agencies and other websites that promoted a sense of national pride gather significant attention. For example, personal stories of Eduard Kubatov, the first Kyrgyz person to conquer Everest; Vladislav Shuliko who swam across Issyk-Kul Lake; Azamat Asangul, a Kyrgyz ballet dancer with a New York company; Kyrgyzstani UFC champion Valentina Shevchenko; and those of other prominent individuals from the homeland were received with many "likes," shares, and positive passionate comments. Additionally, posts about well-known Russian blogger Ilya Varlamov's videos documenting his visit to Kyrgyzstan, as well as those on the appearance of a Kyrgyz shyrdak (felt rug with a distinct pattern) in the Hollywood movie Christmas Chronicles II, also generated long and sometimes heated discussions. Such social media content that deals with Kyrgyz history, culture and identity unquestionably generates the most involvement from group members, particularly if we compare these to posts about jobs or housing. In other words, although the majority of content on the social media sites sampled in this study does revolve around migrants' everyday issues, i.e., employment, housing and documentation, these tend to be one-way advertisements or help-seeking requests, whereas substantial inter-member debates and conversations tend to occur on questions of identity and patriotism, albeit much less frequently. This finding is also consistent with the existing literature demonstrating how migrants' memories and celebrations of their homeland strengthen sense of belonging and maintain connection with their ethnic, cultural and national identities.[36]

Although significant discussion emerges on topics related to prominent national "heroes," as well as Kyrgyz history, culture and identity, the results of the analysis also show that migrants are not likely to participate in, initiate or continuously engage in explicitly political conversations on the selected social media platforms. Explicitly political messages were relatively rare and generally limited to two scenarios: they were either publicized by the administrator(s) of the particular page or group, especially if managed by a formal diaspora organization, or they were genuine political discussion and calls for action emerging among members during specific crisis situations in the homeland. Some groups and pages on Facebook, VKontakte and Odnoklassniki are managed by specific diaspora organizations, which means that the role of the administrator is to control the page settings and decide whether members can add posts and which posts get published, ignored or deleted, as well as who gets to become a member of the group and who gets excluded or expelled. For example, the Council of Kyrgyz Diaspora is a civil society organization registered in Russia and it runs pages on various social media platforms, including Facebook. The organization uses the virtual space to spread the word about the organization's activities, including events, news and services. The social media page highlights how the organization works closely with the Kyrgyz

[36] Tendai Chari, "Performing Patriotic Citizenship: Zimbabwean Diaspora and Their Online Newspaper Reading Practices," *Journal of African Media Studies* 6, No. 1 (2014): 91-109.; Brenda Chan, "Imagining the Homeland: The Internet and Diasporic Discourse of Nationalism," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 29, No. 4 (2005): 336-368.

embassy, as well as other government agencies both in Russia and in Kyrgyzstan as evidenced by pictures with prominent government officials and re-posts of content from state-run media sources. Although the page has over 3500 followers, their level of engagement in discussion is minimal: the posts can be added only by the page administrators, most posts have few likes and even fewer shares, and there are usually no comments underneath them at all. Similar patterns can be observed on other social media pages run by diaspora organizations such as Burimdik and smaller regional diaspora organizations, such as Yntymak and Manas in Yakutia, Russia, or the Kyrgyz Community Center in Chicago. Therefore, in these virtual spaces the information flows from the administrators, i.e., the leadership of the diaspora groups, to their online followers. In other words, while the social media groups discussed previously are organized horizontally so that all members can and do initiate and participate in the discussions and sharing of informal knowledge, the pages that are run by formal diaspora organizations tend to be organized vertically, meaning that members cannot create content but rather consume it passively.

Before delving further into the second scenario, it is important to point out two critical caveats to the argument. Firstly, since the research scope of this study is limited to publicly open social media groups and pages on three social media platforms, it is quite possible that intense political activism among the members of the diaspora occurs elsewhere outside these channels. In fact, there is ample evidence to suggest that migrants utilize messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber and the like, for various types of organizing purposes. However, access to these channels might be limited to only those who have a relatively high level of social capital and are already well-connected within the diaspora network since chats and groups on all these apps require invitation, or at the very minimum, are not searchable, which means that joining such groups requires knowledge of their existence. This leads me to the second important caveat: the acknowledgement of diversity within the diaspora community and recognition that, based on their socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, profession, gender and other factors and experiences, migrants may, firstly, have different political grievances, and secondly, utilize different parts of the internet to express their grievances. Thus, although the research design of this study attempted to incorporate different members of the diaspora as broadly as possible by focusing on open and public groups on the most commonly used social media sites, there are undoubtedly large segments of the diaspora population who might participate in online political activism via other channels and who have been excluded from the analysis. In the next section, I will turn to the discussion of online political activism in times of crisis.

Bursts of Political Participation During Socioeconomic Crisis: the COVID-19 Crisis during "Dark July", the October Revolution and the Kyrgyz-Tajik Border Conflict

The COVID-19 pandemic that has spanned the globe since the winter of 2019 reached its peak in Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 2020. During the so-called "Dark July" the number of daily new coronavirus infection cases reached over 1000, which is a very high number for a country with a population of 6.5 million. The poorly equipped healthcare system was unable to adequately meet the needs of the rapidly increasing number of coronavirus cases and a great deal of responsibility

fell on the shoulders of young volunteers and medical students.[37] The public health crisis triggered a burst in migrant participation on Facebook and other social media platforms. Diaspora members created and shared GoFundMe and other fundraising initiatives targeting different aspects of the fight against the pandemic at home. For example, one such initiative organized by a Kyrgyz migrant in the United States gathered money for meals and transpiration for medical staff in Bishkek; another initiative, also from the US, collaborated with a local activist (and politician) Tilek Toktogaziev to research and install prototypes of oxygen machines made from oxygen balloons in place of the proper equipment which was not readily available at the hospitals and in COVID-19 units. Moreover, Kyrgyz migrants from all over the globe, including the US, the EU, Turkey, China and Russia, used social media in the same way: to organize, fundraise and purchase medical equipment and manage logistics and delivery of it to different regions, cities and villages in Kyrgyzstan. The pandemic gave rise to an unprecedented level of activism that transcended continental borders, simultaneously utilized different types of social networks for the same projects and thinned the line between online and offline participation.

On October 4th 2020, during the parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan, observers noted a series of irregularities including busing, fraud and vote-buying. The following day, President Jeenbekov asserted that the elections had been democratic and transparent, which sparked protests as an increasing number of people gathered in Bishkek's Ala-Too Square. Amidst the protests, political prisoners, including Sadyr Japarov, were released and brought to the Square. Just a couple days later, Japarov was the self-proclaimed Prime Minister and, with the firm backing of his supporters, has remained in power ever since. In January he was elected the President of the Kyrgyz Republic. Sadyr Japarov's incredible rise to power has often been attributed to his popularity on social media. Journalists and scholars alike pointed to Japarov's immense social media presence as one of the main ingredients of his political success.[38] Indeed, there are dozens of Japarov fan pages across various social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp among others, with thousands and sometimes tens or even hundreds of thousands of members and followers. Some YouTube videos featuring Japarov received hundreds of thousands of views within the span of a few days that October. However, the comment sections of these social media pages are filled with bots and trolls who spread distorted news and conspiracy theories about anti-Japarov politicians, activists and civil society organizations, as well as harassed and intimidated users who posted anti-Japarov comments on social media. Migrants comprise a significant proportion of Japarov's supporters both online and offline.[39] Esenamanova found that, among active users of pro-Japarov Facebook pages, Kyrgyz migrants from Russia, the US and other countries were those announcing their support for the new leader.[40] These findings are corroborated by my analysis of social media groups. During early October 2020, there was a burst in online activity in these groups as members posted, shared and commented on the elections,

[37] Ayzierk Imanalieva, "Kyrgyzstan: Volunteers Play Heroic Role in Battle Against COVID-19," *Euasianet* July 17, 2020.

[38] Asel Doolotkeldieva, "Populism à la Kyrgyz: Sadyr Japarov, Nationalism, and Anti-Elite Sentiment in Kyrgyzstan*," Illiberalism Studies Program,* February 24, 2021.; Gulzat Baialieva and Joldon Kutmanaliev, "How Kyrgyz Social Media Backed an Imprisoned Politician's Meteoric Rise to Power," *Open Democracy*, October 15, 2020.; Aksana Ismailbekova, "Native Son Japarov: The Embodiment of Injustice?" *Anthropology Today* 37, No. 5 (2021): 14-17.

[39] Nargiza Ryskulova, "Eton Nash Trump. Kyrgyzstan Izbral Sadyra Japarova I Dal Emu Bolshe Vlasti". *BBC*, January 10, 2021.

[40] Nurgul Esenmanova, "Socialniye Gruppi Podderzhki Politika Sadyra Japarova," *Central Asia Program*, March 9, 2021.

protests and political developments in Kyrgyzstan. Although there was a good amount of support for Japarov in these conversations, there were also many voices questioning his legitimacy and authority. Therefore, the political crisis of regime change triggered online political activism on a variety of social media platforms in local, expat and transnational virtual spaces, such as Japarov's fan pages with their hundreds of thousands of followers, many of whom are members of the Kyrgyz diaspora abroad.

In late April 2021, violence erupted on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border, and dozens were killed or injured during the clashes. Images and videos of the violence, alongside burning houses, schools and stores, started circulating on social media. Migrant groups on various social media platforms actively participated in sharing information, raising awareness, signing online petitions and fundraising for reconstruction and help for the victims of the violence. Specifically, in the groups that I observed, the event sparked the proliferation of hashtags such as #stopRahmon and #stoptajikagression, online petitions, fundraising efforts and online mobilization of compatriots for offline protests and demonstrations in host countries. Facebook was one of the tools used in organizing demonstrations at the United Nations building in New York, as well as in other places around the globe including Germany, France, the UK and others. Therefore, as in the two previously discussed crisis events, the border conflict was a forceful catalyst for transnational and cross-channel (online-offline) political participation.

Conclusion

At first glance, the most common issues that migrants discuss in virtual spaces are questions that are important and personal for all migrants, such as legal and bureaucratic processes for obtaining documents, finding employment, securing housing, gaining access to social services such as healthcare and education, sending remittances back home and communicating with family. Content analysis of posts and comments in social media groups, confirms the findings of previous research that these are indeed the most concerning questions for Kyrgyz migrants in all corners of the world. These findings might suggest that there is very little political conversation happening in these spaces and thus lead one to conclude that they are apolitical in nature. However, a close reading and qualitative analysis of the social media posts reveals that crisis in the homeland, be it regime change, a public health crisis or violent conflict, triggers bursts of intense transnational cross-channel political engagement involving activism which goes beyond simple comments, "likes" and "shares" and spills over to the "real" offline world when funds raised online go towards grassroots initiatives and when protests and demonstrations advance into the streets.

This study is the first step into a deeper understanding of the online activism of the Kyrgyz diaspora. Future researchers might look into the most popular groups and pages on social media platforms and attempt to parcel out how migrants engage on these platforms alongside those who comment from the homeland. Another important and particularly timely avenue for future research lies in unpacking the role of diasporic online activism in elections. Finally, we also need a better understanding of the relationship between online and offline activism and under what conditions one becomes translated into the other. This paper has suggested some answers to the questions it posed, but more puzzles remain.

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Table 1. Social Media Groups or Communities Included in the Analysis

Social media platform	Name of the group	Number of members	Country	Year created
FACEBOOK Groups	Кыргызстанцы в Нью-Йорке - Kyrgyzstanis in New York	12.5K	USA	2015
	Kyrgyz Community in California	2.4K	USA	2013
	Chicago Kyrgyz	1.7k	USA	2015
	Кыргызстанцы зарубежом (Kyrgyzstani abroad)	33.9K	n/a	2011
	Kygyzclub Germany (Diaspora group) http://www.kyrgyzclub-germany.de	15.7K	Germany	2011
	Kyrgyz club UK	2.0k	United Kingdom	2011
	Kyrgyz club - France	2.6k	France	2013
	Swiss Kyrgyz club	1.7k	Switzerland	2012
	Kyrgyz club UAE	11.4k	United Arab Emirates	2011
	Кыргызстанцы в ОАЭ (Kygyzstani in UAE)	4.7K	United Arab Emirates	2012
	Kyrgyz Diaspora in South Korea	2.7K	South Korea	2009
	Kyrgyz in Barcelona/ Кыргызы в Барселоне	1.4K	Spain	2014
	Kyrgyzs in Chicago/Кыргызы в Чикаго	7.2K	USA	2014
	Кыргызы в Стамбуле(istanbul'da kirgizlar)	2.9K	Turkey	2015
	Кыргызы в Анталии (Kyrgyz in England)	4.5K	Turkey	2015
FACEBOOK Pages	Кыргызская диаспора Москвы и МО	2.6K	Russia	n/a
	Форум кыргызских диаспор за рубежом	878	n/a	n/a
	Кыргызская Диаспора"Манас"в Республике Саха Якутия	548	Russia	n/a

	Кыргызская диаспора Ынтымак Республика Саха	561	Russia	n/a
	Кыргыз Диаспорасынын Коомдук Кенеши	1.4K	Russia	n/a
	Кыргызстанцы в США - Kyrgyzstanis in USA	3K	USA	n/a
	Кыргызстанцы за рубежом	2.2K	n/a	n/a
	Кыргыз биримдиги	925	Russia	n/a
VKONTAKTE*	Кыргызы в Москве (Kyrgyz in Russia)	4.4K	Russia	2013
	Кыргызы зарубежом (Kyrgyz abroad)	2.2k	n/a	2017
	Питерские Кыргызы! (Kyrgyz in St. Petersburg)	4.2K	Russia	2016
	Кыргызы Екатеринбург (Kyrgyz in Yekaterinburg)	2.8K	Russia	2016
	Кыргызы в Красноярске. Кыргызстан / Помощь нашим (Kyrgyz in Krasnoyarsk/Helping our people)	2.4K	Russia	2019
ODNOKLASSNIKI	Кыргызы в России (Kyrgyz in Russia)	11K	Russia	2017
	Кыргызы в Новосибирске! (Kyrgyz in Novosibirsk)	6.8K	Russia	2016
	Кыргызы в Москве (Kyrgyz in Moscow)	9.4k	Russia	2018
	Кыргызы в Екатеринбурге (урфо) (Kyrgyz in Yekaterinburg)	4.7K	Russia	2019
	Кыргызы в Екатеринбурге!!! (Kyrgyz in Yekaterinburg)	3.3K	Russia	2014
	Кыргызы в ЕКВ (Kyrgyz in Yekaterinburg)	1.8K	Russia	2016
	Московские кыргызы (Moscow Kyrgyz)	1.3k	Russia	2015
	Новосибирск кыргызы (Novosibirsk Kyrgyz)	1.3k	Russia	2016

	Кыргызская диаспора"манас"в саха (якутии) (Kyrgyz Diaspora Manas in Sakha Yakutia)	1.3k	Russia	2015

Table 2. Odnoklassniki and VKontake Organizations that were Excluded from the analysis

ODNOKLASSNIKI**	Кыргыз. Кыргызы в Москве. Москвадагы кыргыздар	33.8K	Russia	2017
	Кыргызстан. Кыргызы в Москве	16K	Russia	2018
	Кыргызстан. Кыргызы в Москве	14.9K	Russia	2018
	Кыргызы в Москве	5.3K	Russia	2018
	Кыргызы в Питере	7.3K	Russia	2018

* Virtual groups excluded from VKontakte were run by a single person with minimal to no interaction among group members.

** Virtual groups excluded from Odnoklassniki are affiliated with the online advertising agencies.