

STRUCTURE AND TEXTURE OF BISHKEK URBAN COMMUNITIES

(Working paper)

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the structure and texture of urban grass-root communities in Bishkek. The term “communities” in this research applies to all kinds of civil society groups, territorial institutions, clubs by interests, activist organizations, local NGOs, religious bodies, online communities, etc. “Structure” is the main characteristics of the cumulative body of all these communities. It includes a typology of groups, their basic features, sizes, motivations, locations, degree of activeness etc. “Texture” is the shape of networks connecting all these different groups to each other, both within and across specific typologies. In this research we ask: How what does Bishkek urban community looks like and how are its different elements connected to each other?

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POLICY BRIEF

Henry Lefebvre writes about the citizens' "right to the city" actualized in their appropriation of urban space through active engagement with it. In his vision, the ideal city is the product of interaction of diverse active city groups. Camilla Perrone comes up with the concept of DiverCity – urban vision based on the epistemology of multiplicity, the outcome of diverse urban claims, citizens' participation and place appropriation. Doreen Massey portrays the urban social fabric as inherently diverse, lively, always emerging, transforming, changing. To understand it, we need alternative imagination based on heterogeneity, relationality, coevalness. Why are diversity and social dynamics important? Because they help us understand urban places and spaces, which are not simply containers for activities: they are intertwined with social processes and relations that help construct urban identities.

This research explores the structure and texture of urban grass-root communities in Bishkek. The term "communities" in this research applies to all kinds of civil society groups, territorial institutions, clubs by interests, activist organizations, local NGOs, religious bodies, online communities, etc. "Structure" is the main characteristics of the cumulative body of all these communities. It includes a typology of groups, their basic features, sizes, motivations, locations, degree of activeness etc. "Texture" is the shape of networks connecting all these different groups to each other, both within and across specific typologies. In this research we ask: How is the city appropriated by its citizens and how does this appropriation shape urban space?

The research is based on the survey of 500 city residents and 170 grass-root communities in Bishkek. It incorporates social network mapping using social network analysis (SNA) software, to help us understand how all these communities are related to each other: networks, alliances, confrontations, etc. In addition, seven case-studies representing different types of urban communities reconstruct the histories of these communities and provide in-depth descriptions of their activities.

Research findings

The survey of 500 residents of Bishkek reveals some interesting findings. First, it shows that Bishkek has changed significantly in term of its population: only one third of respondents was born here, while two thirds came to Bishkek from other places. Bishkek is continuously accepting newcomers and this affects the urban socialization and recreation practices.

Bishkek residents are still socially active: meeting friends and relatives is the most popular way of spending free time. Interestingly, urbanites prefer socializing with friends, while newcomers – with relatives. Urbanites, perhaps being more at home in the city, use variety of public spaces for such socialization, while newcomers socialize mostly at home or in cafes/restaurants. Newcomers are also more active in religious socialization.

Sad as it is, the least common way of spending free time is going to libraries or bookshops. However, it does not mean that people do not read: reading is the most popular kind of hobby, although Bishkek residents might not necessarily read books. According to the survey results, residents prefer internet as the source of information and entertainment. Internet is more popular than TV, especially among younger people. It is mostly women and elderly, who still spend much time watching TV.

Internet is used not only for obtaining information, but even more so for communication and socialization. The most popular platform is WhatsApp; it is followed by Instagram, Facebook, Odnoklassniki; V Kontakte and Twitter are less popular. Not all of these platforms are used for forming online communities – Facebook is more fruitful in terms of thematic online group memberships. Social networks differ by their popularity among different layers of population.

Bishkek residents are quite active in sports: one half of our respondents engage in one or more kinds of sport activities and sport clubs (compared to other types of communities) meet more regularly and frequently. The most popular types of sports include fitness, jogging, and

soccer. Sport clubs are also the most popular on “the wish list” – communities that people want to join in the future. Groups that are more active in sport are men, youth, and urbanites, while women, elderly and newcomers are less physically active.

Besides sports, one half of all respondents engage in hobbies, although only 16% do this in groups and attend various clubs of interest, while majority do it from home. In spite of this small number, clubs of interests and various artistic/creative groups are anyways the most popular types of communities.

The research did not reveal any unexpected findings in regards to the demographics of socialization. On the contrary, it tends to confirm the existing stereotypes about men and women, young and elderly. For example, men socialize more actively, engage in sports, religious communities and politics, while women spend more time at home, watching TV and internet, socializing with relatives, shopping, visiting doctors and beauty salons. Of three age groups: the youngest are the most socially and physically active and their ways of spending free time are more diverse. With the age, people tend to socialize more with relatives and watch more TV. Similar trend is revealed in regards to the family status: “boidoks” (unmarried) are more socially active; once they get married they settle, lose friendship networks and become more family/relatives oriented. Interestingly, the research did not reveal strong differences between residents of city center, micro-districts, and urban periphery.

The survey of 170 Bishkek communities and organizations reveals that although they are located in Bishkek, many (40%) have the country-wide scale of work. These communities work more or less equally with all age groups (young, middle-aged and elderly) and only children are underrepresented. Men are also somewhat underrepresented – the larger half are women. It is important that these are real, not virtual communities: on average, they meet in person approximately once a week. However, they also use other forms of communication: phone, online forums, Whatsapp groups, and e-mail (in the order of importance).

The main problems encountered by communities are mostly material: lack of finance or proper spaces for meetings and activities. This is exactly the kind of support the communities mostly want from the government. However, other forms of support are also needed.

Comparing communities with organizations we can see that the latter have larger scale, are better organized, meet more frequently, more open to cooperation. However, relations between community members are warmer than in organizations and they have more women. The research also revealed a complex differentiation between communities/organizations of different categories reflected in their official status, age distribution of members, scale of activity, forms of communication, levels of cooperation, percentage of women and warmth of relations with members.

The major finding from the analysis of social networks between communities and organizations in Bishkek revealed that they link very actively across and not so much within categories. Categories that have some degree of internal connection are: advocative, creative, ethnic, religious, and ecological. Other categories, like international/NGOs, neighborhood/local, academic/educational, business/startups, sport, and even activist, are not well connected to each other, but have partners from different categories. On average, every community/organization has two partner organizations/communities. The most well-connected institution is the Ministry of Education. It has many connections with individual organizations, however, it is quite isolated from other “main players” in the field, who are better connected to each other.

There is a list of the most active communities/organizations, whose active stand becomes evident through different methods of SNA analysis. Besides Ministry of Education, these include: The Mayor’s office (state), Assembly of Peoples of Kyrgyzstan (ethnic), Ecois (ecological), Bir Duino (creative), Crisis Center Sezim (advocative), Dialecticon (advocative), Mutakalim (religious), and others. As we can see, they represent different kinds of categories.

Eccentricity analysis shows that the network of organizations in Bishkek is not centralized, but on the contrary, it is quite dispersed. The very low graph density shows that this network is not just dispersed, but its nodes are also very poorly connected to each other. Similar findings emerge from the analysis of clustering – the coefficient is very small. Only eight triangular connections are revealed in the whole network and they represent different categories. When we look at several naturally emerging clusters (with stronger inward rather than outward oriented links), we can see again that they are also not homogenous in terms of their categories, but actually very diverse.

Finally, when we look at seven examples of Bishkek communities/organizations, presented in this report as case-studies, we can see many similarities and many differences in the way they were created and developed to reach their present state. All of them have the advocative component: two struggle for the rights of women, one for the rights of residents of apartment buildings, one for residents of city squatter settlements residents, and one for youth. They all had key personalities – leaders who founded them and played key role in their growth and development. Their activity was not always smooth and many had to fight against all kinds of obstacles, which affected their strategies and made some of them only stronger. The enthusiasm, devotion to the main idea, vision and mission were the key components of their success. Most of the work is done on the voluntary basis and not paid. All of these case-studies illustrate the importance of such communities/organizations and great contribution they make for the development of Bishkek's urban social fabric, its diversity and development.

Policy recommendations

Conclusions produced in the previous section, allow us to make some recommendations. These recommendations are addressed to the government of Kyrgyzstan, to the Mayor's Office, to local territorial administrations, to various donor organizations working with the residents of Bishkek and to Bishkek communities and organizations themselves.

Bishkek residents value real-life socialization. Socialization helps people feel connected to their friends, relatives, communities of interest, etc. It is a very important part of the quality of urban life. This must be recognized and supported. The most important kind of help is material: to improve the infrastructure of public spaces (streets, squares, parks, riverbanks, etc.) and to help with infrastructure for communities to meet. In many Western countries, it is common to see a small public building in the neighborhood park, which can be rented by community members for all kinds of meetings. This would not be something new for Kyrgyzstan: we have the old Soviet tradition of such public buildings like *Dom Kultury* (House of culture), *Kloob* (Club), or *Dom Pionerov* (House of Pioneers). It is very unfortunate, that after the break-up of Soviet Union, many of these buildings were privatized, demolished or forgotten and left to deterioration. It would be great to recover the old buildings and build new ones. Besides buildings, today, we can observe how such public spaces, like parks, boulevards, shaded sidewalks are being stolen from city residents by developers with the help of corrupted city officials. New multi-story housing is built on the territory of neighborhood parks. The current Mayor is renovating nearly 50 streets in the city with the idea of expanding them to improve the flow of traffic and create more parking spaces. To do this, he is cutting thousands of trees, which provided shade for the residents of these streets and reducing the size of sidewalks. His vision of the city is that of a city for cars, not for people. This vision is not going to help urban residents socialize and connect, but quite the contrary. It is important to change that vision and give priorities to pedestrians and bicyclists, not car drivers. This will help preserve the ecology of the city, create better living conditions, and preserve/create more conditions for people to socialize.

The second major recommendation evolves from the analysis of Bishkek communities and organizations. Our aim was to analyze the structure and texture of Bishkek communities. The results reveal that the structure is very diverse: we have many kind of communities –

nearly 20 unique categories. This is a very positive sign – it shows the cosmopolitan nature of the city and reflects the diversity of urban residents’ interests and activisms. This trend definitely needs recognition and support. Perhaps, interesting projects can be organized to help these groups further develop and strengthen their urban institutional and communal identities. However, when we look at the texture of Bishkek urban social fabric and analyze the connections between these communities and organizations, we can see that it is very dispersed and weak: communities are very poorly connected to each other. The second major finding is that the existing connections are rather random and communities do not connect well within categories; but instead have more links across categories. So, the main recommendation that we make in this regard, is that the effort can be made to expand and strengthen the connections, particularly, connections within categories, so that groups with common interests could work and develop together. One could imagine large thematic conferences and forums that bring together communities interested in common themes. Joint activities and collaborations would further strengthen these ties.

Finally, the role of specific community leaders must be recognized. The analysis of our case-studies shows that many communities were born and were able to live for long periods because of the initiative, effort, and active position of specific people with their own very interesting stories. Bringing these leaders together and working with them, would be an important step in strengthening the texture of Bishkek urban communities.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Theoretical perspectives

Henry Lefebvre (1996) describes how industrialization subordinates the contemporary city and urban reality: corporate system begins to regulate urban activities, spaces and time. The resulting effect is fixation of space and replacement of use value by the exchange value. He suggests that we have reached the critical point in evolution of cities, a global city crisis: city is no longer an "oeuvre" (work of art), but an instrument, device that produces homogeneity and mental and social misery, where the sum of elements replaces differences. It all happens due-to economic rationality, which generates segregation and destroys urban fabric. As a result, the city as a unique institution disappears. It is reconstituted by various institutions of power via measures, regulations, and constraints. Lefebvre calls this process synthetic reconstitution. In such conditions, urban consciousness becomes dull; it produces nothing but emptiness. Fincher and Jacobs (1998) too argue that contemporary cities produce modern condition of alienation. Massey (2005) suggests that the city generates dislocation and disconnection. Harvey (2012) explains why this happens through the concept of "political economy of mass dispossession"; it is a "daylight robbery" motivated by the animal spirit of capitalism.

To overcome this crisis, citizens need to re-appropriate their right to the city. Harvey (2012) advocates for *heterotopy* (result of daily coming together of different groups) as opposed to *isotopy* (rational order of capitalism and state). Heterotopy creates real dynamic social fabric. Harvey argues that today, the right to the city is confined in the hands of small political and economic elite, who shape the city after their own desires. Purcell (2002) suggests that we observe a new trend: residents lose control over their city to various forms of domination: from supra-national to that of local governance. Harvey (2012) says that this right has to be re-appropriated by citizens because it is a superior form of right: to freedom, individualization in socialization, oeuvre, inhabitation, and participation. In the process of re-appropriating that right, Lefebvre identifies three forms of social needs: anthropological, creative and the need for genuine interaction, not spoiled by exchange value. He also recognizes the need for new humanism of urban society through creation of highly localized social units, which are indispensable for reestablishing urban unity.

In order to succeed, we need to create new conceptions of urban space. Massey (2005) criticizes the view of space as stasis: fixed, bounded, authentic, singular, with fixed identity. In her opinion, it reflects the dualistic thinking and produces binary perspectives. Instead, she says, we need to see the space as dynamic, alive, open, and complex, reflecting not the negative difference, but positive heterogeneity. We need alternative imagination, based on heterogeneity, relationality, coevalness and liveliness. Massey advocates for the spatial way of imagining cities: we need new stories about intense social interactions and connections to elsewhere. City is a space for different stories and different trajectories; it is a product of complex interweaving of network of social relations. She conceptualizes space and place as social relation, which is inherently dynamic: it is ever shifting social geometry of power and signification, constructed of multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales (global, national, town and family). She cites Chantal Nauffe who writes about multiple, shifting and unbounded identities of people and spaces:

"We are always multiple, contradictory subjects, inhabitants of a diversity of communities ... constructed by a variety of discourses and precariously and temporarily structured at the intersection of these positions".

Massey proposes to use alternative approach to space: space as a product of interrelations, as a possibility of existence of multiplicity, and as always under construction, always being made. She argues for the anti-essentialist view with more focus on relations and embedded practices in order to recreate the relational constructedness of world, politics and space.

Pratt views city not as a mosaic of social worlds, but as identities shaped in processes, performed and unstable, with multiple and contradictory subject positions. According to her, the urban subject is always in motion across places that are not bounded: global flows through local and multiple cultures inhabit one common space. Filho and Monterra (2011) portray city as a set of flow spaces in the permanent process of change: always incomplete, uncertain, connected to each other through topological distances. Lefebvre (1996) describes space as floating medium for things, which implies, contaminates, disseminates social relations. It is at once a precondition and result of social superstructures. Fincher and Jacobs argue that places and spaces are not neutral stages and more than just containers; they are intertwined with social processes and relations that help construct urban identities.

The concepts of difference and diversity are particularly fertile for such discussion. Perrone (2011) plays with words Diver + City = DiverCity, to explore potentialities of difference for planning based on experimental intuitive local knowledge and practices of dialogue, listening and observation. Knowledge of city as practice must be founded in the epistemology of multiplicity and recognition of difference. Cosmopolis, in her view, is a state of mind that embraces the idea of a multicultural city and togetherness in difference. DiverCity is living practice that includes citizens' claims, participation and place appropriation. She says, we need to overcome dichotomies and move towards relations and situational interactions.

Fincher and Jacobs (1998), argue that city as being together of strangers amplifies particular affiliations and reinforces group solidarity and differentiation. Place-related focus on differences can reveal new complexities in urban studies and produce new urban geographies. In their view, difference is not grounded in only singular attributes (blacks, prostitutes, immigrants), which produce hierarchical structures, but on a combination of defining characteristics and more complex mapping of subjectivities. Beaumont and Backer refer to Soja's concept of "third space" – new form of confederalism based on new political initiatives and collaborations between various urban groups. Soja's Postmetropolis is always mutating and reemerging, it is a utopia that cannot be realized. City becomes laboratory of experimentation with opportunity to learn from new practices.

Our research is motivated by all these alternative perspectives on the city, which emphasize the importance of fluidity, diversity, multiculturalism, participation, socialization, social connections, role of communities. Lefebvre (1996) suggests that urban fabric is not just an ecosystem: it has morphology (objects) and society (values). We borrow from him to produce a new terminology: structure and texture of urban communities. Structure describes the morphology of urban social fabric, while texture describes the connections between them. Lefebvre sees city as a semiotic system projected on specific locale, where urban life produces the modification of societal codes. Urban semiology has three dimensions: 1) symbolic – symbolizing cosmos, society, state; 2) paradigmatic – construction of opposites; and 3) syntagmatic based on connecting links. The first one helps us to understand the urban social structure, while the second and third are particularly important if we want to understand the texture of urban social fabric.

This research is going to explore how urban residents of Bishkek are embedded into the social life of the city, which communities and organizations constitute the urban fabric, how links between these urban actors are constructed and what urban semiotics and dynamics they generate. We believe that this flexible, dynamic, inclusive perspective on the city can help us better understand what happens in Bishkek and how it can develop in the future. But first, we would like to have a brief look into the history of urban communities.

1.2. Communities in cities: from urban villages to network communities

A key theme of our research is structure and texture of urban communities which is formed via complex social networks, social movements, urban politics, discourses and actions practiced by the communities. It has always been a key question whether some groups of

interests or some networks can be seen as a “community” and whether locality, or belonging to specific territory is a necessary feature of communities. Classic sociologists perceived city life as not conducive for forming communities. This view was first introduced by F. Tonnies in the 19th century, and then developed by Durkheim, Simmel, Sumner and Wirth (Knox and Pinch, 2009). This view became a conventional wisdom about cities and urban communities.

Later, Gans questioned such views and argued that cohesive social networks and rural-type communities can be found in the so-called “urban villages”. Thus, in his study of Levittown (1967) Gans showed that suburban neighborhoods are liberated communities, consisting of different choices and groups of interest, not necessarily based on locality and in which citizens may choose to participate (Knox and Pinch, 2009). Communities can be based in specific locality, school, work, media and so on. As Park put it: “Community is not simply an association of people, it is an association of institutes. It is not people, but institutes, that is an ultimate and decisive factor differentiating communities from other social constellations” (cited in Vakhshayn, 2011). As Knox and Pinch review, if the former opinion became known as “community lost” argument, studies like those of ethnic urban villages by Gans or of Benthall Green neighborhood in London by Young and Wilmott, formed a “community saved” argument.

Then again, the communality of working-class neighborhoods was challenged by the analysis of disruption of social networks due to such processes as migration, urban sprawl, and suburbanization, conflict of values between people with different ethnic, cultural and economic background, etc. Increasing mobility of city residents, disorganization and anomie of city life weaken ties between neighbors, so the locality began to be seen as less and less important feature of urban communities (Mokrousova and Glazkov, 2014).

Another perspective discusses the “crisis communality”: when communities emerge in response to various threats and urgent needs (Knox and Pinch, 2009). Castells (1983) describes urban structure as a representation of institutionalized domination, urban crisis and challenge coming from new actors or history. A lot of NIMBY protests (not-in-my-backyard), initiatives for preservation of cultural and historic heritage, different collective actions for solving needs and problems related to daily lives (fundraising for roads, establishment of condominiums, communities taking care of their courtyards and facilities) and collective consumption – all of them can be viewed through the lens of “crisis” which stimulates people to mobilize resources and form a collective identity. Mokrousova and Glazkov (2014) propose a notion of “potential communities”, which stand out from others (e.g. being more cohesive, with clearer articulations of their values, with symbolic identity), and even if their members might not have strong sense of community belonging, such communities emerge and evolve in the context of crisis or emergency.

Mokrousova and Glazkov also write about “network communities” formed around city-oriented or city-related ideas (specific values and interests). They suggest that purely locality-based approach is no longer effective because social networks and internet become a predominant form of communication. Their view is supported by Vakhshayn (2011) who argues that new types of communication are a source of solidarity in new types of communities.

We did not intend in this section to give a full overview of community types and history of their formation and analysis. It gives some clues about motives, frames and modes underlying formation of communities and affecting the way communities interact with each other, with the state and with stakeholders. It also helps us to better formulate main research questions and design research methodology.

1.3. Research problematic and research questions

This research will explore the structure and texture of communities in Bishkek. What do we mean by *structure*, *texture* and *communities*?

- Communities – in this research, this term applies to all kinds of civil society groups, territorial institutions, clubs by interests, activist organizations, local NGOs, religious bodies, online communities, etc. We would like to document and study as many organizational grass-root structures that unite at least a small number of Bishkek urbanites, as possible.
- Structure – is the main characteristics of the cumulative body of all these communities. It includes a typology of groups, their basic features, sizes, motivations, locations, degree of activeness etc.
- Texture – the shape of networks connecting all these different groups to each other, both within and across specific typologies. Some groups might be well-integrated, while others are more isolated. Some groups are allies, others are enemies. The connections between the groups define the main dynamics of Bishkek urban social texture.

It has become quite common to talk about “civil society” in Kyrgyzstan. The term is used widely by policy makers, scholars, journalists. However, no serious effort was carried out to understand in-depth what constitutes this civil society. A quarter of century of independence and relative degree of freedom in the country produced a very extensive and diverse range of various grass-root communities, or did it really? This is what we want to understand by studying such groupings in the capital of Kyrgyzstan – the most cosmopolitan of all urban settlements in the country.

In this research we ask following research questions:

- What shapes the grass-root structure of Bishkek’s communities?
- What is the dynamic of cross-community communication?
- How is the city appropriated by its citizens? How does this appropriation shape urban space?

To answer these three questions, we have designed a fairly complex research methodology with the combination of quantitative and qualitative tools.

1.4. Research methodology

This research uses a variety of research instruments. It will be conducted in several stages and each stage will have its own research approach.

1.4.1. Research method 1: Questionnaire survey of 500 city residents

A survey was conducted among city residents with a purpose of finding out how they spend their free time and socialize. Another purpose was to reveal the groups and communities they are members of, nature of group activities and their personal frequency of participation, etc. This survey helped us analyze the profile of urbanites’ individual participation in the grass-root communities of Bishkek. The survey sample was approximately 500 respondents stratified by age, gender, ethnicity and residence to reflect the latest Bishkek census.

1.4.2. Research method 2: Questionnaire survey of 170 grass-root organizations and communities

1. Researchers worked with various existing databases (e.g. that of the Ministry of Justice) of non-governmental/non-commercial organizations to create a starting sample of 50 organizations for the first contact. This starting sample was stratified by the typology of organizations.
2. Questionnaire survey was conducted with the selected starting sample. The survey collected information on the organizational structure, mission, activities, members, location, and social networks/connections with other grass-root organizations.

3. Using the snow-ball technique, other organizations identified in the starting sample were contacted with the same questionnaire survey.

1.4.3. Research method 3: Social network analysis

On the basis of data about partnership between organizations/communities, we performed the social network analysis (SNA) using open source software called Gephi. SNA analysis identifies several main characteristics of a network: centrality, density, modularity, clustering, and others. Such analysis helped us to have a much deeper understanding of Bishkek communities' structure and texture.

1.4.4. Research method 4: Case studies

Once we had the database of grass-root organizations and communities classified by the kinds of activities and by territories, then we selected a sample of the most interesting case-studies representing different categories of communities. The case-studies helped us reconstruct the histories of these communities and include participant observations of their activities and in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions with their members.