Shaping Peace, Social Order and Resilience: Territorial Youth Councils and the Field of Youth Policy

The previous chapter gave a first insight into community security and peacebuilding practices against the background of the post-Socialist transition and its effects on livelihoods in rural and semi-urban Kyrgyzstan. As I have shown, after the rolling back, downsizing and sometimes de facto collapse of state institutions and services, the web of social institutions and civil society under the umbrella of LCPCs addresses conflict and security issues, but is also highly dependent on local activists’ readiness and ability and resources. Based on this first example of post-liberal forms of community security provision, in this chapter I present an analysis of the peacebuilding, social ordering and mobilization practices of Territorial Youth Councils (Territorialnye Molodezhnye Sovety, TYCs) and their implications for post-liberal statebuilding. Officially created in the year 2011 on young people’s initiative to promote peace, tolerance and non-violence in the aftermath of the 2010 ‘Osh’ or ‘June events’ (see Chapter 4), the TYCs were established with the help of continuous support from the Organisation for Co-operation and Security in Europe (OSCE) and the local NGO Iret¹ and were soon integrated into the local government architecture. TYCs in Osh and analogous structures elsewhere in Kyrgyzstan had an important stake not only in promoting tolerance, interethnic and inter-regional exchange but also self-help and solidarity among young people, which makes them a pertinent case for analysing post-liberal peace and statebuilding in Kyrgyzstan. Like the

¹ The Russian acronym for Initiativa razvitiia edinstva i tolerantnosti, or ‘Initiative for the development of equality and tolerance’.
LCPCs analysed earlier, they mobilize comprehensive efforts among young people and national NGOs to realize goals that are also in the interest of local government actors such as the Mayor’s Office (meriia) of the city of Osh. Correspondingly, many practices and discourses of peacebuilding and social ordering undertaken by TYCs can be situated within the ‘politics of sovereignty’ and ‘Western liberal peace’ imaginary at the same time, while their content invoked ‘tradition and culture’ as a source of peacefulness and harmony in diversity.

The data used in this analysis were gathered in participatory observation during national meetings, community events and in interviews conducted with TYC representatives between September and December 2015. I interviewed current or recent heads or active members from five of the 12 TYCs in the city of Osh, some of whom were currently working as staff in the Committee for Youth Affairs or in the NGO Iret. A first draft of the chapter was shared with the latter via an interlocutor and follow-up conversations as part of a visit of Kyrgyzstani youth within a Saferworld project were conducted in June 2019. These dialogical elements and sustained contact with one of the former project staff served to confirm the correct representation of the TYCs’ story and put it into a broader perspective.

As I learned in the follow-up conversations in recent years, the role of TYCs had been significantly reduced as they had been centralized into six TYCs serving two districts each while staff and budgetary resources continued to be scarce, thus making it harder for TYCs to reach the same number of people. To put these and further developments across the country into perspective, I further examine Kyrgyzstan’s national-level approach to youth participation and youth policy. This analysis leads me to the overall finding that, similar to the case of LCPCs, TYCs and other structures, such as youth centres or committees, are welcome to work on their own initiative and raise resources on their own while the responsible bodies and ministries are not doing sufficient work to create the preconditions, legal and institutional frameworks that would enable a more sustainable and holistic youth participation and youth policy. In this sense, both on the local and national levels a post-liberal constellation can be observed in which non-state actors ensure a minimal level of activity and service provision to mitigate challenges faced by youth, whereas state authorities are reluctant to improve the structural conditions and legal frameworks that could make such work easier and more effective.

The chapter proceeds in three substantive steps. First, I describe how TYCs were created, consolidated and established as an institution for conflict

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2 See list of attended events and interviews in Appendix 2. The Committee for Youth Affairs helped to arrange some of the interviews, but all interviews and conversations were conducted on separate occasions.
prevention and management, which was essentially discontinued once the priority issues had been addressed. Second, I analyse how they aimed to address conflict–related and related socioeconomic issues through different strategies and narrative framings situated in the imaginaries of social ordering from Chapter 3, as they affirmed national ideology and ideas of a ‘right path’ on the one hand, but also embraced diverse ideas such as solidarity, charity, self-help and entrepreneurial thinking, on the other. Third, I move beyond the example of TYCs into the realm of national-level youth participation and policy to analyse the state authorities’ overall lack of commitment to systematic, structural and budgetary changes and their reliance on NGOs and international funding as another example of the post-liberal constellation of policy and order-making in Kyrgyzstan.

**TYCs between conflict prevention and long-term peacbuilding**

The establishing of TYCs in the city of Osh in the south of Kyrgyzstan goes back to the year 2010. One among a number of short-term responses to the June 2010 events, which brought massive damage to large parts of the city and other towns in southern Kyrgyzstan, was to create 11 working groups across the city (Booklet, p 7). The young volunteers in these groups attempted to call their peers to peacefulness, to dispel the multiple conflict–related rumours circulating in the aftermath of the conflict and to build trust, reconciliation and new friendships. This initial conflict prevention, often in the form of seminars or training, was conducted under the project slogan ‘I am a Kyrgyzstani’ (Ya – Kyrgyzstanets) which captures the goal of reconciliation and peaceful coexistence among the population regardless of people’s identities and in the multicultural, civic-nationalist sense discussed in Chapter 4.

In 2011, the youth groups were institutionalized as TYCs as part of a project implemented by the NGO Iret and in cooperation with the CYA under the Mayor’s Office (meria). The mayor’s decree (polozhenie) also established a Coordination Council (koordinatsionnyi sovet) consisting of representatives of the CYA, Iret and the OSCE, and one representative from each of the 12 TYCs. In this body, all operative and strategic questions pertaining to TYCs’ work were discussed, including the allocation of

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3 Most of the information presented in this section can be found in the NGO Iret’s Information booklet on the Territorial Youth Council of the city of Osh [Informatsionnyi sbornik o Territorialnykh Molodezhnykh Sovetakh goroda Osh], Osh, 2015; cited as ‘Booklet’ hereafter.

4 Conversation with youth council head, who had been part of the efforts in the aftermath of the Osh events; Osh, 13 November.
‘mini-grants’ to young people’s projects on a competitive basis. A major factor of motivation and source of knowledge was the funded trips of select activists to Northern Ireland and Vienna, where experiences and perspectives on post-conflict trust building among young people were gathered (Booklet, p 8). Further capacity-building and skills training implemented by Iret with the support and advice from the OSCE helped to recruit new people who would gradually partake in the activities of the TYCs, take on responsibility and become second- and third-generation youth council representatives themselves. The training, exchange visits and – once similar initiatives had been started across the country – national conferences for problem analysis, brainstorming and project planning were regarded as prestigious and attracted many participants.

The institutionalization of TYCs served to confer authority to continue their operations and partly solved the question about the ‘ownership’ of the TYC structure. While Iret and the OSCE did virtually all of the capacity-building and recruitment of volunteers, neither of these organizations was a realistic candidate to become a patron of the TYC in the long term. An important step toward institutionalization of the TYCs was the integration of the 12 TYC heads (predsedateli) into the staff of the CYA in 2013 (Booklet, p 9). This step, together with the issuing of ID cards to all active TYC members (from ten up to 30 per TYC), increased the visibility and legitimacy of the volunteers’ work. As one representative from Iret argued, this gave the TYCs a better position, because ‘even if the authorities rotate people, our people will already be there and will not be touched by them [ikh ne trogaiut].’ This degree of institutionalization of TYCs can be seen as a concrete activity of statebuilding, through which state structures, in this case local administrative structures, are supported and in fact extended in order to better reach young people. While administratively integrated in the CYA, the TYCs worked with their respective territorial councils, the sub-division of the Mayor’s Office in each city district (see Table 5.2 in Chapter 5), and thus also with LCPCs located in each district.

The TYCs in Osh were regarded as a success both by the authorities and within the OSCE, and thus served as a model case for building up youth sector structures all over Kyrgyzstan. Analogous youth structures were created in the southern provincial capitals of Batken and Jalal-Abad, in the town of Uzgen north of Osh and in the city of Tokmok in Chui province, east of Bishkek. Here the establishment of a youth working group in an OSCE project in 2012 led to the founding of a Youth Coordination Council (Koordinatsionniy Sovet Molodezhy, KSM) in 2013. However, establishing TYCs analogous to those in Osh proved impossible as the Mayor’s Office

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5 Youth forum in Batken, 11 September 2015.
lacked the administrative competencies of the one in Osh, which is the only ‘republican’ city alongside the capital Bishkek. This case and similar difficulties of legally constituting youth structures in Jalal-Abad and Batken indicate the limits to the official incorporation of youth councils into local administrative structures.

Most TYCs’ activities after 2013 were focused on fostering tolerance and peaceful interaction and were organized in cooperation with local schools, technical and professional colleges, universities and other educational or administrative institutions. TYC volunteers utilized existing channels and infrastructures for communicating events, recruiting participants and new volunteers for their work. On the other hand, TYCs also organize street-level activities such as sports events, small courtyard festivals or concerts with the title Rebiata s nashego dvora (‘Kids from our courtyard’). While both kinds of events reached a sizeable number of the youth, I was particularly interested in understanding what social outreach TYCs could generate in relation to the large population of the 12 districts of the city of Osh they are operating in. With up to 50,000 inhabitants in one district, ensuring appropriate and effective measures and events to build trust and peace and prevent tensions and conflict seemed a potentially challenging endeavour. Cooperating with existing social and administrative structures such as LCPCs and territorial councils, it appeared that TYCs had on overall significant social outreach especially when compared with other cities or rural areas with little or no opportunities for the youth. However, it also seemed possible that pockets of young people who did not know about TYCs could still exist, and hence imply grievances of conflicts that were both unknown and not attended to.

This variety in the positioning of TYCs in their respective districts and corresponding differential ‘coverage’ of events and activities offered to the youth is best understood in light of the institutional loci of TYC activities. Several representatives stated that their activities were located in the schools and colleges of their city district, where pupils actively engaged in their TYC. The presence of TYCs at schools could vary greatly, however. There may be no information about TYCs in some schools, and in one school, as one interviewee stated, “our school director […] did not admit such youth organizations. She did not want people to

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6 Interview with youth representative, Tokmok, 10 December 2015; correspondence, August 2017.

7 Although with similar difficulties, Committees for Youth Affairs were eventually instated under the Mayor’s Offices of these provincial capitals. Participants on youth forum, Batken, 11 September 2015.

8 For instance, interviews with youth council head, Osh, 13 November; with youth council head, Osh, 4 December 2015; with two youth council activists, Osh, 4 December.
undertake such activity but wanted them to only study.”

Youth activists from another TYC reported that their activities were focused on working with higher education institutions as no agreements for holding events with pupils from the district’s schools had been reached. While TYCs’ presence in education institutions thus depended on individual initiatives and permissions, getting to know about TYCs outside of education or other social infrastructure was yet more dependent on coincidence and on whether the TYCs ran any events in a given neighbourhood. One ex-youth council activist reported:

‘In our courtyard, it is possible that people knew [about TYCs]; only I didn’t because I didn’t go out on the street [to play]. My district is [covered by] the TYC Kerme-Too and it turns out that there, people knew well about it and that monthly events with graffiti and other things were held on the street. I knew that such events were being organized in our district … but I just didn’t know that it was TYC people doing them.’

This shows how TYCs have been present in children’s lives through their ‘Kids from our courtyard’ and other street-level events, even if children may not have been aware of the structure behind these activities. At the same time, this social outreach depends on individuals’ interaction with their own district and can vary across different districts. Furthermore, although events are advertised through posters and leaflets, sufficient recruitment of participants usually needed to be secured through word of mouth among youth and in the form of school teachers or pedagogues strongly encouraging or even ‘pushing’ young people to join. Given her limited interaction with children in her courtyard, the ex-youth council activist quoted above was, like many others, recruited into her TYC during the first year of her studies at the Faculty of Business and Management of Osh State University. Overall, then, this demonstrates how TYCs had multiple age groups to work with in different settings and that covering all of these in each district was likely to be impossible. This challenge was elucidated by a TYC head, who pointed out that offering just one annual activity to young people at the three universities and eight schools in his district implied organizing one event per month, while there was still the ‘city youth’ (gorodskaiia molodezh) to be catered for as well. To deal with the amount of work, TYCs appointed responsible

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9 Interview with former ‘golden ten’ member, Osh, 3 December 2015.
10 Interview with two youth council activists, Osh, 4 December.
11 Interview with former ‘golden ten’ member, Osh, 3 December 2015.
12 Interview with activists and TYC head, Osh, 4 December. Interview with youth representative, Tokmok, 10 December.
13 Conversation, youth council head, Osh, 13 November.
persons or sviaznye (‘communicators’) to organize their work, especially in higher education institutions, more effectively, while this created a significant coordination workload for TYC heads.\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{Mobilization, fluctuation and division of labour}

A key difficulty in fulfilling the roles and goals of TYCs was posed by the turnover and fluctuation of membership which is, to some extent, inevitable in youth volunteering projects. Cultural festivals, events and activities in schools, colleges and universities also served to recruit new volunteers, especially at the beginning of academic years when TYCs would advertise themselves alongside other student organizations in higher education institutions,\textsuperscript{15} while personal friendships played an important role in recruiting new members.\textsuperscript{16} The TYCs’ different events and training were advertised as places where ‘active youth are gathering’, can ‘present themselves’,\textsuperscript{17} voice their ambition and get the opportunity to join the core team called ‘golden ten’ (zolotaia desiatka).\textsuperscript{18} The idea was that each ‘golden ten’ member should recruit two more active members, making a TYC count 30 active members plus the head and deputy head. With the heads working as regular staff in the CYA and acting as a bridge between the latter and their TYC, the golden ten took on the principal responsibility for the operative work in the district. As one TYC head from a more rural district in western Osh explained, before working at the CYA in the afternoon, “in the morning, I go to my [home district] office, I have a territorial council head there, leaders of neighbourhood committees [with whom they cooperate] and youth representatives and leaders who are doing the whole [TYC] work there”.\textsuperscript{19}

In this sense, TYC heads depended on their ‘golden ten’ to keep the activities of the TYCs running, which could be challenging given the above-mentioned fluctuation. As the same TYC head explained, “[one year], we had about 14 leaders, but four had already left for their relatives in Moscow in order to work and only ten were left. The following year, of these ten, another four or five became students or also left to work.” This fluctuation meant that within one year the positions within her golden ten team could change one or more times, as people would join the core team

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Interview with activists, Osh, 4 December; youth representative, Tokmok, 10 December.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Interview, ex-golden ten member, Osh, 3 December 2015.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Interview with activists, Osh, 4 December 2015; similar stories were told in interviews by two TYC heads, Osh, 13 November and 4 December.
\item \textsuperscript{17} ‘Ty sebia pokazyvash.’ Ex-golden ten member, interview, Osh, 3 December.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Interview, TYC head of a suburban district, Osh, 13 November.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Interview, TYC head, Osh, 13 November.
\end{itemize}
for an average of only seven to eight months. Similarly, the TYC head with eight schools in his district remarked succinctly that, “as regards the regularity of people’s contribution], that varies [eto po raznomu] and, worse, within a short period of time, “the golden ten completely fell apart. They finished the 11th grade and entered university in Bishkek or left for other reasons.” This demonstrates that, while working in TYCs may be interesting and attractive for young people for various reasons, their life courses, personal plans and obligations vis-à-vis family and relatives may not allow them to be active in TYCs for a long time. This dilemma was particularly acute in the recruitment of pupils from higher school grades, who would mostly leave Osh to study or work elsewhere soon after. The situation frustrated TYC representatives and was seen as a major issue preventing a more sustainable impact of TYCs and raising questions about the aspects of livelihood and career development in relation to work within the TYCs.

Ensuring the implementation of event plans amid this high degree of fluctuation required effective internal communication, delegation and division of labour, but inevitably foregrounded frictions among the activists. While TYC members were free to propose events and activities suitable for their communities and different target groups, the annual event calendar of the city of Osh with its traditional holidays already set some expectations on TYCs and especially their leaders to mobilize volunteers. The salary of 2,100 soms that TYC heads received from the CYA until 2016 implied a degree of authority and prestige, but also further underlined the expectations and moral obligations to deliver the expected activities. The corresponding challenge for TYC heads was to convince their peers to join and actively contribute to the TYCs’ work while maintaining the voluntary and open character of this work. This could also lead to failure, as exemplified in one TYC where members were discontented with their deputy head and, as the TYC head explained “they set up a meeting [miting stroili; laughs] and said, ‘the guy doesn’t do work’, ‘he is such and such’ and they even called for new elections and elected a new deputy. … So that’s the kind of internal politics going on.” In another local youth group the leader shared the distress she experienced when her deputy head decided to resign because he did not agree with the way the local group worked:

‘And when I asked him, why did you leave, why do you not want to work, he said [clearing throat], ‘These are my principles, I want it like this, that’s it.’ And I just wanted to kill myself [ubivalas] and said, gosh, what’s this, what am I supposed to do now, I have to explain

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20 Presentation at national closing conference, 27 October, Janaat Resort, near Bishkek.
21 Which equalled about 25 euros and about a sixth of the national average wage at the time.
This illustrates the stakes involved in the work of TYCs and the trust implicated in decisions on recruiting people and investing in them by sending them to national conferences and training. These investments and the corresponding responsibility make the people in leading positions vulnerable to the disagreement, resistance or inability of ordinary members to carry out their work. The group leader further reflected:

‘Anyway, one has to conform to some rules, to some pillars and to move in such a way that it’s not only comfortable for yourself but also for others. There were days when I missed classes for three or four days in order to work in some project, to go on a trip. Because this is a responsibility, after all. Because you chose this life [podkluchilsa v etu zhizn], after all. You’re not supposed to reject this responsibility because they invest money and work in you. And you’re supposed to give some feedback [if you don’t like something].’

As this statement shows, precarious situations and competitive relations were part and parcel of the TYCs’ work. While such can be mitigated and transformed into constructive cooperation and even year-long friendships, the entirely voluntary status of TYCs’ work further stresses the question about TYC activists’ livelihoods and career prospects after graduation. Given the lack of monetary compensation in these positions except the monthly wage allowance of Osh TYC heads, youth leaders have to sustain their existence through wage labour in various professions ranging from journalism to the hospitality sector. A few TYC activists were able to work in the NGO sector to write grant proposals and help implement projects, including the TYC capacity-building project, thus benefiting from international donors’ post-2010 focus on youth as a vulnerable group. Although a good proportion – about a quarter – of the TYC activists successfully progressed from ordinary member to leader and further to professional employment in youth work and policy, there was a need for more short-term motivational sources to mobilize people. These

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22 Interview, youth council representative, Tokmok, 10 December 2015.
23 For instance, the same youth leader told how she would regularly have disagreements or even fights with her colleague but would always find a common denominator in the end.
24 Interview, youth work expert, Tokmok, 10 December 2015; conversation, TYC project consultant, 6 July 2017.
are discussed in the next section with regard to young activists’ personal (self-)development and contribution to what they saw as the nation’s or their city’s development. These positive aspects notwithstanding, the favourable business cycle created by international donor money could not hide the fact that existing structures and resources in Kyrgyzstan’s youth work and policy sector were barely sufficient to sustainably tackle the challenges pertaining to youth and entire social milieus; a situation that was equally obvious in the TYCs’ long-term establishment.

Delegated, but flexibilized authority

The above discussion has shown how TYCs worked to prevent conflict and build tolerance in the aftermath of the 2010 Osh events as they built up elaborate structures and capacities allowing them to run several events across their respective city districts with minimal budgetary support. TYCs can, in this sense, be seen as the ideal solution from the point of view of the local administration and the state at large. They served to channel international donor money and large-scale efforts of young people into conducting projects and activities, while the Mayor’s Office could steer and control these efforts according to its preferences through the CYA and analogous bodies elsewhere. As the CYA head pointed out, the TYCs had managed to establish cooperation between ‘local administrative organs’ (mestnye organy vlasti)25 and, specifically in Osh, ‘interact closely’ with law enforcement organs, territorial councils (the district-level sub-division of the Mayor’s Office) and their composite institutions such as aksakal courts and women’s councils (zhensovets).26 “As regards the role of TYCs for these institutions”, he further explained, “[they] are in need of human resources … they need people […] who will realize this, discuss, promote and advertise the events”.27 The best demonstration of this close cooperation between TYCs and other administrative and civil society bodies are big festivals held on the occasions of Nooruz,28 1 May, or the Anniversary of the city of Osh analysed further below, where TYC activists presented dance and theatrical performances and helped organize a culinary and arts fair. Further smaller-scale projects funded by ‘mini-grants’ allow youth to realize their ideas and get to know their peers from across the city and even Osh province. The important effect of these activities on building trust, tolerance and peace as well as preventing crime, conflict and delinquent behaviour among the

25 OSCE representative, national youth forum, Janaat Resort, 28 October 2015.
26 Interview, Head of the Committee for Youth Affairs, Osh, 19 November 2015.
27 Interview, Head of the Committee for Youth Affairs, Osh, 19 November 2015.
28 A holiday celebrating the commencement of spring or, in Persian and Zoroastrian tradition, the new year.
youth, foregrounded a clear case for sustaining or even extending the TYCs’ institutional status and mandate.

However, the following actions by the Mayor’s Office sustained the flexibilization of the TYCs and even further centralized them. The TYCs’ support from Iret and the OSCE officially ended in autumn 2016, meaning the TYCs were ‘solely’ – also in terms of funding and capacity-building support – ‘in the hand of the Mayor’s Office’.

The first measure taken thereafter was to halve the number of TYC heads working as ordinary staff members in the CYA: instead of one member of staff per TYC, the CYA employed six staff for the by now 13 TYCs, each of whom managed the work of two TYCs. Accordingly, the salary for each TYC manager was doubled and could more realistically support their livelihoods than the 2,100 soms previously received by each TYC head. Yet, the new arrangement also significantly centralized the procedures and communication channels and thus further increased the pressure on the TYC heads and their deputies to recruit, train and coordinate members for the organization of events and activities. Overall, it appears that the establishment and institutionalization of TYCs in Osh was already the biggest possible achievement, and that further structural and practical changes in youth work and youth policy could only be reached by higher-level initiatives. The pragmatic rationale of mayors’ offices and rural administrations (aiyl okmotu) in smaller towns was to allow youth initiatives to organize events, educate and entertain young people without creating the structures making such work more sustainable, because doing so would incur additional administrative and budgetary burdens. Given that youth affairs are taken care of by voluntary youth activists and NGOs with the help of donor money, there was basically no incentive to create structures such as TYCs or make the latter more sustainable in Osh itself.

The operating logic of TYCs and analogous structures is, in this sense, a post-liberal one as in the case of LCPCs in Chapter 5: They mobilize scarce resources such as donor money and the time and dedication of young activists with otherwise precarious livelihoods, with an appeal to a collective effort to build a peaceful and tolerant social order, while carrying out these activities in accordance with local governments’ and wider state actors’ political agendas. This political alignment of the peace and tolerance

29 Conversation, project consultant, 6 July 2017.
30 The substituting effect of international donors’ and local NGOs’ activities in the youth sphere was noted by a senior specialist from the Tokmok Mayor’s Office Social Department, Tokmok, 10 December 2015.
31 Conversation, TYC project consultant, Osh, 3 December 2015. The expert in Tokmok (see note 30 above) noted how the creation of an official youth work structure was apparently more a matter of political will than of available resources or approval from higher-level structures.
produced by TYCs and its situating in imaginaries of statebuilding in Kyrgyzstan is further analysed in turn.

**Discourses and practices of TYC initiatives**

*Peace, tolerance and exchange between groups and locales*

The original function and mission of TYCs was to build peace and trust between different ethnic groups within and across the districts of Osh city and beyond. Although this initial goal had largely been realized and receded into the background by 2015, many were still very much aware of it, especially youths in the districts affected by the ‘2010 events’. The inter-communal conflict of 2010 was still vividly present in the memories of young people and thus conditioned an acute awareness about perceived differences between ethnic groups and cultures and the necessity to work on this topic and challenge stereotypes and prejudice. Accordingly, the continued significance of exchanges, ‘friendship camps’ (*lagery druzhby*) and mutual visits of people from different districts of the city and beyond was emphasized by several interviewees. One acting TYC head from a district, which had been gravely affected by the ‘2010 events’, told me how, as a reaction to the conflict and the reported involvement of people from remote districts of Osh province, they started organizing mutual visits with villages in Chong Alai region.  

Such exchange between mono-ethnic communities from different ends of the city, for instance Japalak and Amir-Temur or Turan and Kerme-Too, and with remote areas beyond, was, as argued by a leading project consultant, one of the key achievements of the TYCs.

This component of building peace, tolerance and trust and fighting stereotypes between ethnic communities was increasingly combined with activities of general interest for young people. Different so-called mini-projects for peace- and tolerance-building have focused on performances, sports competition or arts and handicrafts with the interaction of different youths from diverse backgrounds. Examples include projects such as ‘Let’s debate with one another’ (*Davaite obsudim vmeste*), where debating and public speech skills training was combined with debating current issues; ‘The world through art’ (*Mir cherez iskusstvo*), where participants from both Osh city and province, who had special artisan and handicraft talents, created works on specific themes which were exhibited in all represented

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32 Interview, Osh, 13 November 2015. Chong Alai is one of the regions whose almost exclusively Kyrgyz population is well known for harbouring stereotypes about Osh and its Uzbek population. This was confirmed in an interview with a project consultant on 3 December.

33 Conversation, Osh, 6 July 2017.
locales; and a workshop on origami paper folding, which included visitors from Aravan, a town south of Osh, and the Alai region. Another important and more regular event theme is the above-mentioned *Rebiata s nashego dvora* (‘Kids from our courtyard’), which offers a stage for young people to present any performances they would like to contribute. Attending such an event on the occasion of International Youth Day, I witnessed a wide range of acts including contemporary pop culture (breakdance, singer-songwriter and rock acts performing Russian- and English-language songs) and sketches and love songs performed in the Kyrgyz language (see Figure 6.1).

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**Figure 6.1:** Performances during *Rebiata s nashego dvora* event

Notes: (a) Photograph from the ‘Kids from our courtyard’ event; (b) music performance; (c) breakdance performance.

Source: Author

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34 Presentations on national forum in Batken, 11 September 2015; Booklet, p 29.
35 Interview, Osh, 4 December 2017.
These events, which make up a large share of TYC activities, place a central emphasis on the idea of practising and living tolerance and openness toward a variety of interests, orientations and identities among young people. While promoting peace and tolerance is still a key goal of these activities, it is not as explicitly propagated as in the events organized in the immediate post-conflict period. This shift toward more *implicit* peace- and tolerance-building is reflecting the need to ‘move forward’ from the initial focus of the TYC project,\(^{36}\) which had already been successful in creating peace and was seen to be in need of ‘new directions’.\(^{37}\) A youth activist from Tokmok pointed out how rules for promoting tolerance and diversity were still adhered to in all projects, for instance by trying to always mix groups by gender and ethnicity in group work slots, or by making participants rethink and overcome reservations and stereotypes once they surfaced in interactions.\(^{38}\) This peacebuilding in ‘imperceptible ways’\(^{39}\) and through an ‘indirect model’ emphasizing cooperation (*sotrudnichestvo*)\(^{40}\) and simply practising diversity and tolerance in action, rather than explicitly propagating and educating young people about it as an end in itself, has emerged in reaction to the above-mentioned need to ‘move forward’ and to acknowledge that most young people with whom projects are conducted may not have memories from the 2010 conflict or may not feel that they are in particular need of being trained in peace. This approach thus takes up Megoran et al’s (2014, pp 14ff) criticism that internationally funded peacebuilding projects among urban residents of Osh and Jalal-Abad were superimposing, often in a patronizing way, ideas of peace and harmony on people who did not feel they needed any peacebuilding measures at all. The peace- and tolerance-building of the TYCs has moved on from this problematic and limited approach not only in its more implicit emphasis on this goal, but also by persistently incorporating youth from the regions of Osh province. Stories of friendship and cooperation, such as the setting up of a joint coal trading business between people in the Alai region and the Turan district of Osh,\(^{41}\) and the exceptional diversity of people working in TYCs themselves,\(^{42}\) helped to overcome stereotypes on the part of young people and foreground stories of

\(^{36}\) As expressed by the head of the Committee for Youth Affairs, interview, Osh, 19 November 2015.

\(^{37}\) Conversation, TYC head, Osh, 13 November.

\(^{38}\) Interview, Tokmok, 10 December 2015.

\(^{39}\) Ibid.

\(^{40}\) Conversation, project consultant, Osh, 6 July 2017.

\(^{41}\) As told by project consultants, conversation, Osh, 6 July 2017; 4 December 2015.

\(^{42}\) The booklet lists all TYCs’ golden ten members whose backgrounds range from sports (boxer, sportsman, fighter, karate champion) and artistic ones (artist, poet, musician, singer, dancer, *komus* [Kyrgyz string instrument] player) to political and student activist ones (school president, school parliament member, political party youth wing member).
personal transformation in other peacebuilding projects.\(^{43}\) That the original mission of the TYCs is still of significance will become particularly clear in relation to its ideological positioning, which I discuss in turn.

**National ideology and the ‘right path’**

On various occasions, the TYC project was positioned vis-à-vis questions of national ideology and the idea of a ‘right path’, *ak jol* in Kyrgyz, which referred both to individual life courses and the development of Kyrgyzstan as a country. As responsible individuals with good outreach in their respective communities, TYC leaders and youth activists from across the country demonstrated awareness of the issues Kyrgyzstan was facing in economic development and the corresponding challenges that society needed to face up to. Pronouncements by event organizers and funders that the young leaders could ‘lay a good foundation for the future of Kyrgyzstan’ and could themselves be ‘the future of this country’ illustrates how youth activists were encouraged to think in terms of national development and politics.\(^{44}\) Young activists’ affirmative statements in a theme movie on the TYC project, according to which they could imagine becoming politicians or president of the country, further strengthened the idea of taking responsibility for the country. In taking to the task, youth activists on a youth forum in Batken drew direct links between Kyrgyzstan’s social and political problems and the insufficiently developed ideology and moral orientation of society. One participant stated:

‘We need to make changes; now women drink and smoke, earlier there weren’t such things [ранше тогу не было]. Why are men not protecting their women and their country? We have to create jobs in Kyrgyzstan, so that women don’t go in the wrong direction; we are doing dirty work on the streets; suicides are growing in number, there is a problem with upbringing [воспитание]. … We need to preserve our national ideology [сохранить национальную идею] and not forget our history. We have to help the people who are not on the right path.’\(^{45}\)

This statement, which initiated a wider discussion on problems faced by youth in Kyrgyzstan, touched upon a number of problems, such as

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\(^{44}\) On the forum in Batken, 11 and 13 September 2015.

\(^{45}\) Plenary session during youth forum in Batken, 11 September 2013.
deteriorating social relations and role models and behaviours – such as men not living up to their perceived role of protecting women, drug consumption, and suicides – and indicates the possibility of solving these problems by helping those who are not on the ‘right path’ (ak jol, Ru.: pravilniy put) and preserving national ideology and historical memory. Further participants agreed that there was a problem with people ‘embarking on the wrong path’ (nastaiut na nepravilnyi put) and that it was increasingly ‘difficult to mobilize people’ (slozhno sobirat ludei) as spiritual values were apparently changing (‘nashi dukhovnye tsennosti izmenilis’).46

In discussing the perceived loss of ideology, people especially emphasized the rise of new Islamic practices: “People forget their [culture], they wear a hijab, but this is Arabic clothing, why don’t they wear some Kyrgyz clothing like the kalpak?” Besides this recasting of the search for national ideology as an issue of ‘traditional versus non-traditional Islam’ (see below), one participant from Jalal-Abad also argued that: “The Kyrgyz language is part of our ideology … we should be proud of it; in Bishkek when someone speaks with a Southern dialect, they relate to him like to a sart [someone part of a sedentary population, usually referring to Uzbeks].” This invocation of ethno-nationalist othering of Uzbeks and the argument about maintaining national ideology by preserving the Kyrgyz language evoked reluctant reactions, but was only eventually countered by the moderator who pointed out: “Our national ideology is neither our language nor our clothing – it is justice [spravedlivost]! No matter what language we speak or what ethnicity we are from, justice is our national ideology, don’t forget this!” This outlines the general tension between the opinion that a stronger national ideology was needed to improve the situation of people in Kyrgyzstan and that, on the other hand, emphasizing Kyrgyz culture and language too much and at the expense of other cultures, ethnicities and ways of life could jeopardize the TYCs’ overarching goal of peace and tolerance. Both the forum in Batken and other TYC events I attended demonstrated that harmonic interethnic conviviality is possible under the banner of Kyrgyzstan’s national symbols. The participants of the Batken forum, for instance, collected money to drive to the local Manas Ata (Father Manas) monument and take photos for their memories. They also set up an entertainment event the same evening, where participants recited the Epic of Manas and other traditional Kyrgyz poetry, alongside other music and sketch performances. While these activities occurred in harmony and even with enthusiasm, it is worth noting that this may have required a higher degree of adaptation and compromise on the part of youth activists who were not of ethnically Kyrgyz background.

46 Plenary session during youth forum in Batken, 11 September 2013.
The main mechanism for producing such understandings of national ideology and interpellating people, including the youth, into it was the programme of official celebrations, as in the city of Osh. This calendar included important anniversaries pertaining to the Kyrgyz nation and the city itself. For instance, on the ceremony for the Anniversary of the city of Osh in late October 2015 (see Figure 6.2), dozens of young people were mobilized to present different dances and historical performances, with a key one being the story of Kurmanjan Datka and the murder of her son, the historical sacrifice made to ensure decades of peace and making the protagonist a national hero (see Chapter 4). Performances of such historical significance were combined, somewhat eclectically, with action-laden shows of hip hop and breakdance groups over the beats of Western RnB.
and Drum-n-Bass music. While this event brought together Kyrgyz legends and dreams of modern life and self-expression on the Lenin Square in front of the Mayor’s Office, the adjacent Lenin Street and the square in front of the theatre (dramteatr) hosted a farmer’s market, an arts exhibition and borsok\textsuperscript{47} festival. With the market hosting stalls representing most towns of Osh province and the borsok competition featuring stalls from local schools, the ‘Day of the City’ offered an impressive display of the diversity of people, traditions and cultures living in and around Osh, but also of the things uniting them, such as specific products in which the towns in the periphery have specialized or the borsok, which has been baked by all groups inhabiting Osh and its environs for centuries. The TYCs’ participation in the anniversary celebration and other ‘festivals of friendship’ and similar events\textsuperscript{48} thus attest to the fact that Kyrgyzstani national symbolism and the implicit reinvigoration of Kyrgyz traditions are commensurable with both displays of modern hip hop and youth culture and the diversity of ethnicities and cultures of Osh and its environs.

As further confirmation of the national ideological positioning, various interviewees from TYCs confirmed that their and fellow activists’ motivation was based on patriotic feelings and desires to develop their community, city and the country at large. Asked about people’s motivation to organize numerous events in their free time, one TYC head explained: “Well, there are some patriots among them [smiles]. After school, they all come on their own initiative, we do stuff, they are already like patriots.”\textsuperscript{49} Another TYC member explained that he was joining the TYC activities because he personally wanted to “change my country” and “make a contribution [\textit{dat polzul}].”\textsuperscript{50} The ex-golden ten member from a western district explained that “[o]ur goal was to unite the city and to develop it … and I knew that TYCs develop the city by strengthening it and creating interethnic accord”.\textsuperscript{51}

In this sense, participation in TYC work and its building of peace and tolerance was seen as an act of patriotism and a contribution to building the

\textsuperscript{47} Central Asian fried dough specialty.


\textsuperscript{49} Interview, Osh, 4 December 2015.

\textsuperscript{50} Interview, Osh, 4 December 2015.

\textsuperscript{51} Interview, Osh, 3 December 2015.
Kyrgyzstani nation by at least some of the youth activists. In these practices and activities, discourses emphasizing Kyrgyz tradition and defence against external influence, which can be situated in the ‘politics of sovereignty’ imaginary, can coexist with ideas of multicultural, civic nationalism and displays of pop culture and youth sub-culture akin to the creativity and self-expression in the Western ‘liberal peace’ imaginary. Incompatibilities between such discourses and positions were rarely confronted, as the platforms created by TYCs would allow a degree of diversity and heteroglossia. Thus, the remark of one TYC head that “our people [narod] does not like these LGBT and similar people. Here, no one is forcing their opinion upon you” was not brought up during other interviews with TYCs or any events. Overall, the TYCs work thus made a key contribution to socializing tolerant and diversity-oriented people under the banner of national ideology, both in more open multicultural terms and under more exclusively Kyrgyz symbolism of national heroes like Manas and Kurmanjan Datka. These latter symbolic referent objects, on the other hand, also emphasized cultural and ideological positionings with more exclusionary character, foregrounding a post-liberal character of the peace and unity produced.

Tackling concrete problems: racketeering and poverty

Events and activities revolving around official discourses on nation-building, interethnic friendship and tolerance were the easiest and most straightforward way for TYCs to promote their goals. However, given their close focus on communities and the task of ‘identifying problems [vyiavlenia problem] and contributing to their solutions’ TYCs also work to tackle the issues faced by youth in their respective districts and in the country at large. These included, among others, racketeering and poverty, which affected young people in often grave ways and were seen as source of further problems such as crime and delinquency. The efforts invested in tackling these issues were an important addition to the authorities’ work, as in the case of peace- and tolerance-building discussed above.

In analysing and devising measures against racketeering in schools and wider youth milieux, TYCs made some important progress. Already in 2014, TYCs in Osh had organized events to tackle such issues together with the local administration, schools and Inspectors for Youth Affairs (Inspektor po delam nesovershennoletnykh or IDN) in the police. In a project on the problem of ‘[i]nter-group clashes among youth and racketeering in schools’, a ‘Dialogue Centre’ for a discussion of the reasons for these phenomena was

52 Osh, 13 November 2015.
53 Interview, head of CYA, Osh, 19 November 2015.
established, meetings with law enforcement agencies organized, and even an excursion was arranged for ‘pupils under the influence of informal leaders [imeiushikh vliiania neformalnykh liderov]’ (Booklet, pp 22–3). The TYC head from a central district in Osh reported that racketeering was the number one problem (pervia problema) in his district’s schools and how, thanks to his group’s efforts to promote moderation, “some pupils who are racket leaders […] already listen and it’s already interesting for them”. He explained that sports events were especially useful in his team’s attempts to make racketeers refrain from their practices. Many of the racketeers had become members of the TYC, because knowing what kind of events were being organized by this entity they started ‘considering different things in life’ (soobrazhenie drugogo). A project consultant confirmed that former racketeers and ‘gangsters’ [bandity] had indeed written quite interesting project proposals. A more detailed story of a conversion of racketeers and youth gang leaders was told by the TYC head from the rural district of Osh:

‘In my TYC we have 13 villages [sel] and all the time there are fights between youths of different villages. So, together with neighbourhood inspectors and IDNs, we set up seminars for the informal leaders … and we went to [a town] in Jalal–Abad province, where they had a good time [otdylali], became friends and learnt new things. So, when they came back home they had already become friends.’

Asked what exactly they told the racket group leaders to convince them to come to such a summer camp, the youth council head further explained that they approached them as ‘very active young people’ whom they sought to recruit for a camp for active people and for the development of new ideas for the youth. As the different leaders and the people ‘managing different schools’ (smotriashie shkoly, lit. ‘looking after schools’) became friends, the number of physical fights significantly decreased or, if they happened at all, fights were not that grave (ne tak slozhno), as the activist explained. While these cases of success benefited from good cooperation on the part of law enforcement agencies and the financial and organizational support of donors and NGOs, this situation can vary considerably with time and geographical location, even from district to district and violence among youths remains a significant issue across the country.

A yet more fundamental issue facing youth in Kyrgyzstan appears to be underlying the other problems that TYCs are tackling. While I have glossed the issue as ‘poverty’, this must be understood in its different nuances and

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54 Interview, Osh, 4 December 2015. A project consultant confirmed.
55 Conversation, Osh, 6 July 2017.
56 Interview, TYC head, Osh, 13 November 2015.
aspects which can loosely be grouped into, first, the general effects and social ills emanating from poverty and socioeconomic hardship; second, the social and psychological effects of migration and other attempts at coping with the situation; and third, the deprivation of rights and basic services affecting young people living in poverty. The first two aspects were especially present in TYCs’ work. The TYC head from the rural district of Osh, for instance, said that her TYC team demanded a ‘crisis centre’ be set up, which would offer psychological help to women in difficult domestic situations which had led to a rising number of suicides.\(^{57}\) Similarly, a police major from Batken reported that suicides, especially among children from badly-off families \((\text{malomushikhia semei})\), were a big problem, alongside children being left by parents who go to work abroad.\(^{58}\) The social work expert from Tokmok shared similar experiences about the trend in the deterioration of the family as an institution:

‘The institution of the family as such does not exist anymore ... Now, where you look, you see lone mothers bringing up children, or lone fathers, or the parents went somewhere the child stays behind alone and becomes a social orphan, right? Or the parents leave the child altogether. What’s this? To tell the truth, this kind of thing is very developed here now. ... in the [municipal] Commission for Children’s Affairs we had nine cases, and all these nine cases were from disadvantaged families \([\text{neblagopoluchnye semei}]\), all of them! The children don’t go to school because the family is badly off \([\text{nuzhdaetsa}]\), because there is no birth certificate or because the father and mother do not have passports. ... And then mothers and fathers, they have no upbringing \([\text{vospitania}]\), no education \([\text{obrazovania}]\), parents give their child to someone random, it doesn’t matter at all what happens to their son, he’s being brought up by some strangers or a grandmother who is eighty years old, we had all of these cases.’\(^{59}\)

This shows how the deterioration of families is associated, on the one hand, with parents’ attempts to cope with economic hardship through labour migration and delegation of the upbringing and provision for their children, but it is increasingly conditioned by social destitution and individuals and entire families vanishing from the registers of welfare institutions and the state altogether. Under the theme ‘The violation of rights of young brides and the break-up of young families’, TYCs set up a theatre play to raise awareness about the way in which negative family relations and factors

\(^{57}\) TYC head, Osh, 13 November 2015.
\(^{58}\) Youth forum, Batken, 12 September 2015.
\(^{59}\) Interview, Tokmok, 10 December 2015.
such as alcoholism or unemployment can lead to broken homes, while also discussing, in a roundtable, the possibilities of mitigating this trend (Booklet, p 29). The aspect of rights deprivation was highlighted by participants in the forum in Batken. This point was emphasized in regard to ‘social orphans’ left behind by their parents and relatives and living in state boarding homes (internaty) with only 500 soms per month allocated for their needs – a sum barely sufficient to cover a week’s costs. The participants thus suggested rights education (правоведение) in the form of a school subject as a way to counter the entrenchment of the precarity of socially vulnerable children through the withholding of their basic rights. Poverty and destitution as fundamental challenges faced by youth and the Kyrgyzstani population at large both directly affect the TYCs and indirectly conditioned the problems they dealt with, such as family and upbringing problems, domestic violence and conflicts among the youth. The instruments and capacities of TYCs to address these issues were, as this survey shows, often limited to reacting to neediness or conflicts and criminal practices such as racketeering, which are deeply intertwined with these socioeconomic dynamics. The TYCs’ approach to dealing with such socioeconomic issues in their challenging environment is discussed in the following.

*Self-help and solidarity*

There are two discernible strands of thinking among TYC activists as to how poverty and socioeconomic hardship in Kyrgyzstan can be dealt with. The first revolved around the idea that such challenges can be overcome and dealt with if people work on improving themselves to be better equipped for the challenges of life. This emphasis on the importance of basic education, knowledge, skills and the ideas of self-help and self-improvement had remarkable significance and resonance among young people working in the TYCs and in Kyrgyzstani society at large. As one participant at the youth forum in Batken proposed when reasoning on how to overcome problems in the work of TYCs: “One needs to start with oneself and to change oneself [Nado nachninat s sebia, nado sebia meniat].”\(^{60}\) This stance also involved a critical angle on the lack of the right education and training to fill the employment positions that are actually available\(^ {61}\) which would lead to a human resources or ‘cadre problem’ (кадровая проблема). The entrepreneurial ethos foregrounded in such ideas of self-improvement and self-help was best captured in the phrase, “We should not only ask what the state does, but rather, what can we do for the state?”, which, going back to J.F. Kennedy, was

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\(^{60}\) Batken, 11 September 2015.

\(^{61}\) Youth forum, Batken, 11 September 2015.
echoed by various forum participants. At the closing conference, two of the more successful TYC heads put forward this self-initiative, entrepreneurial ethos as a key to escape the problems faced by youth. Making references to ‘people who built today’s America’ such as Steve Jobs, they argued that becoming a successful leader and entrepreneur was mainly a question of will, as the opportunities available for young people nowadays were unprecedented (‘ранше не были такие возможности’).  

This and other presentations of TYC members thus promoted what could be called, according to Makovicky (2014), an entrepreneurial model of personhood, which with its defiance of the adverse conditions and lack of state provision and opportunities has gained popularity among youth in Kyrgyzstan. Numerous donor projects, programmes and events facilitate young people’s self-development, such as the Jashtar Kemp (‘Youth camp’) organized annually by the youth-led NGO Youth of Osh that showcases successful business people and their personal development paths, are testimony to this new trend, as are various ‘business club’ projects organized by the same NGO to support young businesses and tackle unemployment. Such activities are very attractive for their focus on empowerment and the possibility to realize one’s own ideas and projects and become successful. On the other hand, this ‘liberal’ and entrepreneurial approach runs the risk of homogenizing people’s experiences while ignoring their unequal socioeconomic backgrounds, recent family histories and other factors that can render their attempts to self-improve and realize their potential impossible. People disproportionately affected by life’s hardships may not be aware of this or may be in denial, causing disappointment or worse if they do not succeed. The same TYC activists who at the November youth conference had presented the idea of taking Steve Jobs and other entrepreneurs as role models admitted in later group work that people in their neighbourhood were still forced to go to work in Russia, even if they were very talented. So, while self-improvement and entrepreneurialism were seen as ways to make the best out of the situation, the overwhelming feeling about the socioeconomic issues faced by the youth in Kyrgyzstan and the massive fluctuation they created in youth work, was one of frustration and desperation.

Here the second, complementary narrative comes into play: solidarity and empathy among young people and the initiative to help people in need were

62 National closing conference, Jannat Resort, Chui province, 28 October.
65 National closing conference, Jannat Resort, Chui province, 28 October.
another important agenda of TYCs and other youth structures. TYCs undertook efforts to solve a number of problems, such as ensuring water supply and regular cleaning of different parts of Osh or the setting up of ‘social taxis’ [socialnye taksi] in an eastern district of the town.66 The expert from the social department from Tokmok affirmed that youth nowadays are ‘aware that it is necessary to help each other, and the poor, and the old’ and enumerated countless examples of organizations and initiatives helping elderly, homeless, poor families, and school children. Similarly, the Tokmok youth delegation on the forum in Batken demonstrated how for them, ‘everything starts from solidarity and tolerance’ as they and their partners in the regions of Chui province worked to support children’s houses and had even opened a canteen (stolovuiu), whose profits were spent on charity purposes.67 The head and deputy head of a central district TYC in Osh gave their interview in the headquarters of the organization they worked for as professionals, which specialized in supporting disabled people for whom state support was insufficient or unavailable.68

This solidarity and charity aspect of the work of TYCs and their members is a critical complement to the self-help and entrepreneurial narrative examined above. Some interviewees put forward explicit criticism vis-à-vis the latter, remarking that “there are some people who join [TYCs] only to develop themselves, right? … Just to develop themselves and one’s thinking somehow, and when you’re done you try to get a job, right” 69 or indicating that some people were working “only for their own pocket [na svoiu karmanu]” to develop their own business and enhance their own life.70 Another critical voice on the forum in Batken remarked: “[T]here are many egoistic people who think about themselves, but maybe even one day we will be corrupted [mozhet byt my i budem korrupcionernami], we need to pay attention to people around us, in our community [nado obratit vnimanie cheloveku vokrug, v svoem soobschestve].” This is not to discredit the idea of self-help and self-development altogether, however. Rather, given the specific junction that the different people were at in their lives – the end of their school years and entering studies or professional lives – the idea of developing their own skill sets, abilities to lead teams and projects and to gather experience and knowledge is an indispensable part of the TYCs’ work. The combination of this idea of personal growth and experience with empathy about the challenges and hardships faced by peers and society at large motivated many TYC and other youth activists to put all their time and effort into the improvement of

66 Interview with TYC head, Osh, 13 November 2015.
67 Group presentation, Batken, 11 September 2015.
68 Interview with TYC head, Osh, 13 November 2015.
69 Interview, ex-golden ten member, Osh, 4 December 2015.
70 Presentation during the national closing conference, Jannat Resort, 28 October 2015.
youth policy and politics in their respective communities and Kyrgyzstan at large. While the project closing conference in 2015 and TYCs’ discussions in the year 2016 were dedicated to questions of institutional development and sustainability, the downsizing of TYCs from 12 to six salaried leading positions already indicated reluctance on the part of the authorities to create more sustainable and well-endowed structures. In the next section, I thus discuss further initiatives to bring substantive change in the area of youth policy and youth participation in Kyrgyzstan.

A voice of or vis-à-vis youth? Opportunities and limitations of youth participation and youth policy in Kyrgyzstan

Both the slow and selective progress in the institutionalization of TYCs and other youth structures, and the systemic nature of problems of poverty and crime indicated that youth activists needed to establish themselves on various levels in the political system, rather than just in their local communities. To capture these attempts and the agenda of creating more sustainable youth policy structures, I first focus on initiatives for better youth participation at the municipal and national levels before then discussing developments in Kyrgyzstan’s youth policy sector, which, as I argue, appears to be captured in a post-liberal logic, as it selectively draws on international support and ideational frameworks to support the underlying goal of strengthening societal stability and national sovereignty.

The first aspect of youth participation started to come up during my research in Osh, where more and more reference was made to the upcoming inauguration of a Youth Parliament for the city of Osh which, according to one TYC head, would perhaps be more effective in solving problems at the city level as it would enter into direct dialogue with the city’s parliament (gorodskii kenesh). The CYA head affirmed that it would be helpful to have youth representatives raise issues and make recommendations for legislation and normative acts to the city parliament and Mayor’s Office. However, besides the opening of the Youth Parliament, little is known about the results it has achieved and the recommendations it has made. Given its lack of official status, it seemed fairly straightforward for local authorities to devote

71 Conversation, consultant, Osh, 6 July 2017.
72 Conversation, TYC head, Osh, 13 November 2015.
73 Interview, Osh, 19 November 2015; the same mission was stated during the inauguration of the youth parliament in late December 2015.
74 Vechernyi Bishkek, ‘В Оше состоялось открытие молодежного парламента [The opening of the youth parliament was held in Osh]’, 21 December 2015, www.vb.kg/doc/331338
more focus and also draw public attention toward a number of projects aimed at improving the performance of municipal services and quality of life in the city. The best example is the OshCity App project supported by USAID and DFID, which featured a mobile phone app allowing people to file any concerns and complaints and was, in the words of the then mayor, Kadyrbaev, “very practical in helping us to keep track of the issues that concern our citizens and to efficiently react to them.” With the NGO ‘Youth of Osh’ as implementing partner, this initiative presented a significant success and impact of the local youth. Yet, it also drew public attention away from attempts to create an institutional mechanism to raise more youth-specific problems and challenges.

Analogous initiatives at the national level have taken more or less decisive steps toward strengthening democratic culture among youth and establishing structures for youth representation. A USAID–funded project entitled ‘Generation of Democracy’ (Ru.: Pokolenie demokratii; Kg.: Demokratii munun) organized televised debates between the youth wings of established political parties with the goal of ‘improving the culture of constructive dialogue and open societal discussion of different issues and draft laws’ as well as further strengthening and comparing positionings of the political parties. Perhaps the strongest initiative has been the Youth Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic (Molodezhny parlament or Jashtar parlamenti) which after its founding in 2011 and subsequent inactivity was organized again in 2016 to advance the ‘formation of an active civic position’ among the youth and their ‘active participation’, as well as dialogue ‘with the Jogorku Kenesh [Parliament] and other state organs’. The parliament has continued its work

75 See www.map.oshcity.kg/
76 Youth of Osh, ‘В Оше запустили мобильное приложение для приема онлайн обращений [In Osh, a mobile app has been released for filing online requests]’, 28 May 2017, http://youthofosh.kg/2017/05/28/v-oshe-zapustili-mobilnoe-prilozhenie-onlajn-obrashhenij/
77 Kloop.kg, ‘Публичная дискуссия и конструктивный спор. Зачем нужны молодежные политические дебаты? [Public discussion and constructive arguing. Why do we need young politicians’ debates?]’, 6 July 2017, https://kloop.kg/blog/2017/07/06/publichnaya-diskusiya-konstruktivnyj-spor-i-podderzhka-molodyh-politikov-zachem-nuzhny-molodezhnye-politicheskie-debaty/. The project is organized by the Central Asia section of the International Debate Education Association (IDEA), the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the media platform Kloop with the support of USAID.
in the following years and, while meeting with representatives of the Jogorku Kenesh and participating in some of its committee sessions, it has made its most significant interventions in the form of survey research and public calls to tackle corruption in higher education and other problems faced by the youth. Overall, the Youth Parliament has remained in the framework of a capacity-building project run by NGOs and funded by international but also domestic donors. Therefore, despite its important input, questions still remain as to whether more institutionalized structures and democratically elected representatives are not necessary to adequately represent Kyrgyzstani youth in national politics.

The second aspect of youth policy in Kyrgyzstan presents a similar picture as a systematic state policy approach has long been said to be lacking and necessitated UN Agencies such as UNICEF and an array of international donors and domestic NGOs to step in and fulfil the most urgent needs. Already in early 2015, a network of NGOs under the banner ‘Youth policy in action’ (’Молодежная политика в действии’) filed a declaration (обращение) to the president, government and Jogorku Kenesh, asking them to initiate the drafting of a national ‘Conception for Youth Development’ and the formation of a working group called Council for Youth Affairs under the government. The declaration pointed out that youth policy had remained ‘at a very low level of effectiveness [эффективность реализации остаётся на очень низком уровне]’ and that a ‘tendency of extreme disinterest on the part of the authorities’ had led to the relegation of urgent concerns to the margins of domestic affairs. Given this neglect, the organizations demanded a ‘targeted and consistent process of structuring youth policy’ including the drafting of the above Conception and the development of a ‘systematic approach in realizing youth policy’. Various experts from youth organizations I spoke to explained how the once well-resourced youth structure of the country had gradually been dismantled in the course of the two revolutions in 2005 and 2010 and made youth work completely dependent on support from international organizations. The sentiment that international organizations seemed to know better and care more about Kyrgyzstani youth than the state itself was voiced on several occasions, for instance on the youth forum in Batken where one project consultant concluded their final remarks with a “Thank you” to the OSCE “for supporting our youth more than our

state; this is from my heart [eto ot dushy]” while an inspector for youth affairs remarked that many youth problems “are not solved at the state level”.83 The insufficiency of the national-level youth policy was further explained by a representative of the Institute for Youth Development. In his opinion, the State Agency for Youth Affairs, Physical Culture and Sport (State Agency or GAMFKS hereafter)84 did not provide a clear line for youth policy coordination across relevant fields such as education, social affairs or law enforcement; moreover, it did not ensure vertical integration between the national and municipal levels, where an appropriate framework and conditions for conducting youth work were largely lacking, as well.85 The state approach was further lacking, according to the expert, “clear indicators according to which we are supposed to achieve [goals], … so that we can move, within the next few years, towards a goal we are supposed to reach and can allocate all our resources for”. Instead of taking over this coordinating and dialogical role, the State Agency focused more on concrete projects and thus duplicated the efforts of civil society organizations, making the interviewee wonder about this uncoordinated approach.

In the years since these observations, the authorities’ approach to youth policy can be said to have slightly improved, at least as far as the structural side is concerned. A governmental decree from December 201686 further increased the State Agency’s competency and enabled a more coordinated and holistic youth policy, thanks also to the inclusion of the Institute for Youth Development (IYD) and other youth NGOs in an expert working group to co-determine the conceptualization and measures in the design of national youth policy.87 The IYD and its partners had continuously mobilized support and dialogue among youth organizations in a National Forum of Youth Centres and Youth Houses which served as a ‘new communication platform for the uniting of all stakeholders in the spheres of youth policy and youth work’88 and, furthermore, by organizing public discussions of

83 Batken, 11 September 2015.
84 Gosudarstvennoe agenstvo po delam mkolodezhi, fisicheskoi kultury i sporta pri pravitelstve Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki (GMFKS).
85 Interview, Bishkek, 9 December 2015.
88 For.kg, ‘В Бишкеке проходит Республиканский форум молодежных центров и домов молодежи [In Bishkek an all-republican forum of youth centres and youth houses is under way]’, 23 September 2016, https://for.kg/news-380573-ru.html
the draft law ‘On the foundations of state youth policy’ across the entire country. The Institute has consolidated its leading position in the youth policy sphere, as it has provided courses to train specialists for youth affairs (спеціалястів по делам молодежи) with the support of the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) since 2013 and has been offering a broad portfolio of projects to advance the professionalization of the youth sector.

The efforts of the Institute and network ‘Youth policy in action’ seem to have borne fruit, as in August 2017 Prime Minister Jeenbekov signed the ‘Programme for the development of youth policy for the years 2017–2020’, which prescribed a ‘systematic approach of state administration organs and their partners’ and gave the GAMFKS a central role in coordinating its implementation. The ‘Conception for Youth Policy for 2020–2030’, which was developed with input from the youth NGOs and representatives and was released in October 2019, presented a further commitment from the government, but largely postponed the concrete means for reaching strategic goals in education, employment and political participation of youth to a plan of measures still to be worked out. All in all, the efforts of youth policy actors have brought about a more proactive approach on the part of the authorities which has created a better basis for the development of a more holistic approach in the youth sphere. On the other hand, it remains to be seen how effectively the commitment of power holders is implemented and how the dialogue and cooperation between the State Agency and the wide array of civil society actors will evolve. The fact that the small successes discussed above were reached with significant societal mobilization and with significant and continuing donor support foregrounds a post-liberal

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90 Institute for Youth Development, ‘Профессионализация сектора молодежи и расширение экономических возможностей молодежи’ [Professionalization of the youth sector and broadening of economic opportunities for youth], no date, https://jashtar.org/kto-my_/gallery/1.html  
constellation in the youth policy and politics sphere. While non-state actors continue to mobilize large-scale funding and voluntary work, state authorities approve such initiatives as they serve to improve or at least stabilize the young people’s situation. In the meantime, questions of sustainability and structural change still remain unsolved today.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed TYCs and other structures in Kyrgyzstan’s youth sphere to show how they are part of peacebuilding, security and ordering processes that are situated in the country’s trajectory of post-liberal statebuilding. As I have shown, the different practices of building peace, tolerance and trust and preventing conflict and violence are embedded in wider societal dynamics as they invoke understanding not only of national belonging and ideology but also of diversity which resonate with the imaginaries of statebuilding examined in Chapter 4. Further, the analysis has yielded the finding that a selective and somewhat opportunistic reliance of state actors on non-state initiatives has occurred both on the local and the national level. Thus, TYCs and local NGOs in the former and a broad coalition of NGOs doing donor-supported youth work in the latter case have ensured a minimal level of provision of services and projects to mitigate challenges faced by youth, whereas the structural conditions and legal frameworks determining their work have not been changed at all or only in a reluctant manner.

As in many other sectors, the shocking ‘June events’ in 2010 marked a turning point in the way youth and the necessity of youth work were regarded in Kyrgyzstan. Youth gangs and large crowds of youths had a clear role in the emergence and continuation of the conflict over several days (Matveeva et al., 2012). As the TYC activists and project consultants and supporters stated, the youth were especially receptive to the false information circulating during the few days in June and in their aftermath, which made concrete efforts to dispel rumours and prevent further conflict the initial main priority of conflict-prevention initiatives. The TYCs have since promoted trust, tolerance and peaceful interaction among the youth from different communities, ethnic groups and personal backgrounds. Through their mobilization for city-wide festivals, smaller events in courtyards, schools and universities and exchange events with communities in the regions of Osh province, the TYCs have established a culture of openness and cooperation. They have thus managed to significantly decrease the conflict and violence potential, both in regard to ethnic and cultural difference and in relation to specific problems such as racketeering and youth gang rivalries. In this sense, TYCs are a key actor of peacebuilding and conflict prevention, which was acknowledged in the decision of the Osh Mayor’s Office to institutionalize
this structure under the Committee of Youth Affairs. However, despite the crucial work done by TYCs, the Mayor’s Office did not further strengthen their status and capacity. On the contrary, by reducing the number of salaried TYC head positions from 12 to six individuals, who were still supposed to organize work in the entire city, the authorities have significantly limited their capacity since 2016. As follow-up conversations indicated, TYCs thus operate on a much lower level today than they used to in the framework of the OSCE project implemented by the NGO Iret. This points to the post-liberal character of social ordering in Kyrgyzstan, where the concerns of ensuring activities and participation frameworks for youth in the long run seem to come second to the priority of maintaining order in the immediate aftermath of the 2010 events.

When they did still work at full capacity, TYCs and analogous youth structures presented a convenient mediating and supporting function in areas and aspects that local authorities could not or did not want to cover, and were almost exclusively sustained by the voluntary labour of young people and donor money. With TYC heads working directly under the CYA, the work of TYCs could be shaped and controlled by the mayor’s administration and the TYCs practically became an arm of the latter or, as suggested by one interviewee, a mediator between the administration and local youth. TYCs offered young people the entertainment, attention and care which the heavily strained, downsized and incapacitated state institutions in the educational and social sectors could not impart. In this sense, TYCs represented the local administration and thus the state by promoting behaviours and attitudes conducive to peaceful and resilient social order. On the other hand, even if the impact of TYCs and other youth structures served to prevent conflict and build tolerance and peaceful relations, this cannot be equated to a situation where the root cause for conflict and inter-communal or interethnic tension have been substantially mitigated or overcome. Rather than systematically dealing with material or sociocultural root causes of conflict, TYCs appear mainly as an institution of conflict management, which successfully promotes non-violence but does not have the mandate or capacity to tackle more fundamental problems.

The most significant impact of TYCs was to unite young people in a collective effort to build peace and tolerance through formats and practices that emphasized unity, harmony and a degree of acceptance of the social order which has emerged since 2010. The coexistence of multiple nuances of this social order can be understood through Bakhtin’s notion of *heteroglossia*, which I have proposed as a way to interpret the discursive hybridity of processes of social ordering and statebuilding (see Chapter 3). As I have shown, young people understood their engagement in TYCs and other youth activities in ways as diverse as developing their community, city or country, developing and improving themselves to
prepare for their careers, or as an act of solidarity and help to people in need. In fact, both the first and second of these narratives can be related to the Western ‘liberal peace’ and ‘politics of sovereignty’ imaginaries, as they both implied ideas of realizing an entrepreneurial mode of personhood in a free market environment (Makovicky, 2014) and also emphasized a need to contribute to societal development, possibly with patriotic motivation. The most obvious manifestation of the ‘politics of sovereignty’ imaginary lies in discussions of ‘national ideology’ and the need for its strengthening and leading people back onto a ‘right path’ (ак жол or правильный путь). Threatened Kyrgyz traditions and language and historical heritage were invoked along more or less clearly ethno-nationalist lines and thus stood in tension with a civic-nationalist, multicultural idea of society. Both on the youth forum and in public events and celebrations, however, the youth went along with such discourses and symbolism, as they coexisted in momentary harmony with celebrations of the diversity and commonalities of different ethnicities and cultural legacies in the country. This was best exemplified in the combination of ancient Kyrgyz legends and self-expression through hip hop and breakdance performances on the ‘Day of the city of Osh’ and ‘Kids from our courtyard’ events, which clearly illustrated the heteroglossia of social ordering in southern Kyrgyzstan.

These activities demonstrated how TYCs build peace through practised and lived tolerance and coexistence of diverse interests, values and identities. At the same time, my analysis of the high fluctuation and the fact that interaction with or in TYCs is in many cases a mere stopover in young people’s life trajectories, as well as a selective social rather than merely territorial outreach, shows that this positive impact of TYCs can be limited and highly contingent, which in turn points to the importance of addressing conflict factors in a more systematic manner. Further caution is warranted regarding the fact that apart from motivating young people to be disciplined, polite and make the best of their situation through self-development, the TYCs’ work can also serve to silence and normalize some people’s disadvantages and the general absence of good opportunities and viable livelihoods in Kyrgyzstan. Thus, in the logical extreme of the entrepreneurial personhood promoted in the TYCs and wider youth work, state–society relations are recast into a post-liberal modality, where political subjecthood – the basis for shaping and negotiating the organization and reproduction of social life – is replaced by an entrepreneurial subjecthood, whose purpose is to optimally use the available resources without critically reflecting on wider societal conditions. While young people’s solidarity and charity initiatives mitigate this autonomization and responsibilization, they have a similar effect of transferring collective responsibility from the state to non-state actors and international donors. In this light, besides mobilizing young people to help themselves and help each other, I have argued that
there is also a need for youth actors to try to bring about more systematic forms of political participation and youth policy in Kyrgyzstan.

I have outlined existing initiatives in this direction and the institutional and normative changes they have brought about, such as establishing a ‘Youth Parliament’ and effecting a more systematic approach toward youth policy on the part of the authorities. Yet, I also pointed out how the concrete manifestations of this seemingly new approach remain to be assessed and that the structural dependence of youth policy and youth work in Kyrgyzstan on international donors and domestic civil society has so far largely persisted. In turn, this foregrounds, in a similar way to the dynamics analysed around LCPCs in Chapter 5, the combination of substantive non-state actor social ordering and service provision, and a focus of state actors on sovereignty-related concerns into post-liberal forms of ordering. These findings will be further corroborated in the next chapter, where I examine the efforts of another civil society initiative to lobby popular interests from the bottom up, only to realize that changing policies and legislation is neither a straightforward process, nor sufficient to change concrete practices on the ground.