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Squatters and the socialist heritage: A comparison of informal settlements in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan

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5.1 Introduction

In her article on comparative urbanism in Central Asia, Elena Trubina laments that there is ‘an almost total absence of comparison between cities’ in Central Asia.¹ She continues that the limited research that exists on Central Asian cities ‘simply stands for large-scale tendencies’, illustrating wider processes but refraining from detailed studies of urban life. This chapter offers a response to this critique. It provides a detailed comparative study of informal housing in Kyrgyzstan’s capital city Bishkek and in the former and current capital cities of neighbouring Kazakhstan – Almaty and Astana.² In all three cities, there exists a number of populous, unauthorised settlements on the cities’ peripheries. These settlements and the similarities and differences between them provide the focus for this chapter. The comparison will point out important commonalities between these Kyrgyz and Kazakh cities, while also highlighting the diverging ways in which these informal settlements have developed and the different interactions of squatters with authorities in pursuing their claimed rights. I will be examining the outcome of state–squatter interactions in these different contexts. Kyrgyzstan has largely taken a negotiation-based approach, while Kazakhstan has used violent methods to crack down on illegal settlements. Why did these two countries differ in their approaches, and how did these different policies influence the situation of squatter settlements?

As regards terminology, I will be using the adjectives ‘illegal’ or ‘unauthorised’, which mainly represent the perspective of the state, when
discussing how these settlements emerged (that is, by occupying plots of land without permission to do so). By contrast, I will use ‘informal’ when dealing with the views and actions of settlement-dwellers.

The data I have gathered about Bishkek’s squatter settlements originate predominantly from a settlement called Ak Zhar, where I conducted extensive anthropological research in 2012–2013 by means of semi-structured interviews, expert interviews and participant observation. Likewise, I closely observed the work of Ak Zhar’s community leaders. When I discuss settlements in Almaty and Astana, I mainly rely on research articles and primary sources on the topic, which are available online.

5.2 Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: Similar but different

Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are not only neighbouring countries but also culturally very close to one another. People in these two countries often refer to each other as ‘sister peoples’ and this is always emphasised by the rulers of both countries. In addition, the distance between Bishkek and Almaty, the former Kazakh capital, is only a three-hour drive. However, the two countries differ in their political and economic situations. Kazakhstan is an authoritarian country with a strong presidential rule, whereas Kyrgyzstan has preferred parliamentary democracy since 2010. Furthermore, Kazakhstan is economically more prosperous than Kyrgyzstan, thanks to the country’s significant oil reserves.

Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan both became independent after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The demise of the socialist state pushed both countries into a difficult economic, political and social situation. Unemployment rates rose dramatically as many factories and plants had to close down. This drove the majority of the population into poverty, and rural areas were hit especially hard. Impoverished rural inhabitants reacted with mass migrations to the cities. During the Soviet era, there already existed a clear distinction between rural and urban areas, whereby the former were viewed as destitute and the latter as prosperous. New arrivals to the city were called pejoratively myrki or ‘uncultured villagers’ in Kyrgyzstan, and in Kazakhstan they were perceived as risky and unstable newcomers who ‘find it easy to engage in excessive alcohol and drug abuse, violence, and crime’. Such negative images of incoming migrants were reinforced in the mid-2000s when they seized plots in the outskirts of Kyrgyzstan’s and Kazakhstan’s major cities. Unauthorised settlements popped up in the three cities in different time periods: in Almaty in the early 1990s and 2000s, in Astana in the early 2000s and in
Bishkek in the early 1990s, early 2000s and mid-2000s. These squatter actions signalled a new sense of freedom as well as a different perception of existence after the demise of state socialism.

_Samosakhvat_, or land squatting, is considered illegal in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Those who practise squatting are called zakh-vatchiki (literally: grabbers). Zakhvatchiki have a poor reputation and are commonly perceived as criminals or law-breakers. The act of _samosakhvat_ is believed to create chaos in ‘orderly’ urban settings and to destabilise society. Obviously, the states’ reactions to this were disapproving, and both Kazakh and Kyrgyz authorities undertook measures to punish the squat- ters. The punishments, however, differed between these two countries.

In Kazakhstan, the state usually resorted to physical violence, demolishing houses and evicting people from their dwellings. Only the first squatter settlements, which emerged in Almaty in the early years of independence, were legalised and provided with necessary infrastructure. But when the legalised settlements grew closer to the city centre in the early 2000s, the state reacted unsparingly. In Kyrgyzstan, too, the first settlements that emerged in the early 1990s were legalised. Later on, in the early 2000s and after the Tulip Revolution in 2005, the attitude of the state shifted towards ignoring the existence of the settlements and turning a blind eye to the basic needs and concerns of their residents. After large-scale public protests, which the settlements’ inhabitants staged to make claims for infrastructure and legalisation, this policy of neglect transformed into one of active toleration, whereby authorities not only facilitated the provision of water and electricity but also began to discuss how to integrate the settlements into the official administrative structures.

### 5.3 Squatter settlements in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan

In the following, I introduce three informal settlements in the three cities under discussion. I start with the settlement of Ak Zhar in Bishkek, where I conducted extensive field research, and then discuss the settlements of Shanyrak in Almaty and Ondiris on the outskirts of Astana.

**Ak Zhar, Bishkek**

Ak Zhar is an unauthorised settlement to the north of Bishkek, lying just across the city boundary. It emerged in the spring of 2005 immediately after the Tulip Revolution as a result of land squatting. The majority of the current residents of Ak Zhar, when I talked to them, did not want to
be called or viewed as zakhvatchiki, mainly due to the fact that they considered their action to constitute organised, orderly acquisition of land. They told me they had purchased plots of land or houses from a group of people they referred to as top bashy. As I was told, top bashylar (pl.) had – allegedly – connections to influential state officials, who provided them with information about which plot around Bishkek was ‘available’ for squatting. Having squatted in the large territory of what is today’s Ak Zhar, the top bashylar started distributing plots among their family members, relatives and fellow villagers. According to the stories I heard, top bashylar also sold plots to other people who approached them with an interest in purchasing them. It is believed that top bashylar made a good deal of money out of illegal land sales and then vanished from Ak Zhar. Today, the whereabouts of top bashylar are unknown.

When people started to settle in Ak Zhar, the state agencies (including the regional architects’ office, the department dealing with private residential construction, and the Kyrgyz scientific institute charged with city planning) came to identify the settlement as illegal because the act of squatting had violated the law. Accordingly, the state disavowed the settlement and did not officially recognise it. Thus, in the initial years of Ak Zhar’s existence, dwellers lived under harsh conditions, as it remained disconnected from basic infrastructure such as electricity and drinking water, with no central heating or sewage systems. Mainstream Bishkek residents were largely against illegal appropriation of the city’s land and called on the state authorities to punish the squatters and to refrain from legalising their settlements. In this hostile environment, Ak Zhar residents initially tried to resolve their everyday problems by themselves and live their lives as ‘quiet encroachers’. For instance, they purchased private generators to light their homes at night, and they bought bottled drinking water. See Figures 5.1 and 5.2.

When Ak Zhar residents gained force in terms of population numbers, they were able to organise a large-scale protest by blocking a strategically important road in Bishkek. They demanded access to electricity and drinking water and the legalisation of Ak Zhar, which would entail the recognition of their properties, thus turning the occupants into property owners. The protesters succeeded in their bid to meet with the highest-ranking officials (namely, the then-Prime Minister, Atambaev, and the then-mayor of Bishkek, Omurkulov), who committed to resolving their problems. While the electrification of Ak Zhar was entrusted to a private company, it was promised that overall responsibility for the area in which Ak Zhar was located would be transferred to the city of Bishkek and taken away from the Province of Chui, thus upgrading the potential
Figure 5.1  A northern part of Ak Zhar on the outskirts of Bishkek. © Eliza Isabaeva.

Figure 5.2  Laying the foundation of a future house in Ak Zhar. © Eliza Isabaeva.
status of the settlement. The transfer from one municipality to the other (called locally transformatziia) proved to be a protracted and onerous bureaucratic process, however, and the legalisation of Ak Zhar has not yet occurred. Nevertheless, significant steps towards legalising unauthorised settlements like Ak Zhar have been taken by the government. The Speaker of the Kyrgyz Parliament declared in summer 2018 that a law on legalising illegal settlements had been passed by the Parliament, pending only the President’s signature.12

Shanyrak, Almaty

In comparison with Bishkek and its population of approximately one million inhabitants, the former Kazakh capital Almaty is home to around two million people, around 100,000 of whom are inhabitants of informal settlements.13 Although squatter settlements in the former Kazakh capital also emerged in the early 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union,14 notably it was only after 2005 that they appeared on the radar of the Kazakh state authorities as an object of close inspection. It was the Tulip Revolution in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, in which the main participants were said to be poor and desperate dwellers of likewise poor and peripheral settlements, that changed state policy.15 When the Kazakh authorities became aware of the political power of these people, they changed their approach to the illegal settlements from indifference to repression.

In 2005, Kazakh authorities opted to instigate demolitions and evictions in many squatter settlements, including plans to demolish a considerable number of houses in the Shanyrak settlement. Although these measures were generally effective, they led to clashes between city authorities and the settlements’ residents. One day, in September 2005, the residents of Shanyrak organised a protest, which was met by the special police forces, trying to disperse the protesters. In view of the upcoming presidential elections in Kazakhstan, the city’s mayor Tasmagambetov visited the protesting dwellers of Shanyrak and promised that no houses would be demolished, except those that had been built recently; but after the elections he began to harshly criticise the squatters. When demolitions took place in the settlements of Bakai and Aigerim, this made Shanyrak residents even more nervous, and tensions rose.16 Finally, on 14 July 2006, a violent clash between police and Shanyrak dwellers took place. Media coverage shows bleeding police officers with severe head injuries as a result of being pelted with rocks. And worse was to come: the residents even took one of the police officers hostage and burned him to death. Police detained more than 20 people
for rioting, and four of them were later sentenced to long jail terms, being found guilty of organising the disturbances in which the police officer lost his life. After this violent escalation (see Figures 5.3 and 5.4), the authorities allowed the settlement population to legalise their properties
and provided communication and other infrastructures, to prevent a potential clash between the people and police in the future. Shanyrak subsequently became a new quarter in the city called Alatau.\textsuperscript{18}

Ondiris, Astana

Astana, the new capital of Kazakhstan, founded in 1997, soon faced the same problems as Bishkek and Almaty. Internal migrants from rural provincial areas came to Astana in search of employment and better living conditions. Unauthorised settlements began to appear on the outskirts of the city. One of them, the settlement of Ondiris, emerged in 2004 during the peak of the construction boom in Astana. Current residents of Ondiris tell a story of organised squatting similar to that in Ak Zhar in Bishkek: that they had bought their plots of land from a woman who turned out to be a fraudster. She had allegedly faked property documents for the land and sold plots to many people. The authorities did not recognise these property documents and thus declared Ondiris an illegal settlement.\textsuperscript{19} Likewise, Ondiris dwellers faced many problems similar to the ones in Ak Zhar and other settlements. With no drinking water, they had to transport it from far away; they had to organise their own electricity supply by purchasing the necessary pylons and cables; there were no social infrastructures, such as schools or paved roads; and the legalisation of Ondiris proved to be (and continues to be) a long and difficult political and bureaucratic process. Whereas Shanyrak has now been recognised as a legal settlement and Ak Zhar is one step away from legalisation, it appears that Ondiris will have to continue its fight for official recognition for some time yet. The Astana authorities have promised not to demolish any homes or evict anyone from their dwellings. But they have also clearly stated that plots will not be legalised and that Ondiris residents will not be granted any property documents.\textsuperscript{20}

5.4 The attitudes of squatters towards the state

Having briefly described three unauthorised settlements in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, I now want to discuss the interaction between state and squatters in these two countries. The authorities represent a Weberian perspective of the state, in which state laws are above everything else. While, in Kazakhstan, the state used physical as well as psychological violence to reinforce the law, in Kyrgyzstan mainly psychological violence
was used, based on non-recognition and neglect of needs. However, at the same time, squatters expanded the scope of this perspective by contesting it and employing different sets of appeals, thereby actively re-making supposedly static laws and likewise shifting supposedly fixed boundaries between the illegal and the legal. Thus, in both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the interaction between authorities and squatters has shown itself to be dynamic and bi-directional rather than passive and unidirectional (such as top-down).

Nevertheless, the attitudes of the authorities and informal settlement residents differ between the two countries. In view of the Tulip Revolution in the neighbouring country, the Kazakh authorities were willing to go toe-to-toe with settlement residents and went as far as demolishing houses. Shanyrak inhabitants in Almaty reacted aggressively and tried to defend their dwellings by any means possible, such as blocking roads, burning tyres and fighting the police. Bishkek’s peripheral settlements never witnessed such harsh clashes. The Kyrgyz authorities were very cautious not to anger the masses of destitute people so soon after the Tulip Revolution. Likewise, Ak Zhar residents avoided escalation. Although they criticised the Kyrgyz state (institutions as well as political leadership) and protested by blocking the road and other means, their attitude was generally non-confrontational. Instead, they sent repeated signals to the authorities that their existence and their problems should no longer be ignored. Residents of informal settlements criticised the Kyrgyz state and blamed it for their desperate situation. This criticism of the government was often based on moral comparisons – for example, that influential and wealthy people were allowed to monopolise power and grab national assets in addition to improperly acquired money to finance their lavish lifestyles, while poor people were punished for seizing land to live on. In raising these objections, they tried to turn the state’s attention to their concerns and convince it to take action. One of my informants summarised their attitude concisely: ‘We want to belong to the state’ (in Kyrgyz: biz dele ökmöttün kishisi bolgubuz kelet). I also heard people saying ‘What else can we do [to accelerate the legalisation process]?’ or ‘What else is expected from us?’ (in Kyrgyz: dagy emne kylyshybyz kerek?). There was a desire for the state on the part of Ak Zhar residents, then, when it turned its back on the people by refusing to accept and recognise the settlement. Their questions revealed a readiness to integrate into the state’s structures if they were allowed to stay in Ak Zhar. This pragmatic attitude made it easier for the Kyrgyz state authorities to negotiate with Ak Zhar’s people on the terms of inclusion and recognition.
Ak Zhar’s population also showed a willingness to bear a part of the costs related to legalisation and the provision of infrastructure. For example, when the budget allocated for electrification was depleted, the residents were asked to raise their own money and finance the acquisition of additional pylons and cables. Furthermore, each household bought its own electricity meter. Residents also raised money for drafting the master urban plan for Ak Zhar – an important precondition for the legalisation of the settlement – and each household contributed 500 KGS (approximately $10 US at that time) to pay the relevant fees to the architects’ office of Chui Province. In this sense, the politics of negotiation and active toleration of the Kyrgyz state turned Ak Zhar dwellers into contributing citizens. The manner in which the Kyrgyz state acted – employing no physical violence while still rejecting Ak Zhar residents – made the settlement population ‘yearn’, in a sense, for the state.

In Kazakhstan, by contrast, state violence against Shanyrak residents – which turned out to be costly, both financially and in terms of human life – had resulted in the state single-handedly providing the necessary infrastructure for the settlement’s residents and legalising their properties, thereby asserting its one-sided power relationship with the people.

Correspondingly, a subtle difference between informal settlement-dwellers in Bishkek, Almaty and Astana can be seen in one particular strategy with which they tried to argue their right to housing. In both Kazakh cities, residents of unauthorised settlements turned to the then Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev personally as the ultimate merciful figure that would protect ordinary people. For example, when evictions were conducted in the settlement of Bakai in Almaty, residents carried poster-sized portraits of Nazarbayev to prove ‘their citizenship and loyalty to the state, trying to avert forced eviction’. Similarly, in Astana, an elderly woman named Nesipgül Uiabayeva, whose little shack was scheduled to be demolished, glued 91 portrait photos of Nazarbayev onto it, in the hope that this would stop state representatives taking action against her. As Uiabayeva explained:

Why did I put up portraits of our president? Because our functionaries no longer fear God, they fear no one; may they now fear our president. The president’s politics ensured that folk lived well, that our future looked promising, that it was on a high level. And they [the functionaries] are evicting us onto the streets by taking away our own land.
By turning to Nazarbayev, the woman was attempting to make him into an ally of her cause. As both cases demonstrate, for residents of informal settlements in Kazakhstan the country’s president represented an entire state apparatus. More than in the judicial system, in state agencies or in state officials, people believe in the ‘justice’ provided by Nazarbayev personally. In Ak Zhar, similarly, dwellers wrote numerous petitions directed to individual politicians whom they took to be personifications of the state. At the same time, it is common to hear ordinary Kyrgyzstani citizens say that they openly admonish the president or prime minister and show dissatisfaction with their decisions. In Kyrgyzstan, similarly to Kazakhstan, the state is commonly associated with individual politicians – that is, there is a personified perception of the state. However, while in Kazakhstan this personification paves the way to a ‘king-like’ veneration, Kyrgyzstan is much more pluralistic in this respect. Kyrgyz citizens thus have a variety of personalities at their disposal, to whom they can appeal and whom they can ‘revere’.

In the understanding of ordinary Kazakhstanis and Kyrgyzstanis, a strong state is one that can guarantee unity, stability and order. This Soviet understanding of a state is often tied to the rule of the strong leader. But, as there is no such strong leader in Kyrgyzstan, the state in Ak Zhar is often perceived as weak or even absent, and Kyrgyzstanis frequently complain about lack of leadership. However, that apparent weakness does not necessarily lead to negative outcomes for Kyrgyzstani citizens. In the Kazakh case, a strong state has used its power to violently crush the people’s demands for inclusion and better living conditions, whereas, in the Kyrgyz case, contested power relations have made negotiations, compromise and inclusion possible.

Although in authoritarian Kazakhstan (until recently, ruled by a single leader for almost three decades) there exists an obvious structural continuity between the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet state, one may argue that pluralistic Kyrgyzstan, paradoxically, has remained more committed to the values of the socialist past. This commitment first and foremost expresses itself in a sense of responsibility for ensuring the wellbeing of its citizens – including the provision of housing – to which the inhabitants of unauthorised settlements can also appeal. The stronger role of public opinion gives the squatters scope to invoke the socialist legacy and remind the state authorities of the socialist traditions of taking care of citizens and attending to their needs. In doing so, people in Kyrgyzstan can gain leverage over the ruling leadership and the way politics play out in the country. Because there is demand and pressure from
the people, the Kyrgyz state often acknowledges its responsibility to provide its citizenry with housing, even if it is acquired illegally.

The living conditions of many people in Ak Zhar during the time of my research were far from decent. But at least the state did not evict people from homes, and even extended basic material infrastructure, actively negotiating the terms of inclusion and recognition. Conversely, in Kazakhstan, the authoritarian regime has cracked down on opposing public opinion, projecting the image of an unassailable state with its strong leader Nazarbayev at the helm.

5.5 Conclusion

At one time, Soviet member states Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan shared a similar history and path of development. Even in the early years of independence, their socio-economic and political problems and their nation-building efforts were comparable. However, their development trajectories began to diverge. Kazakh leadership has established a strong authoritarian rule, with Nazarbayev being an irreplaceable president since 1991, and whereas Kyrgyzstan is now governed by its fifth president, elected in 2018. Unlike Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan went through two popular revolts, which put an end to the authoritarian ambitions of the first two presidents. These episodes of unrest have given the Kyrgyzstani people a sense of their transformative power. Although residents of Ak Zhar perceive this power as well, as their statements and actions testify, their overall stance is ambiguous. In their protests, the people of Ak Zhar also showed how much they longed to be considered a part of the state – to be included instead of excluded. The Kyrgyz authorities acquiesced and began to negotiate the concrete terms of recognition and inclusion, searching common ground with Ak Zhar dwellers.

The absence of physical violence towards the dwellers of squatter settlements in Kyrgyzstan, in contrast to the violent confrontations in Kazakhstan, is an important difference. Although both countries once lived under the paternalistic Soviet system, the Kyrgyz state has succeeded in building a more productive relationship with dwellers of illegal settlements – and thereby in committing to central elements of the socialist welfare system, such as the right to housing. From this, one may arrive at the paradoxical conclusion that the more pluralistic post-Soviet societies have, in some way, remained closer to the socialist past than societies ruled by unyielding authoritarianism in the Soviet tradition. In this interpretation, it is the existence of political power-sharing and the
right to free public expression that allowed Kyrgyzstani squatters to exert pressure on the state by invoking the country’s socialist past and ‘reminding’ state authorities of exemplary socialist traditions.

The experience of informal housing in Kazakhstan was very different. After an initial phase of inaction, it was the revolutionary turmoil in Kyrgyzstan that prompted the Kazakh authorities to openly confront squatters and illegal land occupation. This was supposed to bring a return to order and establish the superiority of law above all else in society, but it provoked violent reactions from those affected by eviction and demolition. As the case of the Shanyrak settlement shows, such a confrontation has led to dire consequences: evictions, demolitions, injured law-enforcement officers and even loss of human life. Only afterwards did the Kazakh authorities agree to formalise Shanyrak and provide material as well as social infrastructure, but firmly within a top-down approach. Conversely, in the case of Ondiris, the Astana authorities have exerted psychological violence by refusing the squatters’ requests for acknowledgment and for legalisation of the settlement. As such, authoritarianism not only fosters violence, which makes negotiations and consensus difficult or even impossible. Authoritarianism can also constitute (and simultaneously disguise) a clear break from the more laudable achievements of the socialist past by silencing the voices of former Soviet citizens and their nostalgic claim-making. As the case study of Shanyrak shows, this does not exclude the possibility that even authoritarian regimes can eventually make concessions to their citizens – but only after the failure of violence.

Notes

2. As of March 2019, Astana is now officially called Nur-Sultan. However, I retain the old name Astana throughout this chapter.


7. See Alan Smart and Thomas Aguiera, Chapter 3 of this book.


28. Kazakhstan’s long-time president Nursultan Nazarbayev (surprisingly for many people) resigned from the presidential post on 19 March 2019.

29. After Nazarbayev’s sudden resignation on 19 March 2019, Kassym-Zhomart Toqaev acted as the country’s interim president. During the June 2019 presidential election, Toqaev was elected the second president of independent Kazakhstan.