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Gendered Nationalism in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan: Perspectives from Women's Rights Activism

Mayely Müller

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Abstract

In Kyrgyzstan, nationalism has been on the rise in recent years. Increasing nationalist tendencies were accompanied by gendered implications, especially for women. This paper explores the gendered dimensions of nationalism in contemporary Kyrgyzstan through the prism of women's rights activism. Building on qualitative interviews, the research discloses the experiences and perceptions of women's rights activists towards the nationalist discourse and utilizes these perspectives for an examination regarding the gendered dimensions of nationalism. The research aims to unpack current nationalist developments through a gendered lens, whereby a better understanding of the linkages between gender and nationalism is attempted. One finding of this work is that the nationalist discourse is differently experienced by activists, while the overall tension regarding a lack of consensus where Kyrgyzstan as a nation should develop illustrates a main issue. As a major gendered dimension of nationalism, hegemonic masculinity is identified as a legitimization of gendered hierarchy. This reinforces the objectification of women as well as the symbolic meaning of women as the representation of the nation. Ethnicity plays an additional role since the Kyrgyz nation is aimed to be perpetuated, which could have implications for non-Kyrgyz groups. It is argued that the foundation of contemporary Kyrgyz nationalism might lie in the thought of continuity and temporality of the nation which is under continuous re-invention. This is shaped by the interplay of tradition and its institutionalization, emancipation practices of the Soviet past, remembrance of nomadic times, religious influences as well as Westernization, which all impact gender and gender roles perceptions in the current nationalist framework.

Keywords: gender · nationalism · women's rights activism · feminism · Kyrgyzstan · Central Asia

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Introduction

In recent years, nationalism saw a continuous rise in the Kyrgyz Republic¹ (see Wagner 2021, Doolotkeldieva 2021). Societal developments were shaped by processes of traditionalization, discourses about the national Kyrgyz heritage as well as a revival of Islamic religion (see Laruelle 2012, Marat 2016). This was accompanied by tendencies against external influences, especially antipathies against Westernization. In this context, ethnonationalist and traditionalist groups emerged, mostly propagating presumed Kyrgyz values. Those tendencies were further reflected after the 2020 October unrest and the outcome of the elections in January 2021 with the newly elected president Sadyr Japarov, who pursues a nationalist political course. This was followed by the shift from a parliamentary system to a presidential one. In addition, various amendments of the constitution were made, which supported the manifestation of ‘traditional’ norms and values (see Akisheva 2021). While a considerable part of society seems to endorse nationalist orientations, other parts oppose current developments. The strengthening of nationalism and accompanying developments specifically encompass gendered implications, for example by highlighting certain notions of gender roles as traditional ideals. The ongoing changes indicate significant gendered effects, which are directly transmitted into lived realities of different groups within society.

The women’s rights movement represents one particular group, since activists – despite versatile perspectives within the movement – seem to stand in contrast to nationalist understandings of gender. This juxtaposition is demonstrated by continuous confrontations and an anti-feminist backlash from the traditionalist and rightwing spectrum in the past years. This has included forms of hate speech, death threats, detainments as well as physical violence by nationalist and traditionalist groups. In this way, women’s rights activists seem to touch a sore point regarding the performance of gender. It is therefore puzzling to investigate the gendered dimensions of the nationalist discourse through the prism of women’s rights activism, specifically in the context of Kyrgyzstan as a post-Soviet state in Central Asia. The experiences of women’s rights activists are used as a fruitful basis for the research, which in turn dig into the underlying developments of nationalism and gender and unpacks its mechanisms of legitimization and institutionalization. Gendered nationalism in Kyrgyzstan with its connection to historical narratives should be elaborated in-depth since “[r]eshaped traditions assert hierarchical gender relations, where the male and the masculine have pre-eminence over the female and the feminine” (Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016: 196). The research is backed upon five problem-centered interviews with Kyrgyzstani activists originating from different strands within the spectrum² as well as three expert interviews with scholars. Although the findings

¹ In the following, Kyrgyzstan is used interchangeably for the Kyrgyz Republic.

² This includes activists with a focus on sexual and reproductive rights (SRHR), gender and youth, art activism, and Marxist feminism. Also, aspects of LGBTQ activism are included in the research.

must be seen in the contextual framework of Kyrgyzstan, specific patterns of nationalism might be of interest for further research in post-Soviet countries.

Gendering nationalism

In order to trace the interplay of gender and nationalism in Kyrgyzstan, the theoretical backdrop of how nationalism is gendered must be taken into account. By deconstructing gendered presumptions within nationalist thought, the interlinkages between gender and nationalism become visible. In processes of nationalism in which “collective memories” are “rediscovered”, Yuval-Davis scrutinizes why women are usually hidden although they “play crucial roles in biological, cultural and political reproductions of national and other collectivities” (1993: 622, 630). Therefore, it must be taken into account which impact masculinity and femininity have in nationalist projects and in which framing gender roles appear. Hence follows that

“[n]ationalism is gendered in how the *construction* of group identity [...] depends upon divisions of masculinity and femininity. In this sense, the process itself presupposes gendered social relations. Nationalism is also gendered in how the naturalization of domination [...] depends upon the prior presumption of men/ masculinity over women/ femininity” (Peterson 1994: 83).

These considerations not only reveal the gendered dimensions of social relations but also shed light on the construction of hierarchies. The naturalization of domination and the association with masculinity uncovers the presuppositions of patriarchal structures within nationalism. In doing so, gender inequality is presumed as a “natural” state, leading to the construction and reproduction of asymmetrical social relations (*ibid.*). This complex is accompanied by various gendered presumptions within nationalist thought. One aspect here is the role of biological reproduction which is allocated to women. By the act of allocation, nationalism reinforces “a gendered structure of power, in which women are delegated the family care responsibilities and men the responsibilities for public life” (Chandler 2011: 56, see also Vickers 2002: 255). Here, the problem of dichotomization reappears since these power structures reaffirm gender hierarchies while also constructing potential barriers for women to engage in the public realm. In turn, nationalist discourse becomes masculinized through its framework and its connected expectations towards gender roles. Specifically, “nationalism typically has sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope”, therefore creating a fundamental connection between masculinity and nationalist projects (Enloe 2014: 93). Due to the male-shaped predominance of the state and its institutions, the framing of nationalism is particularly intertwined with “the culture and ideology of hegemonic masculinity” (Nagel 1998: 249). Conceptually, hegemonic masculinity might be defined “as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy” (Connell 2005: 77, see also Donaldson 1993: 645).

The notion of hegemonic masculinity thus entails specific burdens and privileges which is further linked to heteronormativity. As a result, “men are not only defending tradition but are

defending a particular racial³, gendered and sexual conception of self" (Nagel 1998: 258). This perception of men in the nationalist discourse "also designates a specific place to men within the symbolic imaginary" (Güçler 2020: 6). On the other hand, women as those responsible for reproduction "are framed as the future of the nation, and in a manner that authorizes their domination and the control of their reproductive capacity" (Mulholland et al. 2018: 8). This shows how women are semantically used as "symbolic markers of the nation" (Peterson 1994:79).

Consequently, for the case of Kyrgyzstan, the semantic meaning of women in relation to the nation must be acknowledged by looking at specific narratives of how women have been framed in reference to society in the nomadic, Soviet and post-Soviet period. The framing of symbolism at the core of gendered nationalism remains problematic in so far that it derives from "patriarchally sculpted symbols" of the nation, in which women "served as symbols of the nation violated, the nation suffering, the nation reproducing itself, the nation at its purest" (Enloe 2014: 87). The reduction of women serving as symbols should be criticized since it manifests the passive framing of women. In this very framework, however, gender cannot be examined solely in an individual manner due to its interconnections to other dimensions. The intersections of gender, race and class should consequently be taken into account and examined through an intersectional lens (see *ibid.*, McClintock 1995: 5).

A related phenomenon to this spectrum is antifeminism, which occurs in different ways: Conservative antifeminism operates on the basis of preserving traditional and conservative values, sometimes also entailing religious values. These values are seen as an assurance for stability and security. In this sense, feminism is perceived as a threat to that order as well as to the family and gender roles. Another decisive form is rightwing-nationalist antifeminism, which pursues to keep up a "natural" order with an autochthonous ideal of the family and is expressed by defending biological gender roles as well as the usage of racist idealization (Höcker et al. 2020: 256). Deviations from such a perception, for example the emancipation of women or differing sexual orientations, appear correspondingly as threats. Thus, it can be argued that "the defence of highly traditional and hierarchical gender models and, not least of all, a rejection of homosexuality have [...] been core elements of [...] nationalist thinking" (Schutzbach 2019). Under the backdrop of these theoretical premises, Kyrgyzstan appears as a distinct environment for tracing developments of nationalism, on the one hand, and antifeminism, on the other.

Nationalism and Antifeminism in Kyrgyzstan

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the following independence in 1991 depict crucial circumstances for the dynamics of nationalism in Kyrgyzstan. The narrative of Kyrgyzstan alongside its post-Soviet neighbor states in Central Asia as a "tabula rasa" (Peters 2002: 20) resulted in

³ Although Nagel's understanding also contained the white component of masculine identity, her considerations might still be taken into account for other cases.

international, mostly Western, development intervention in the 1990s, which however saw failures in its implementation of liberal policies, leaving a fragile setting. Instead, the political vacuum caused by the break-up of the Soviet Union was primarily filled with nationalism (see Mense 2016: 43). Scrutinizing the background of this vacuum, the situation of nationalism during the Soviet period must be reflected. Ideologically, an international socialism was propagated with the aim to replace existing structures⁴ which served as markers of identity. On the contrary, the establishment of a “Homo Sovieticus” was pursued (Schmidt 2007: 212). The “Homo Sovieticus” was by no means detached from nationalist thought due to the fact that the spoken language of this prototype should be Russian. This illustrates however a symbolical hierarchization within the Soviet Union in which non-Russian groups were subordinated. At the same time, the distinction between citizenship in relation to the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and nationality in relation to the Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic, on the other, determined a dual approach of identity politics (*ibid.*: 218).

In the course of the transition of the Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic as a part of the Soviet Union to the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, national policies sought for a reference to pre-Soviet times (see Laruelle 2012: 41). These nation-building processes dissociated with the Soviet period. First of all, the government under the first president Askar Akayev reinterpreted the double identity paradigm by establishing a “twin civic/ethnic identity” (*ibid.*). Although a liberal approach to ethnic minorities was pursued in the 1990s, there was also the usage of “ethno-centric ideological projects to mobilize the state apparatus” which intensified over the years (Marat 2008: 8). Therefore, a strong reference towards a Kyrgyz nationalism with a primordialist notion was set. More specifically, the utilization of cultural narratives and policies regarding Manas⁵ was consciously implemented in the years after independence. This was institutionalized by the integration of Manas into university courses as well as the aspiration to entrench the Manas epic in the nation-state context.

Ethnonationalism was continuously a center of attention for the following decades. This was marked by an emphasis on the Kyrgyz language⁶ and Kyrgyz historical narratives, among other factors. While these policies underlined an ostensible continuity of the Kyrgyz nation, they also put other ethnic minorities living in Kyrgyzstan in difference to a Kyrgyz majority. The ethnic violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010 further contributed to this development. In this context, the gradual spread of Kyrgyz nationalism occurred not only among the higher political level as “elite nationalism” but also at the grassroots level (Doolotkeldieva 2021: 4). Departing from this ethnonationalism, Laruelle concluded that what

⁴ This comprises various realms of social life such as religion, family, clan relations, among others (see Schmidt 2007: 211, Marat 2008: 12). Although these structures were oppressed during Soviet times, they did not vanish within that period.

⁵ The Manas epic refers to the historical character Manas and his forty knights who are believed to have fought and founded the first Kyrgyz state in the 9th century AD (Laruelle 2012: 40).

⁶ The re-establishment of the Kyrgyz language competed with existing structures in regard to Russian language and how this determined state institutions and other places of decision-making.

“dominates today is the illusion that the more Kyrgyzstan becomes the state of the Kyrgyz in terms of identity narrative, historical references, language policies, and marginalization of the minorities from decision-making, the more it will be able to succeed in constructing itself as a state” (2012: 47).

This very notion has to be seen in the framework of the weak economic situation and political instability. Besides an emphasis on cultural and linguistic practices, the role of religion is further connected to post-Soviet nationalism in Kyrgyzstan (see Pembeci 2017: 135). The religious revival of Islam particularly stands out at this point, whereas some scholars go so far to argue that this transformation contributes to a “*homo islamicus*” which tries to link religion and national identity (Olimova and Tolipov 2011: 8).

In 2021, the presidential elections as well as a referendum on the political system were implemented, resulting in the win of Japarov as new president and a shift from a parliamentary to a presidential system. In preparation of the referendum, the Japarov administration reconceptualized the constitution, including amendments about the commitment towards neo-traditional concepts (Schmitz 2021: 3). It also foresaw the reduction of parliamentary seats as well as the re-introduction of the traditional council *kurultai*, which is supposed to have power towards all fields of politics and personnel decisions. Yet, many questions such as the unspecified definition of traditional values, which guide new policies and correspondingly the realities of people, remain open. In the course of the establishment, the changes of the constitution were framed as “*Khanstitutsija*”, referring to the depiction of Japarov as a modern Khan (Coppennrath 2020: 7). With this historical, male-dominated account of leadership, certain narratives of masculinity and gender roles in a broader sense are reproduced within the framework of the nation.

Furthermore, developments in recent years included an antifeminist backlash. Ultra-rightwing nationalist groups⁷ such as *Kyrk Choro* operated publicly against activists and advocated for the preservation of Kyrgyz tradition while rejecting demands of women’s and LGBT activists by highlighting the Westernized character of those (see Aitkulova 2021: 70). The name Kyrk Choro refers to the forty knights of Manas, which emphasizes an ancient reference of the past. The backlash can however not be limited to movements like Kyrk Choro but have to be seen in a broader context, including the state apparatus and political parties. The unlawful detainment of some 70 activists on the Women’s Day in 2020 after the attacks by unidentified men shows how the police had been involved in the backlash (HRW 2020). An absence of action by the government in this regard reveals another layer of how the backlash stands out. The cooperation of Kyrk Choro with government agencies underlines the interwovenness between the state and non-state level (see Satke 2018). However, the developments in Kyrgyzstan have to be understood in the framework of a global anti-gender movement which is connected to rightwing politics, rising nationalism and anti-globalization sentiments and which sees gender as an

⁷ Other nationalist groups are for example *Kalys* or *Eldin Unu* (see Doolotkeldieva 2021: 4, BTI 2016: 2). Since they were not in the focus of the empirical data, they are not elaborated in detail.

ideology (see Denkovski et al. 2021: 9). With this, gender is framed and instrumentalized “as a threat to society”, a pattern which can be observed globally although the various actors do not necessarily have to be connected with each other (*ibid.*: 10). That being said, the emphasis on patriarchal and heteronormative structures of society is taken up into the agenda of anti-gender actors.

Gender roles in flux

Political and societal transitions directly impact lived realities. In turn, those affected realities underline that gender is inevitably interwoven in these processes and, moreover, that gender roles are shaped by them. Specifically, it has to be acknowledged how historical narratives, in particular gender roles deriving from nomadic times and the Soviet period, often influence perceptions of today. Due to the lack of written documentation, it is indeed difficult to identify the situation of gender roles during nomadic times (see Hoare 2021: 23). However, there is the notion that gender equality in nomadic structures were rather equal because of the shared tasks of a nomadic lifestyle which differs from sedentary ways of living (*ibid.*). While most of the known nomadic leaders were men, female leadership was also represented by Kurmanjan Datka, who ruled Kyrgyz tribes in the 19th century. On the contrary, perceptions persist that gender equality was not necessarily given and that patriarchal structures existed in nomadic societies as well. The tendency of romanticizing the past should thus not be neglected, while also acknowledging these notions as an approach to historical imagination.

Looking at the Soviet period, Central Asian women were expected to participate in the workforce, which depicted one of various women policies at the time (Beyer and Finke 2019: 318). Simultaneously, the role of women centered around “motherhood as a social and national duty”, which targeted the development and protection of the Soviet homeland (Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016: 197). Hence follows that being a woman was accompanied by various duties and expectations, which were concurrently instrumentalized in a symbolic way. In this sense, these policies contradicted each other, which is why they can be described as the “Soviet paradox” (Kandiyoti 2007: 617). Kandiyoti even goes so far saying that Soviet policies regarding women did not focus on the main goal of gender equality but rather the “social protection by the state” (*ibid.*). Despite some policies favoring the empowerment of women, for example in the education sector or through women’s quotas, it can be argued that male privilege persisted within socialist paternalism and can still be found in the post-Soviet time.

The advent of international development actors in the 1990s brought additional understandings of gender roles, which were predominantly shaped by Western ideas, often linked to notions of liberal and neoliberal feminism. What can be observed nowadays is the multilayered nature of these influences. Historical narratives of the past are used as points of reference. In the ethnonationalist context, nomadic references are in particular utilized when nomadic and tribal traditions are remembered (see Handrahan 2001: 474). Processes of traditionalization

are further related to this context. Here, traditionalization is understood as the processes of practices which are perceived as traditional but also encompass the possibility of their institutionalization. Hence follows that traditionalization builds upon the reshaped nature of practices and, in doing so, it connects these practices to the contemporary. Focusing on women, it is important to note that “[w]omen’s issues have always been linked to tradition, as it is very often through discourses on and practices related to gender that tradition can manifest itself visibly and publicly” (Beyer and Finke 2019: 318).

These impacts for the roles of women can especially be found in the realm of the family and religion (*ibid.*). As it will be demonstrated, the reframing of selected traditions is directly linked to the realities of women. Moreover, the sphere of religion is another decisive process in which gender roles are negotiated. In the last decades, the revival of religious practices, specifically Islamic ones, shaped societal developments in Kyrgyzstan, which had been previously suppressed during the Soviet period (see Omelicheva 2015: 7). On the one hand, roles of women are impacted by that influence in the everyday life, for example when it comes to the implementation of religious practices. On the other hand, the politicization of religion also plays a role on the macrolevel, where secularism seems to be liquidated (see Sadyrbek 2021a: 5). In addition, it should be noted that age, ethnicity and other factors might play a role which influence gender roles and ascriptions (see Beyer and Kojobekova 2019: 4). Consequently, intersectional dimensions have to be taken into account. Considering that all these influences shape gendered hierarchies and contribute to different pictures of gender roles, a certain complexity and ambivalence emerge for lived realities. In these realities, gender roles might be influenced differently depending on individual experiences and respective local contexts. Yet, it can be noticed that specifically roles of women were continuously used and instrumentalized in ways of embodiment and symbols. This becomes particularly visible when the experiences of women’s rights activists are taken into account, notably in the context of nationalist tendencies.

Activism in an ambivalent environment

Departing from the discrepancies of gender roles as well as the political and societal developments of recent years, the interviews with women’s rights activists shed light onto the lived realities and concrete consequences, specifically in the spectrum of activism:

“[T]hey [traditionalist and nationalist groups and individuals] are saying that women who fight for women’s rights [...] are foreign agents and enemies of the nation so that those women activists are... they took money for their activism and they are a source of assault, they are people who sell their ideas and nation” (activist, focus on domestic violence and SRHR).

External framings of activists encompass various negative connotations. Such external perceptions display a base of the backlash against women’s rights activism, which in turn is embedded in an environment of nationalist tendencies. Therefore, the variety of external and internal perceptions of women’s rights activism serves as an access to explore conflicting structures.

Taking the statement above into account, the framing of activists as “foreign agents” or “Western agents” (*ibid.*) relates to the characteristics of dependency and external control. One origin of this notion might be that many activists work in the NGO sector, which is criticized for its dependence on Western donors and their agendas (see Hoare 2016: 282). The assumed dependence is thus marked with the framing of something external, which is accompanied by different ideas and conceptions. In the case of gender-related topics, agendas in which feminism appears are thus viewed “as a foreign ideology” (Jayawardena 2016: 1). The assumption of feminism as a Western concept was put in contrast by many activists, who differentiated between (neo-)liberal feminism from a Western background and other forms such as Marxist feminism or notions of the gender equal nomadic society.

Another issue in the context of nationalism and the accompanying rejection of the external is a misconception of certain terms. According to the empirical data, there are many different understandings of key words such as gender and feminism. In this context, gender is often equated to LGBT, which is negatively connotated. An interviewee described it as follows:

“I think that United Nations first of all have misused the word a lot. Because instead of saying women’s right they used gender. And, also when it comes to LGBT rights, then it was also covered by the gender term. And people think then it’s something not very good or coming from West” (activist, focus on gender and youth).

Hence follows that women’s rights activism is often automatically associated with LGBT, which is in turn associated as “gay propaganda” as two interviewees stated. Accordingly, anti-LGBT tendencies are specifically utilized in Russia, which can similarly be observed in Kyrgyzstan. Another interviewee referred to external opinions who equalize feminism as LGBT. This results in a conflation of the terms gender, feminism and LGBT. The misconceptions of terms that determine the gender discourse and LGBT-related terms with a negative connotation thus have to be acknowledged in order to understand different actors operating in the discourse. Such differences in meanings and understandings reveal one foundation upon which the backlash is experienced and the nationalist discourse is perpetuated. More precise, three activists reported homophobia against activists, for example by calling activists “gay”. This illuminates a strategy, in which “[c]alling women lesbians is designed to dismiss the feminists as tainted by alien ideas [...] and to marginalize feminist ideas as stemming from degenerate women” (Enloe 2014: 118). As aforementioned, verbal attacks against activists depict one aspect of the backlash. These interactions between activists, on the one hand, and nationalist and traditionalist groups or individuals, on the other, thus represent a pivotal connection to the nationalist discourse. One conflicting line poses the confrontation of women’s rights activism as something “untraditional” as one activist emphasized. The preservation of specific values, which are ascribed as traditional, are a main foundation for the argumentation against activism and underline mechanisms of conservative antifeminism. Consequently, the widespread development of a “traditional consciousness”, as stated in an expert interview, might manifest this tension and create pressure for women’s rights advocates. This consciousness operates on the basis of an assumed

stability and order, including social hierarchies. These hierarchies as well as the assumed stability seem to be threatened by the feminist agenda, which could serve as one explanation of the conflicting relation (see Höcker et al. 2020: 256). Not only is the agenda a trigger point for action and reaction between two sides. The fact that women's rights activism takes place in public and thereby touching upon visual gender-related taboos, for example by integrating the female body into activist presentation, challenges patriarchal structures and understandings. Another example for the conflicting line between women's rights activists and pro-nationalists is a counter-event of the Feminnale which was supported by the minister of culture. An activist described that protesters of this counter-event brought signs reading "nation is higher than rights". The division and hierarchization of the nation and rights reveal a specific understanding of values. It demarcates not only women's rights in particular, but rather human rights in general.

Intersectionality is another major dimension by which the nationalist discourse is experienced. Here, experiences are related to the personal ethnic background but can also be seen in a broader context. For example, one interviewee with an Uyghur background described attempts of linking antifeminism to ethnic minorities:

"I don't exactly remember who it was, either deputy or Minister of Culture, they wrote in 2020 after the march that there were not a lot of Kyrgyz women on the march, so they were trying to make look that ethnicity minorities making the march. This is actually an urgent alarm because in Kyrgyzstan that is a very sensitive issue" (LGBT activist).

The interviewee further noticed particular discrimination in the case that people have another ethnicity, for example Uzbek, and are not heterosexual. Another instance in the light of Kyrgyz nationalism was given when it comes to multiethnic marriage and the claim to uphold Kyrgyz ethnicity, therefore depicting an ethnic discrimination. In this way, these experiences approach underlying issues which touch upon the continuation of an ethnicity-based nation.

Moving on to a broader societal level, light should be shed on women who do not engage in activism and who might be in favor of nationalist and traditionalist orientations. One activist reflected on the educational and economic privilege of activists, thus having different realities and circumstances than others. This is accompanied by the phenomenon that activities and confrontations are mostly carried out in urban centers, especially in Bishkek, whereas it might not represent the situation for the whole country. The lack of representation is particularly visible in regard to rural women and older women, who might not share the views of activists. More generally, the divergence of ideas and understandings points to lack of a consensus towards a societal common ground. This is particularly decisive since it determines the future development of Kyrgyzstan, on the one hand, and the sense of belonging, on the other hand. In this way, the separation between different social groups is a crucial aspect while a gap of a platform to discuss societal issues appears to be missing according to the empirical data.

Diverging gender roles conceptions

The complex of gender roles encompasses a variety of understandings. These understandings are integral to approach the gendered dimensions of nationalism since it illuminates gendered hierarchization within group identity (see Peterson 1994: 83). Thus, gender roles perceptions structure the basis in nationalist frameworks. In this regard, the different conceptions of gender roles refer to the past whereas they relate to contemporary gender roles or put them in contrast. Gender roles perceptions of the present often refer to the social status within the family. Both accounts lead to the creation of narratives, constituting different lived realities.

Looking at the references to nomadic gender roles, the interviewees had diverging opinions regarding gender equality. Three activists perceived the relationship between men and women as relatively equal because of the specific living conditions of nomadic societies, for example by stating that there “were no special women’s roles, everything was done together with men”, “women and men were in equal positions because we were nomad”, or “women usually used to be equal more or less because you share all of the possibilities during the nomadic journey”. In contrast, another interviewee concluded that “in traditional culture, women always were in a really bad position”. This was supported in an expert interview, in which it was argued that despite the specific living conditions the nomadic tradition displayed also a patriarchal tradition. The interviewee evaluated that this situation has remained and has been reinforced by Islam. In the light of the diverging conceptions regarding the roles of women in nomadic times, the attempt to “regaining control of that society” might “not liberate women” (Enloe 2014: 118). One additional aspect was brought up several times, namely the reference to Kurmanjan Datka as a female nomadic leader. On the one hand, an activist pointed out that Kurmanjan Datka as a Kyrgyz stateswoman is neglected in historical narratives. On the other hand, another interviewee emphasized the instrumentalization of powerful women by nationalists, stating that

“one of the argument of nationalists is that they always say we have equality between women and men’s rights, that it is just a fairytale of feminist movement that we don’t have equality. And they always give as an example Kurmanjan Datka and Roza Otunbaeva [laughs]. And I’m always saying, two women in a whole history against thousands of male leaders, you know” (feminist art activist).

The usage of ostensible female empowerment narratives in nationalist discourses thus is possible “if and when specific types of political incentives exist”, for instance by the legitimization of an assumed gender equality (Belafatti 2019: 78). Although the notions of the negotiation of Kurmanjan Datka diverge, they have in common that female political leaders are not placed in the center of attention but are rather instrumentalized or neglected in a male-dominated system of power relations.

Contrasting perceptions of gender roles also appear for the Soviet period. While some interviewees highlighted the “Soviet colonization”, an activist with a background in Marxist feminism assessed gender-related heritage from the Soviet period as something which comes from

within. The respective interviewee emphasized the need to decolonize the discourse from Western gender conceptions and liberal feminism because “[i]n our history, we had a lot of examples, where we just need to give these examples. Not outside, just inside”. Therefore, the notion of decolonization is in particular interesting due to the diverging evaluation of it.

Moreover, the “Soviet paradox” with its contradictory policies on gender equality (Kandiyoti 2007: 617) can also be found: for example, one activist stated “we have lots of leftovers from Soviet culture where women were propagated as care givers and people who are nice, beautiful and et cetera”. The multiple expectations of women during the Soviet period might be observed in the contemporary setting as well. At the same time, gender roles might be influenced by other factors. The same interviewee addressed the influence of “patriarchal values coming from Russian culture [and] Islam” as well as the establishment of “a national portrait of a Kyrgyz woman who is most beautiful, caring, tender, nice, always supporting men and always serving everyone around”. The ascriptions of women’s roles with its various influences shed light onto the construction of gender roles narratives.

The narration of such gender roles is carried out and reproduced by social relations and practices. One particular aspect here is the embeddedness of these roles in the family. The hierarchization of women’s roles are integral since “the culturally legitimate authority of women comes with advance in age and ‘bargaining with patriarchy;’ the authority and power of women are enacted through their successive roles [in the family]” (Ismailbekova 2015: 1). The higher social status when a woman gets older and becomes “the matriarch of the family” was similarly emphasized by an interviewee. In this sense, “women begin their careers as new brides (kelin)”, thus having the lowest status in their husband’s family (Ismailbekova 2015: 1). The lower roles transmitted through kelinism therefore come along with expectations to gendered tasks. This framework attempts the internalization of “particular feminized expectations” and the manifestation of a gendered status quo (Enloe 2014: 11). The setting appears however paradoxical due to the need of women as a force in the labor market. Nonetheless, such a manifestation of family hierarchy and the status of young women might contribute to a possible transfer of these models over generations and to an internalization of patriarchal structures.

In this way, it can be argued that the nation “revolves around the structure of family and the roles and power relations it naturalizes. It is gendered in its very construction as it naturalizes the conventional understandings of mother, father, and children” (Pin-Fat and Stern 2005: 43). By the naturalization of power relations through the family, a hierarchized understanding of ascriptions of tasks, which are segregated in the public and private realm, is perpetuated. This explanation might support the investigation of the backlash against activists since they consciously scrutinize, criticize and oppose such a hierarchization of gender roles. With this, women’s rights activists disrupt narratives which sustain the nation and therefore question the status quo.

Practices of legitimization: hegemonic masculinity

The structures of gendered hierarchization must be analyzed in regard to its construction. At this point, hegemonic masculinity comes into play since it conceptually determines power relations in nationalist frameworks while simultaneously legitimizing these. This highlights the pivotal interrelation between nationalism and masculinity (see Nagel 1998: 252, Enloe 2014: 93). A focus on masculinity corresponds with the empirical data: in an expert interview with a Kyrgyzstani ethnologist, it was stressed that the “society is built around the idea of masculinity”. Accordingly, this is shown by the desire to have a son or the idea that “Kyrgyz men” should be strong, powerful and leading, thus creating certain expectations for men. These attributes support the notion of a hegemonic type of masculinity, which is marked by an anticipation of gendered power relations. In this light, the subordination of women in this patriarchal system appears as a consequence, which might be accompanied by misogyny. For example, one interviewee referred to the predominance of men in the political sphere and the effects of it by accentuating that a government mainly consisting of men can be “very sexist”. Furthermore, she stated “for me, as higher nationalist as more patriarchal society”, thus drawing a connection between nationalism and patriarchal structures. Hence follows that a gendered hierarchization implies normative frameworks in which both men and women hold specific ascriptions.

As aforementioned, this very system might be supported also by women. One activist explained this support by arguing that women might be “afraid” or “are just products of patriarchal culture and got used to this”. Notwithstanding the possible reasons of this support, it can be argued that this framework might reproduce such a system. More specifically, the anticipation of such a structure under the backdrop of assumed ascriptions might be reinforced by certain narratives suggesting a societal order. Argumentative patterns for the legitimization of this order might be connected with the usage of traditionalism or specific interpretations of Islam. One example here might be the framing and utilization of bride kidnapping as an ancient tradition⁸, therefore justifying contemporary practices. The subordination of women in this very system might also be the exclusion of women from the public realm. By enshrining gendered hierarchization with such patterns of legitimization and the idea of order, unequal power relations are not only perpetuated but also internalized.

The implementation and manifestation of hegemonic masculinity in a nationalist framework can be detected in different manners. For example, the rise of Japarov as president was accompanied by the deployment of “traditional” symbols of kinship and leadership that resonate with Kyrgyz society” (Ismailbekova 2021). Furthermore, the utilization of Japarov as “a native son” or “a direct descendant of the khans” amplified nationalist narratives not only in the manner of historic references but also in a masculinized way (*ibid.*). The framing of the changed

⁸ The practice of ala kachuu over time has been variously examined, whereas integral changes since the post-Soviet time can be determined. Kleinbach et al. however found that “prior to the 20th century the practice of bride kidnapping was uncommon (both consensual and non-consensual)” (2005: 192).

constitution as “Khanstitutsija” further underlines this rhetoric. This shows how specific language might be used to reinforce imaginaries of leadership. While enduring narratives suggest a preservation of gendered hierarchies to uphold presumed stability, critics such as women’s rights activists might depict a threat to this system. In this context, an activist stated that

“I think this current government, they support this discourse of nationalism because they don’t want to share power, they still want to stay. They understand that feminist movement can bring changes, you know. That women can be more active and they are not ready to share power and that is why I think they really understand why the feminist movement is dangerous for them. [...] That is why they develop this discourse themselves” (feminist art activist).

In other interviews, this argument was highlighted by the opinion that people in powerful positions, who are usually male and privileged, are afraid of new things. By challenging respective power constellations, a loss of authority might be feared due to the disruption of hegemonic structures, which might also foster antifeminist actions (see Höcker et al. 2020: 276-277). In addition, a hurt sense of honor was brought up in an expert interview by addressing that the behavior of women would contribute to a violation of masculinity, which might be linked to a violation of tradition. The reference to tradition again becomes integral since it is put in contrast to a presumed contradictory behavior of women. The interviewee drew an additional linkage to this issue by stating that independent women might be accused of taking money from the West and being spoiled by Western education. The loss of hegemonic masculinity might therefore be linked to a confrontation between internal values, i.e. tradition, and external values, i.e. being Westernized. Under the backdrop of an assumed stability and the need to preserve a certain hierarchy, it seems yet paradoxical that the Kyrgyzstani framework has been shaped by political and socioeconomic fragility. On the contrary, it might be argued that the assumption of stability insinuates an order *despite* this fragile framework.

Another major aspect within these structures displays the heteronormative framework and its discrepancies. Different masculinities standing in contrast to a hegemonic understanding endanger the very thought of presumed stability which is informed by heteronormativity. More specifically, homophobia against LGBT persons in the framework of nationalism was addressed by several interviewees, whereas an antipathy towards gay men was highlighted, for instance:

“[W]hen we say, you should join the feminist movement, they say no no no, those are lesbians and gays. No no [emphasize], those are gay. In Russian, gay is not applied for women, gay is only applied for gay men” (activist, focus on gender and youth).

While the respective interviewee stressed that her focus on activist work would not lie on “gay people and male bisexuals” but rather “lesbians, bisexuals and transgender women, people”, a focus on other masculinities can be illuminated (*ibid.*). In this manner, Slootmaeckers found that homophobia might be used as a “technology of Othering”, whereas the framework builds upon the idea of nationalism as competing masculinities (2019: 241). Hence follows that the

nation is connected to a heteronormative framework, in which non-heteronormative gender identities and sexual orientations are perceived as threats. This notion was demonstrated by another interviewee, who referred to a group of deputies of the parliament *Jogorku Kenesh*, stating “[t]hey say, oh those gays ruin our traditional norms, ruin our lifestyle and so forth. They are our enemies. They will destroy our state, nation and so forth” (activist, focus on domestic violence and SRHR). Looking at the usage of words, the rhetoric suggests a narrative of strong antipathy, which creates a threat against the nation and its constitutive system. The reference to “traditional norms” again draws attention to the ways how this antipathy is legitimized. Furthermore, interviewees stated that the antipathy towards LGBT issues is certainly connected with the way how homophobia is articulated in the framework of “gay propaganda” in Russia. In fact, the Russian government fosters “masculinity and traditional gender roles”, thus underlining “the importance of biopolitics” which contributes to homophobia (Commercio 2021: 30). In this way, antifeminist structures not only oppose ideas, resources, and rights of women but also LGBT communities (see Höcker et al. 2020: 253). Consequently, women’s and LGBT rights and emancipation processes are rejected in order to impede a dissolution of “traditional” gender roles (*ibid.*: 276). The preservation of an assumed stability therefore centers not only around specific ideas of hegemonic masculinity in a nationalist framework but also opposes seemingly contradictory ideas.

Women between representation and objectification

The objectification and representation of women within the nation display pivotal poles in the framework of nationalism since both phenomena can be observed while they seem to stand in contrast to each other. Drawing from the themes which came up throughout the interviews, the objectification of women including body politics, and women as the representation of the nation reveal specific patterns, which must be put into relation. Starting with the objectification of women, interviewees underlined the issue of specifically young women in the nationalist discourse, for instance:

“[I]f society became very nationalistic, women become just an object. Every man, even if it is just a guy working on the street, in his mind there is a perception that all women of Kyrgyzstan belong to him because he is Kyrgyz. And he is willing to do whatever he wants. That is really bad and dangerous, because when it is just a stranger on the street, you can at least ask someone and protect you but if it is your husband or partner, it can turn to permanent domestic violence. [...] When society turns more nationalistic, it became a norm such behavior. And women are always blamed” (activist, focus on Marxist feminism).

The linkage between the objectification of women and nationalism illuminates the issue of an internalized hierarchization within the framework of a Kyrgyz nationalism, resulting in a potential threat for women due to a gendered degradation. In doing so, this setting would pose not only a societal issue but also a specific problem within family structures. Another interviewee referred more detailed to the situation of women within the family by stating that

“they use those women who get married in their families as literally slaves when for example the guests come to the house, those women have to serve all those guests, even if she is educated, even if she holds a position. If she is the youngest daughter in law, it sucks. It like really sucks. Because she has to serve everyone, even if she is pregnant or ill” (activist, focus on gender and youth).

The devaluation of women as an object and/or a servant of the family thus becomes an integral point for the reflections on gendered nationalism. More precise, if the aspect regarding the naturalization of domination is taken into account, the objectification of women corresponds as a striking consequence, therefore conceptually extending the dimensions for women in nationalist frameworks. The dimension of objectification can further be linked with the implications for education and how this notion is transmitted since childhood. An interviewee explained how young women and girls are prepared for their specific domestic roles and simultaneously alienated by their parents or own relatives. In turn, this process can have significant consequences for education when boys are prioritized. It was further described that this attitude might be seen as a preprogrammed process, thus contributing to an internalization of gendered expectations. As an explanation for objectification, the religious concept of *amanatization* was brought up in another expert interview, according to which amanat

“objectifies the woman as someone or something, as an object, which belongs to god actually, men and women they belong to god at the same level but it is somehow put under the protection of a man, ya, so there is a level, the women, the men and the god, but both of them are the objects of the god but in this life, the woman should be under the protection of the man due to the biological differences and their social ascribed roles of course. [...] I think that this concept is misunderstood at the action level by the people themselves, by men and women as well” (sociologist, focus on Kyrgyzstani society).

Elsewhere, the concept amanat was described as the state of women being under male custodianship “regardless of their social role and status in the family” (Piga et al. 2016: 119). In this regard, it might be scrutinized if the concept serves rather as a legitimization than an explanation towards the objectification of women. More precise, the concept builds upon the naturalization of domination by interpreting a religious framework, therefore contributing to an internalization of gendered hierarchies. The question might also be raised why objectification occurs not only in the context of a religious background but can be found elsewhere.

What is particularly striking however is the argumentation of legitimization by biological differences. Drawing from the empirical material, the issue of body politics including the dimension of biological reproduction comes into play at this point. For example, one activist referred to the societal obligations of women, describing “it’s giving birth” and “marriage” next to being an “unpaid cleaner for your whole relatives”. The expectation to give birth might be linked to the warranty of reproduction and further to the reproduction of the nation. Since “[w]omen are associated in the collective imagination with children and therefore with the collective, as well as the familial, future”, the meaning of women is also carried out and reproduced in symbolic manners (Yuval-Davis 2003: 18). This collective imaginary sets a strong focus on reproduction, because “[n]ationalist projects rhyme womanhood with motherhood”, whereas “the figure of

the mother tends to overshadow other – nonetheless existing – representations” (Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016: 197). Women might be seen as the representation of the nation or, to put it in the words of Peterson, as “symbolic markers of the nation” (1994: 79). In this light, a narration of gendered symbols and meanings reinforcing the nation is put into place. An interviewee connected this symbolic function further to women’s rights activism:

“By trying to ruin patriarchal and traditional norms, we are of course sort of trying to ruin the nation because women is the metonym of the nation like we mean nation. [...] They think that Kyrgyz women are the representation of the nation. If they are spoiled, it means that nation will be spoiled” (activist, focus on domestic violence and SRHR).

The implications of such a narrative become particularly visible when anticipated symbolic ascriptions are touched. In this manner, women are idealized as carriers of the nation and therefore metaphorized. Most notably here is the idea that women’s “purity must be impeccable” due to the connection of the family and kinship, on the one hand, and the nation, on the other (Nagel 1998: 254). This mechanism manifests the symbolic structure of the nation as it contributes to an instrumentalization by representation with specific consequences (see Bhabha 1990a: 308). In addition, it emphasizes the upholding of an imagined nation by not only linking it to gender but also to ethnicity. What remains at the core is the paradox between objectification and representation of women. However, it could be argued that *because* women are imagined in a symbolic way of representation, they are “deprived of human attributes” (Kim 2020: 9). In this way, the utilization of symbols would depict a contribution to the possibility of objectification. Both ways however demonstrate how women and their roles are instrumentalized in the framework of nationalism. This argument might be underlined by the considerations of Yuval-Davis, who not only investigated the exclusion of women in collective identity narratives but also identified “womanhood” as “a property of Otherness” (2003: 19). Ultimately, this points to the centrality of hegemonic masculinity in the nationalist discourse.

Ethnic nationalism and gender

The ideology of ethnicity and nationalism as “a kinship ideology”, in which “[t]he ethnic or national group has been ‘born’ at a particular time in history”, sheds light onto the significance of gender (Lindholm 1994: 29). The assumption of the “birth” of a particular group – in this case the Kyrgyz nation – points to a primordial understanding, which provides ground for a nationalist narrative and, furthermore, a designated space for social and cultural practices. These practices are predominantly associated as tradition, which in turn might lead to the reproduction of ethnonationalism. Correspondingly, this framework relates to a sense of identity, whereas it specifically targets Kyrgyz nationalism. In the nationalist discourse the reference to the ethnic Kyrgyz thus finds a resonance due to “weak, citizenship-based identity” (Marat 2016: 6). Looking back, “the main threat for Kyrgyz identity was identified as the ‘cultural dilution’ caused by the presence of Russian cultural and linguistic domination”, which over time altered to the identification of “minorities, primarily Uzbek, as the main threat to Kyrgyz

identity, to the Kyrgyz state, to the dominant position of the Kyrgyz and to the ‘purity’ of the nation” (Belafatti 2019: 71-72). Portraying external influence as a possible threat, a loss of ethnic identity and its reclaim are articulated. Regarding the Soviet period, it was stated that during this time

“we lost our ethnical identity, you know, we have been all mixed as some sort of Soviet communist people. And because of that, I think people now are trying to regain that identity and they try to stick to those traditions as it was something identifying them [...] because we didn’t belong to ourselves for the years while we were Russian colony, Soviet Union” (activist, focus on gender and youth).

Accordingly, the statement draws a connection between regaining an ethnic identity and traditions as a performative act attempting the perpetuation of this identity. The paradigm of loss was also addressed by another interviewee, who added that nationalist rhetoric emphasizes the protection of the nation from the influence of other countries because of this loss. What might be added besides former external influence from the Soviet Union is the impact of Westernization since the 1990s. Furthermore, the question arises what role Islamic religion plays in this context, whereas Islam can be perceived as something coming “from within” as stated in an expert interview. On the contrary, external actors, for example countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar or Kuwait financially and ideologically influence Islam in Kyrgyzstan (see Engvall 2020: 15, 20).

Referring to the connection of ethnicity and gender, the creation of an “image of a very peaceful, tender and obeying girl who is truly Kyrgyz woman”, as an activist stated, is integrated into the undertaking of reclaiming a certain ethnic identity. In this light, certain imaginaries how Kyrgyz women should be are established besides the instrumentalization of women as warrantors of the continuity of the nation. As a result, direct consequences arise for the lived realities of women. This might range from non-consensual bride kidnapping as a quasi-re-established tradition, over burdens for inter-ethnic marriages to intersectional dimensions specifically targeting women who are non-Kyrgyz and not in line with a certain gender role image. At the same time, the latter two aspects can also apply to men and specific connotations of masculinity.

Anchoring mechanisms of nationalism

Looking at processes of the institutionalization of nationalist thought, light must be shed how nationalism is currently legitimized and implemented. Here, primordial notions, which hint to an ancient understanding of the nation, play an integral role. This is specifically carried out through the connection of the nation and kinship. By utilizing genealogical accounts and historical narratives, the aspect of temporality serves as a kind of glue for legitimacy. Ideologically, this allows the imagination of the nation as an entity while simultaneously amplifying a symbolic dimension (see Bhabha 1990a: 309). However, the in- and exclusion of other groups in a society happens through this imagination if the nation is referred to a certain ethnicity. What appears additionally interesting is the question how temporality and the nation stands in

relation to the Soviet period. Some interviewees described a disruption in this regard, whereas the cultural heritage was emphasized which was abruptly by the Soviet and Russian colonization.

Although this perspective might not necessarily be shared by all interviewees, these accounts show how the Soviet time might be seen as an impairment in regard to the sense of belonging and its associated cultural ties. In fact, it can be argued that in the Soviet period, the discourse on ethnic and/or national identities was somehow overshadowed by other identity narratives, i.e. the “*Homo Sovieticus*” (Schmidt 2007: 212). This impairment would further highlight how temporal linearity has been suspended. In this respect, one could argue that *because* of this disruption, the developed emphasis on the Kyrgyz nation has been reinforced in the last decades. Within this realm, however, the different ways how the nation was and is narrated, thus constructed, point to the ambivalence of its imagination.

Taking a closer look to the references towards tradition, the utilization of perceived traditions underpins the framework of temporality by supposing continuity. Remarkable is the way how tradition is negotiated. More precise, tradition as a set of practices is integrated through an assumed re-establishment of it. The framing of a re-establishment of tradition points to the characteristic of invented tradition, whereas specific traditions, which are in line with a suitable past, are utilized (see Hobsbawm 2007: 1). Ironically, the process of making up and re-creating traditions in reference to an imagined past stands in contrast to the actual belief of a historic, ancient origin of these very traditions. By ‘picking’ traditions, the current imagination of the nation is specifically developed. The utilization of traditions in this framework, for instance the current practices of ala kachuu, points to a certain direction how traditions are selectively re-invented whereas the nomadic past is imagined in particular gendered ways. Another example here displays virginity practices⁹ which might be seen as “a way to express an ethnic identity” since it is “systematically referred to as an ancient Kyrgyz practice” (Kim 2020: 9). The mechanism of selective traditions associated with the nomadic past reveals how neonomadism might work “to undermine the idea of gender equality and strengthens discourses justifying patriarchal oppression” (Belafatti 2019: 74). Consequently, the exclusion of women in the rediscovery of tradition highlights an underlying structure of hegemonic masculinity since this standpoint navigates certain practices while others might be neglected (see Yuval-Davis 1993: 622). For instance, an interviewee addressed the gap that Kurmanjan Datka as a queen is neglected by traditionalists while in contrast Manas is elevated.

In addition, certain images such as women as “keepers of hearth and home” emphasize an ancient and thus legitimizing character not only for the national narrative but also resulting gender roles ascriptions (Ismailbekova 2015: 2). With these mechanisms, specific norms and values are transmitted whereas the thought to return to tradition and therefore coming to a

⁹ Kim examines female pre-marital virginity as a “reified social practice” which is embedded in national ideological projects of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan (2020: 9).

certain entity is reproduced (see Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016: 196). These mechanisms reinforce patriarchal structures in the moment when selected invented traditions or images underpin ties to hegemonic masculinity. On this very basis, narratives of the nation can be produced and reproduced, whereas the process of imagining the nation appears as fluid and dynamic. With this, the contemporary picture of the Kyrgyz nation is refined by the distinct usage of narratives which are tied to a temporal understanding.

Looking at the implementation practices in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, contemporary politics have to be distinguished from previous frameworks regarding the manifestation of the nation, for example the components of a civic identity framework of the early Akayev administration. Rather, it can be demonstrated how nationalism can be seen as “a key element of the political agenda” (Laruelle 2012: 39). This is directly connected with the manifestation of tradition. The changed preamble in the constitution of 2021 includes the establishment of “honouring traditions and customs”, which stands in line with ancient traditions “based on the precepts of Manas” (Akisheva 2021). This was preceded by a presidential decree which called “on state bodies to adopt measures aimed at promoting ‘traditional’ values in the education system and other areas” and recommended “media outlets to ‘propagate the values of a traditional society, the ideals of the family, a healthy lifestyle, love for the Fatherland and service to the people’” (IPHR and LPF 2021: 5). Interestingly, the wording of the decree and the renewed preamble propose gendered norms which derive from a masculinized notion of the nation, i.e. the “Fatherland”, and the linkage to Manas as a national hero and warrior while simultaneously pinpointing to “traditional” gender roles.

In addition, the kurultai as a “substitute for the high chamber of the Kyrgyz parliament” displays another manifestation of tradition, which is carried out by constitutional changes (Phillips 2021). From a traditionalist point of view, the institution might be seen “as a continuation of the pre-Russian Kyrgyz customs” (*ibid.*). In this light, it could also be interpreted that the re-installation of the kurultai as an ancient institution presents an act of emancipation from the Soviet period. Thus, the transformation of the constitution might be seen as an element of an ongoing nation-building process, which is embedded in the framework of tradition evoking a return to assumed primordial norms and values (see Sadyrbek 2021b: 6). With this transformation, specific narratives in regard to Kyrgyzstan as a traditional society are perpetuated.

Another area where ideas of tradition are manifested is school education. Here, historical narratives are taken up, for example in textbooks which illustrate not only the Manas epic including the foundation of the Kyrgyz nation but also the “heroic past and future onto boyhood” (Palandjian et al. 2018: 175). Furthermore, it has been argued that in these “textbooks, national heroes’ immortal contributions to the nation-building processes continue to live on through the birth of a boy, a visit to a gravestone, or the retelling of national mythology” (*ibid.*). In doing so, the idea of hegemonic masculinity becomes reproduced in the particular context of school education, which might contribute to an internalization of masculinized structures. Moreover,

it also underlines the idea of the Kyrgyz nation which implies an exclusion of other ethnic groups. An interviewee referred to this issue by stating

“[i]t is like Kyrgyzstan for ethnic Kyrgyz. I have a feeling that all books are written like this [...]. There is no understanding when you read this book as a kid, I mean, not every kid can analyze and made his own decision, but it is not about our diversity and cultural heritage and a lot of different cultures were here” (feminist art activist).

By connecting not only ethnicity but also gendered aspects in the area of education, the “racialization” of the ethnic majority as well as the structural masculinization in the nationalist context is reproduced, therefore creating a distinct way of how the nation is imagined (Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016: 197). This manifestation might then allow a broader space to contradict presumable opponent perceptions, which can for example be found in the spectrum of women’s rights activism (see Marat 2021). The strategies of manifestation result in several consequences.

Firstly, when the nationalist discourse builds upon Kyrgyz norms and values, the othering of non-Kyrgyz groups might be reinforced. Hence follows that minorities are excluded which could pose a source for intrasocietal tensions, in particular when the nation is equalized to the state. Since the institutionalization of ethnic parameters is carried out through constitutional amendments, this process might be supported.

Secondly, the implementation of Kyrgyz nationalism finds itself in the context of political and socioeconomic fragility. Therefore, it has to be scrutinized if the applied strategies which suggest a certain kind of stability will sustain over time. The disappointment in the democratic system and the enrichment of elites are grave, especially if “the failure of statehood is interpreted as the failure of nationhood” (Laruelle 2012: 47).

Thirdly, the public discourse on the ways how the Kyrgyzstani society should develop faces a lack of consensus. At the core of this issue might stand a complex web of diverging ideas of society, which is contested by traditionalist and rather modernist orientations, re-Islamization and secularism, different notions of ethnicities, as well as the dimension of internal and external influences in a post-Soviet space. Moreover, the geographical aspect must be taken into account since lived realities in urban and rural areas but also in different regions vary significantly. Thus, it should be put into question who brings ideas of the nation into the discourse and who lives in those realities which are shaped by specific narratives (see Bhabha 1990b: 1). Looking specifically at the group of women’s rights activists, it is noteworthy how antipathy arises by the assumption that activists are ‘Westernized’ and advocate for values which are perceived as something external. This is particularly interesting since many women’s rights activists are in fact shaped by cosmopolitan, multicultural and hybrid influences in their realities while they simultaneously address inherent gender roles perceptions. Due to this framing, modernity, which might be associated with activists, and traditionalism as a way of approaching the nation towards a primordial conception stand in opposition with each other. The motives of conservative antifeminism in regard to preserving tradition and rightwing-nationalist

antifeminism as a way of continuing a specific kind of biological reproduction consequently underscore these conflicting lines. Alongside all strategies of manifesting the nation stand gendered implications. The institutionalization of selected invented tradition, which is informed by the continuous creation of a distinct idea of the nation, provides ground for the continuation and extension of narratives in which specific gendered dimensions are reproduced and reinforced.

Conclusion

The prism of women's rights activism provided a ground for the examination of nationalism and gender in Kyrgyzstan. The notion that women's rights activism is 'untraditional' points to the contrast of nationalist and traditionalist orientations to the extent that different ways of antifeminism can be observed. In this way, it can be argued that women's rights activism has a particular place in the nationalist discourse since it is perceived to stand in opposition to 'traditional' values and morals as well as a presumed stability. Rather, the feminist agenda seems to disrupt those proposed ideals by scrutinizing and challenging existing power relations. Looking at the underlying structures of gendered nationalism, different understandings of gender roles must be taken into account since they play a pivotal role in the ascription of social tasks and expectations. A key component of the relation between nationalism and gender in Kyrgyzstan is hegemonic masculinity, which comes along with gendered hierarchizations in a heteronormative framework. The ambivalent relation between women in their representative function of the nation, on the one hand, and the objectification of women, on the other, amplifies this component. The linkage between ethnicity and gender further illustrates aspects of intersectionality and extracts the specific context of Kyrgyz nationalism. The current strategies of nationalism entail severe implications. It has to be acknowledged that all strategies of manifesting the idea of the nation come along with gendered dimensions, which reveals the necessity of gender-sensitive research. Besides the gendered implications, the ethnonationalist framework is accompanied by the problem of the in- and exclusion of different groups, which could be a possible source for intrasocietal tension, specifically when the idea of the Kyrgyz nation is equalized to the state context. In the fast-changing environment of Kyrgyzstan, it remains to be seen how the applied strategies will sustain over time. In this light, the elaborated findings could serve as a connecting factor for future research in post-Soviet Central Asia.

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