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Social Media and Cross-Border Political Participation: A Case Study of Kyrgyz Migrants' Online Activism

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

Keywords: migration; political participation; social media; Central Asia; Kyrgyzstan

1. Introduction

The internet and social media have become the central means of communication and information distribution for people around the world. This is especially true for transnational migrants since their social networks stretch across various states and continents. In this study, I will investigate cyberspace as a political space where it is possible to observe migrants' political activities, attitudes, and preferences, as well as patterns of engagement in politics. Specifically, the goal of this research is to explain how, when, and why migrant populations connect with homeland politics in cyberspace and under what conditions online political activism spills over to real-world political action. Given that Kyrgyzstan has a high percentage of citizens residing abroad and, according to World Bank, is one of the most remittance-dependent economies in the world, the political, social, and economic importance of emigrants' engagement with the homeland cannot be overstated for the country (Sulaimanova 2017).

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

2. Defining Key Concepts: Diaspora and Political Participation

This study is positioned at the intersection of two social science sub-fields: studies of migration and political participation. In order to construct a theoretical framework that guides this research, it is important to define and conceptualize two key terms: diaspora and political participation. While the term "diaspora" is familiar to many and the concept has received a lot of scholarly attention, the exact definition remains elusive. In the most simplistic terms, diaspora refers to a part of a population living abroad or an ethnic community divided by state lines (King and Melvin 1999). However, not all ethnic minorities or immigrants and their decedents are necessarily part of a diaspora, since one of the key characteristics of a diaspora is a strong emotional and material connection to the homeland (Sheffer 1986). Moreover, a diaspora is a form of consciousness or a "space of imagination" that is socially constructed through political discourse (Berns-McGown 2008). The diaspora conscience harbors a hybrid identity that is tightly linked to the homeland through language, religion, and historical memory but at the same time also linked to the minority status in the host society (Safran 1999). The intricate and multifaceted concept of diaspora is further complicated by different experiences of migration and settlement. Political ideologies, interests, and grievances are shaped by migrants' socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, gender, social capital, legal status, and degree of integration in both homeland and destination societies (Werbner 2002; Sánchez Gibau 2005). Labor migrants, students, refugees, seasonal workers, and other groups all have different sets of political attitudes grievances and opportunities for political engagement (Basok 2004). Therefore, on the one hand, a diaspora is a complex organized community of co-nationals residing outside of the native state that share a social bond with each other; and, on the other, a diaspora is a network of people with diverse identities and interests that takes an active part in various aspects of the political and economic life of the homeland.

In the digital era, this hybrid identity transcends physical territorial delimitations; it is reproduced through new types of connectivity that allow individuals to publicly express their identity and political views (Kok and Rogers 2017; Adamson 2016). Digital diaspora refers to geographically dispersed compatriots who connect with each other on the internet for the purposes of personal or material benefit, such as matchmaking, information sharing, exchange, and assistance such as finding housing or employment (Brinkerhoff 2009). At the same time, the virtual space also provides a platform for political engagement, where migrants use the internet as a transnational public space where they construct discourse about history, culture, and politics, as well as organize real-life demonstrations, raise funds, discuss policy, and lobby the government (Bernal 2006). For many immigrant communities, the internet is an important medium of political participation through which a sense of citizenship and belonging is cultivated and developed (Georgiou 2013). The rise of the internet, social media, and digital technologies have accelerated the increase in the multiplicity of informal channels of socio-political activism across borders. However, who uses it for political participation and under what conditions remain unclear. Therefore, there is an acute necessity to carefully study the relationship between migration and political participation in the homeland politics.

Political scientists have long debated who participates in politics, how, and why. At the most basic level political participation encompasses two types of activities: voting and civic activism. Whereas the former is fairly straightforward, the latter subsumes a wide range of activities, including signing petitions, giving money to political groups, marching in rallies, and joining protests. However, it remains unclear whether social media activities also represent a form of legitimate political participation. Do social media groups function similarly or differently from conventional social organizations? Do they reinforce or displace offline networks? Social science scholars have two opposing views on the answer to these questions: some find that online engagement with political issues is no more than "clicktivism" or "slacktivism", meaning virtual "liking", sharing, commenting, and other forms of social media engagement is essentially useless since it does not produce any tangible policy impact (Morozov 2009; Gladwell 2011; Kristofferson et al. 2014). Yet, other

scholars argue that online activities constitute a legitimate form of political participation. They find that joining online groups helps marginalized populations overcome barriers to the formation of real-world offline social networks (McKenna and Bargh 1998), as well as helping those who otherwise would not be able to build extensive social ties, which naturally includes migrants who share a common national identity but are dispersed across vast geographies. Additionally, although online political activism may not have immediate policy implications, it leads to increased personal satisfaction, raises awareness, and places certain issues on the political agenda (Halupka 2014, 2018). Debates around online political participation are ongoing, and many questions remain unresolved: Can participation in virtual communities be reduced to "clicktivism"? Under what conditions does it spill over to the real-world?

The questions I posed above have been addressed empirically by a relatively small number of studies. For example, in his study of transnational activism among Romanian expatriates, Mercea found that anti-gold mining protests that occurred in 2013 were to a great extent coordinated and organized via Facebook and Twitter, and that this experience produced a collective identity for geographically dispersed but ideologically like-minded Romanians living abroad (Mercea 2018). Similarly, based on his study of migrants from Mexico, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic residing in the United States, Paarlberg argued that, although citizens living abroad are unlikely to turn out to vote or are sometimes deprived of such a right, they nevertheless actively participate in politics, not as voters but as fundraisers, lobbyists, and influencers (Paarlberg 2017). At the same time, the internet has for a long time now played an important role in facilitating the activities of migrant civil community organizations. Websites and social media groups were designed to provide migrants with relatively easy and quick access to information (such as job ads, online marketplaces, dating, etc.) and connections with other members of the diasporic community. For instance, the E-Diaspora Atlas project provides a map of networks connecting various migrant-run websites operationalized as nodes. In the last few years, as social media usage via smartphones has proliferated, groups on Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram, and other similar apps have become the most significant tool for online community building (Kperogi 2020; Kozachenko 2021; Al-Rawi and Fahmy 2018). As the literature on migrant transnational activism and citizenship continues to grow, new theories and debates have emerged, but many critical questions remain unclear. Specifically, under what conditions do migrants engage with virtual communities politically? Under what conditions does online participation spill over to real-world social mobilization? The pursuit of answers to these questions is what motivated this research project.

3. Social Media Activism among Central Asian Migrants

Central Asian migrant communities and their activities have attracted a significant amount of scholarly attention, especially in recent years as the number of Central Asian migrants in Russia, Europe, North America, and the Middle East is growing (Urinboyev 2017; Tregubova and Nee 2020; Demintseva 2020; Schenk 2020). The Kyrgyz migrant community in Russia has been well-documented, particularly when it comes to the heterogeneity of its diasporic associations and their functions (Filatova 2019). For instance, in Moscow there are dozens of various Kyrgyz migrant organizations that have different membership and objectives. Some larger well-organized groups have clear political motives and view migrants as potential voters and, as such, actively mobilize migrants during elections, even busing them to voting stations in cities across Russia (Doolotkeldieva 2021b). Although extant studies have made important contributions to scholarly understanding of the role that these diaspora organizations play in political mobilization, the role of informal migrant networks that exist in the virtual space of social media remains unclear. Some scholars have argued that Kyrgyz migrants in Russia are unlikely to engage in politics for two reasons: (1) lack of opportunity, including lack of free time, loss of citizenship, and limited access to information; and (2) lack of political opportunity structure in Kyrgyzstan stemming from, on the one hand, a minimal effort by political parties to secure migrant votes and,

on the other hand, the low political efficacy of migrants and their unwillingness to participate in politics due to widespread corruption and nepotism (Ruget and Usmanalieva 2011). In their more recent work, Ruget and Usmanalieva investigate whether the use of digital technologies, particularly smartphones, politically empowers Kyrgyz migrants in Russia. The findings show that while Kyrgyz migrants use mobile phones to connect with compatriots aboard, as well as their family and friends at home, they do not use smartphones to engage in political discussions or activities either at home or in their host country (Ruget and Usmanalieva 2019), which confirms the authors' earlier conclusions about the low level of political activism among Kyrgyz migrants.

The use of smartphones and social media was also at the center of Urinboyev's research on the transnationalism of Uzbek migrants in Russia. He argued that smartphones enable migrants not only to keep in touch with their families and friends back home but also to build a "telephone-based Uzbek mahalla" in Moscow (Urinboyev 2021). Similar to Kyrgyz smartphone users in Moscow, Uzbek migrants also gain access to information about jobs, documents, residence registration, and work permits via social media apps. Urinboyev argues that smartphone communication allows migrants who originate from the same village or neighborhood to recreate social relations even if these individuals may be thousands of miles away from home or from each other (Urinboyev 2021, pp. 89–113). In other words, smartphones and social media are technologies of transnationalism that allow migrants to establish a virtual place where their home village and fellow villagers in various parts of Russia are all present. Urinboyev further argues that these smartphone-based transnational communities represent a mode of everyday resistance to the repressive political environment in Russia (Urinboyev 2021, pp. 89–113); however, whether or how Uzbek migrants use social media for political engagement at home remains unclear.

The pioneering research on Central Asian migrants' online (and offline) transnational activities discussed above has made an invaluable contribution to scholarly understanding of the phenomenon. However, despite its undeniable relevance in today's political arena, there are still many open questions and debates about migrants' political participation via the Internet, particularly social media. Specifically, are virtual transnational communities limited to informal self-help exchanges and translocal/transnational social networks that help migrants cope with repressive conditions in the host country, or do they under certain circumstances become politically active in the affairs of the homeland? What conditions serve as catalysts for political engagement in virtual communities? Earlier research on transnational political practices demonstrated that such activism is often triggered by political crisis or natural disasters (Levitt 2001), and a number of case studies provided empirical explanations about these processes (Guarnizo et al. 2003); yet, little is known about whether and how such crisis conditions provoke online activism that spills over into the offline realm and leads to real political consequences. This study presents a case study of Kyrgyz migrants' transnational online-to-offline political engagement that occurs sporadically at times of severe political or social turmoil.

4. Research Methodology

This study utilizes an inductive comparative research design that aims to investigate the differences in political engagement among migrants from different host regions (including Russia, the US, the EU, and countries in the Middle East) and across different types of social media platforms: Facebook, VKontakte, and Odnoklassniki. I used a mixed-method approach that included software-assisted content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis of Kyrgyz migrants' virtual communities and groups on the three social media platforms mentioned above. I downloaded and analyzed textual data from the websites over the May 2020–October 2021 timeframe. These specific platforms were selected because they contain a large amount of publicly available content which is accessible to any Internet user. The reason for choosing only publicly accessible open groups is that, unlike private WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram, and other messenger apps that require member invitations, specific platforms selected for this study have a low barrier for migrants to join, so the

samples will include individual contributors with both high and low social capital, as well as different levels of social media usage opportunities and skills. The main limitation of this approach is that it does not capture all relevant virtual spaces and, thus, whatever results this study yields should be taken with a grain of salt since different categories of individuals depending on their age, class, gender, ethnicity, occupation, or other socioeconomic characteristics might be engaged in political conversations elsewhere beyond the sampled virtual spaces. A second key limitation of this study is that, since groups included in the sample are public, its members may be cautious about posting political content due to the fear of surveillance and persecution.

The first step of the project was to identify the relevant groups on Facebook, VKontakte, and Odnoklassniki using keywords such as "Kyrgyz", "Kyrgyzstan", "кыргыз", "кыргыздар", "кыргызы", "кыргызстацы", and "кыргызская диаспора". The search was limited according to three criteria: (1) the type of resource was limited to "groups" and "pages" on Facebook, "groups" in Odnoklassniki, and "communities" in VKontakte; (2) the number of members or subscribers had to be upwards of one thousand, i.e., had to reach to a substantial number of people; and (3) all selected groups must be public, meaning anyone can access the content freely. This selection process did not specifically target only explicitly expatriate groups since any group containing the nation or country name in Cyrillic or Latin languages could be included. All virtual communities that were identified in this manner are presented in Table 1. One of the challenges encountered during this process is that VKontakte and Odnoklassniki had groups with very high membership rates (and I suspect a large number of inactive users or bots) but were managed by one or two persons whose identity was concealed. A review of the posts in these groups revealed that their only purpose was the advertisement of goods and services and that no inter-member discussion actually occurred, so these groups or pages were omitted from the research sample. It is important to note that "pages" on Facebook that are run and managed by diaspora organizations were included in the sample, even though some of them had slightly less than one thousand members.

The second step of the analysis was an aggregation of all textual data from group discussions on each website. These data were categorized by social media platform and organized into three separate folders: VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, and Facebook. Next, I performed content analysis using NVivo software to calculate word frequency distribution and conduct key term searches. The content analysis was followed by a careful manual review of the posts, images, links, and comments in each of the groups for the identification of discursive patterns and their categorization with specific date stamps.

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

Social Media Platform	Name of the Group	Number of Members	Country	Year Created
Facebook Groups	Кыргызстанцы в Нью-Йорке-Kyrgyzstanis in New York	12.5K	USA	2015
	Kyrgyz Community in California	2.4K	USA	2013
	Chicago Kyrgyz	1.7K	USA	2015
	Кыргызстанцы зарубежом (Kyrgyzstani abroad)	33.9K	n/a	2011
	Kygyzclub Germany	15.7K	Germany	2011
	Kyrgyz club UK	2.0K	United Kingdom	2011
	Kyrgyz club-France	2.6K	France	2013
	Swiss Kyrgyz club	1.7K	Switzerland	2012
	Kyrgyz club UAE	11.4K	United Arab Emirates	2011
	Кыргызстанцы в ОАЭ (Kygyzstani in UAE)	4.7K	United Arab Emirates	2012
	Kyrgyz Diaspora in South Korea	2.7K	South Korea	2009
	Kyrgyz in Barcelona/Кыргызы в Барселоне	1.4K	Spain	2014
	Kyrgyzs in Chicago/Кыргызы в Чикаго	7.2K	USA	2014
	Кыргызы в Стамбуле(istanbul'da kirgizlar)	2.9K	Turkey	2015
	Кыргызы в Анталии (Kyrgyz in England)	4.5K	Turkey	2015

Table 1. *Cont.*

Social Media Platform	Name of the Group	Number of Members	Country	Year Created
Facebook Pages	Кыргызская диаспора Москвы и МО	2.6K	Russia	n/a
	форум кыргызских диаспор за рубежом	878	n/a	n/a
	Кыргызская Диаспора"Манас"в Республике Саха Якутия	548	Russia	n/a
	Кыргызская диаспора Ынтымак Республика Саха	561	Russia	n/a
	Кыргыз Диаспорасынын Коомдук Кенеши	1.4K	Russia	n/a
	Кыргызстанцы в США—Kyrgyzstanis in USA	3K	USA	n/a
	Кыргызстанцы за рубежом	2.2K	n/a	n/a
	Кыргыз биримдиги	925	Russia	n/a
VKontakte	Кыргызы в Москве (Kyrgyz in Russia)	4.4K	Russia	2013
	Кыргызы зарубежом (Kyrgyz abroad)	2.2K	n/a	2017
	Питерские Кыргызы! (Kyrgyz in St. Petersburg)	4.2K	Russia	2016
	Кыргызы Екатеринбург (Kyrgyz in Yekaterinburg)	2.8K	Russia	2016
	Кыргызы в Красноярске. Кыргызстан/Помощь нашим (Kyrgyz in Krasnoyarsk/Helping our people)	2.4K	Russia	2019
Odnoklassniki	Кыргызы в России (Kyrgyz in Russia)	11K	Russia	2017
	Кыргызы в Новосибирске! (Kyrgyz in Novosibirsk)	6.8K	Russia	2016
	Кыргызы в Москве (Kyrgyz in Moscow)	9.4K	Russia	2018
	Кыргызы в Екатеринбурге (урфо) (Kyrgyz in Yekaterinburg)	4.7K	Russia	2019
	Кыргызы в Екатеринбурге!!! (Kyrgyz in Yekaterinburg)	3.3K	Russia	2014
	Кыргызы в ЕКВ (Kyrgyz in Yekaterinburg)	1.8K	Russia	2016
	Московские кыргызы (Moscow Kyrgyz)	1.3K	Russia	2015
	Новосибирск кыргызы (Novosibirsk Kyrgyz)	1.3K	Russia	2016
	Кыргызская диаспора"манас"в саха (якутии) (Kyrgyz Diaspora Manas in Sakha Yakutia)	1.3K	Russia	2015

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

5. Patterns of Everyday Engagement on Social Media among Kyrgyz Migrants

Emigrants comprise approximately 12% of the total population of the Kyrgyz Republic. According to the Department of External Migration under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in 2018 the largest share of Kyrgyz labor migrants were in Russia, followed by Kazakhstan, Turkey, the USA, Italy, Korea, Germany, UAE, and the UK (Table 2). The official records reflect only the number of people who crossed border and migrated through authorized legal channels; however, undocumented migrants also comprise a large share of the migrant population. Thus, the actual percentage of Kyrgyz migrants is likely over 20%.

Table 2. Most common destination countries by number of migrants from the Kyrgyz Republic (Department of External Migration 2018).

Destination Country	Number of Migrants
Russia	640,000
Kazakhstan	35,000
Turkey	30,000
USA	15,000
Italy	5500
Korea	5000
Germany	5000
UAE	3000
UK	2000

UAE, and the UK (Table 2). Regardless of their host country destinations, migrants from the Kyrgyz Republic are very diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, education, professional background, and immigration status. Both men and women are equally likely to leave the country in search of better opportunities. In 2016, approximately 40% of Kyrgyz migrants were women (Federal Migration Service of the Russian Federation 2016), and that number has significantly increased in recent years, although it is difficult to estimate precisely (Razmahnin 2021). Among many ethnic groups that reside in the Kyrgyz Republic, Russians, ethnic Kyrgyz, and Uzbeks are at the top of the migratory outflow list. In 2019, 2699 Russians, 2352 ethnic Kyrgyz, and 1244 Uzbeks left the country and re-settled permanently in another state. Russians are most likely to seek permanent residency and citizenship in the Russian Federation through the compatriots' program that allows descendants of Russian settlers in Central Asia to return to the homeland. Among ethnic Kyrgyz, the majority go to Russia as temporary labor migrants and find many legal and bureaucratic barriers for naturalization, which explains the statistics. Among ethnic Kyrgyz labor migrants, 85% tend to hail from the southern parts of Kyrgyzstan (Department of External Migration 2015), which can be explained by higher density of population vis-à-vis arable land and lower levels of urbanization and development, compared to the northern regions (Chekirova 2019b). While over half of these migrants graduated high school and over 36% hold university degrees, only 12% work in their area of specialization. In Russia, the majority of Kyrgyz migrants work in construction and service sectors; in Kazakhstan, in agriculture and cotton farming, and in the US, EU, and UAE, it is not uncommon for highly educated individuals to work in lower skilled capacities; yet an increasing number also find work in highly specialized professional settings if they are fluent in the local language and possess the necessary credentials (Chekirova 2019a).

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

The analysis of word frequency distribution (Figures 1–3) shows that the topics discussed on all three social media platforms are quite similar and prominently feature employment-related content as signaled by frequently used words such as "работа" (work) or "жумуш" (work in Kyrgyz), "требуется" (needed), "зарплата" (salary), and "деньги" (money), as well as specific professions that are common among Kyrgyz labour migrants, such as "повар" (cook), "уборка" (cleaning), "такси" (taxi), and "доставка" (delivery). The second most prominent category is documentation and legal questions with keywords such as "документы" (documents), "паспорт" and "загран" (both referring to passport), "посольство" (embassy), and "помощь" or "жардам" (help in Russian and Kyrgyz), and, most recently, "COVID" and

"vaccine" since PCR tests and vaccine documentation have become commonly required for international travel. The third category includes questions surrounding housing as represented by frequently used words like "комната" (room), "район" (region or neighbourhood), "квартира" (apartment), "оплата" (payment, which may refer to rent), "метро" (subway), and "место" (place). Group members and users often discussed their own experiences with these three main categories of issues and shared informal knowledge about how to deal with or circumvent bureaucratic hurdles that many migrants experience with both home and host country authorities. Therefore, the exchange of informal knowledge among members of migrant communities and networks is undoubtedly one of the main purposes in using the virtual space. These results are consistent with previous research on migrant usage of social media in general and that of Central Asian migrants specifically (Aricat 2015; Dekker and Engbersen 2014; Ruget and Usmanalieva 2019).

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

A deep dive into the discussions in these virtual spaces reveals other important patterns of transnational communication and activism that goes far beyond the typical apolitical self-help type of content. Specifically, some of the most "liked", shared, and commented on posts included those that promoted a sense of national pride and nostalgia for the homeland. For instance, on the Facebook page of the Kyrgyz diaspora in New York I observed a long discussion about the proper name of a popular salty dairy snack common all over Central Asia and some parts of the Middle East and usually referred to "kurut" in Kyrgyz or "kurt" in Uzbek. The post was meant to promote a snack product that was to be launched in the US market, and the intense discussion that this post elicited from the group members symbolically represents migrants' engagement with questions of their national identity. Similarly, posts and re-posts from news agencies and other websites that promoted a sense of national pride gather significant attention. For example, personal stories of Eduard Kubatov, the first Kyrgyz person to conquer Everest; Vladislav Shuliko who swam across Issyk-Kul Lake; Azamat Asangul, a Kyrgyz ballet dancer with a New York company; Kyrgyzstani UFC champion Valentina Shevchenko; and those of other prominent individuals from the homeland were received with many "likes", shares, and positive passionate comments. Additionally, posts about well-known Russian blogger Ilya Varlamov's videos about his visit to Kyrgyzstan, as well as those on the appearance

of Kyrgyz shyrdak (felt rug with a distinct pattern) in the Hollywood movie Christmas Chronicles II, also generated long and sometimes heated discussions. Such social media content that deals with Kyrgyz history, culture, and identity unquestionably generates the most involvement from group members, particularly if we compare these to posts about jobs or housing. In other words, although the majority of content on the social media sites sampled in this study does revolve around migrants' everyday issues, i.e., employment, housing, and documentation, these tend to be one-way advertisements or help-seeking requests, whereas substantial inter-member debates and conversations tend to occur on questions of identity and patriotism, albeit much less frequently. This finding is also consistent with the existing literature demonstrating how migrants' memories and celebrations of their homeland strengthen the sense of belonging and maintain connection with their ethnic, cultural, and national identities (Chari 2014; Chan 2005).

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

Although significant discussion emerges on topics related to prominent national "heroes", as well as Kyrgyz history, culture, and identity, the results of the analysis also show that migrants are not likely to participate in, initiate, or continuously engage in explicitly political conversations on the selected social media platforms. Explicitly political messages were relatively rare and generally limited to two scenarios: they are either publicized by the administrator(s) of the particular page or group, especially if managed by a formal diaspora organization, or they are genuine political discussion and calls for action emerging among members during specific crisis situations in the homeland. Some groups and pages on Facebook, VKontakte, and Odnoklassniki are managed by specific diaspora organizations, which means that the role of the administrator is to control the page settings and decide whether members can add posts and which posts get published, ignored, or deleted, as well as who can become a member of the group and who is excluded or expelled. For example, the Council of Kyrgyz Diaspora is a civil society organization registered in Russia and it runs pages on various social media platforms, including Facebook. The organization uses the virtual space to spread the word about the organization's activities, including events, news, and services. The social media page highlights how the organization works closely with the Kyrgyz embassy, as well as other government agencies both in Russia and in Kyrgyzstan as evidenced by pictures with prominent government officials and re-posts of content from state-run media sources. Although the page has over 3500 followers, their level of engagement in discussion is minimal: the posts can be added only by the page

administrators, most posts have few likes and even fewer shares, and there are usually no comments underneath them at all. Similar patterns can be observed on other social media pages run by diaspora organizations such as Burimdik and smaller regional diaspora organizations, such as Yntymak and Manas in Yakutia, Russia, or the Kyrgyz Community Center in Chicago. Therefore, in these virtual spaces the information flows from the administrators, i.e., the leadership of the diaspora groups, to their online followers. In other words, while the social media groups discussed previously are organized horizontally so that all members can and do initiate and participate in the discussions and sharing of informal knowledge, the pages that are run by formal diaspora organizations tend to be organized vertically, meaning that members cannot create content but rather consume it passively.

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

Before delving further into the second scenario, it is important to point out several critical caveats to the argument. Firstly, since the research scope of this study is limited to publicly open social media groups and pages on three social media platforms, it is quite possible that intense political activism among Kyrgyz migrants occurs elsewhere outside these channels. In fact, there is ample evidence to suggest that migrants utilize messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber, and the like, for various types of organizing purposes. However, access to these channels might be limited to only those who have a relatively high level of social capital and are already well-connected within the diaspora network since chats and groups on all these apps require invitation, or at the very minimum, are not searchable, which means that joining such groups requires knowledge of their existence. This leads me to the second important caveat: the acknowledgement of diversity within the Kyrgyz migrant community and recognition that, based on their socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, profession, gender, and other factors and experiences, migrants may, firstly, have different political grievances, and secondly, utilize different parts of the internet to express their grievances. Additionally, there is likely a significant number of Kyrgyz migrants who have little time, resources, or interest in joining online groups and discussions; and on the flip side, many transnational political activists conduct community outreach and organizing in the "real world" outside of the virtual space. Thus, although the research design of this study attempted to incorporate different members of the Kyrgyz migrant community as broadly as possible by focusing on open and public groups on

the most commonly used social media sites, there are undoubtedly large segments of the migrant population that have been excluded from the analysis. Finally, the third key limitation of this study is that it does not account for the impact of the state in social media activities. Specifically, authoritarian states suppress the expression of political opinions on social media in a variety of ways. Some strategies may be as straightforward as blocking access to certain platforms, or they could be more subtle, such as cultivating an environment of fear that imposes self-censorship. Moreover, online political debates are muddied by state-sponsored bots and trolls, which further complicates the inquiries into the substance of the online conversation and activism. Fully acknowledging the limitations imposed by these problems, in the next section, I turn to the discussion of online political activism in times of crisis.

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

The COVID-19 pandemic that has spanned the globe since the winter of 2019 reached its peak in Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 2020. During the so-called "Dark July" the number of daily new coronavirus infection cases reached over 1000, which is a very high number for a country with a population of 6.5 million. The poorly equipped healthcare system was unable to adequately meet the needs of the rapidly increasing number of coronavirus cases and a great deal of responsibility fell on the shoulders of young volunteers and medical students (Ayzierk 2020). The public health crisis triggered a burst in migrant participation on Facebook and other social media platforms. In response to the crisis, migrant social media groups created and shared GoFundMe and other fundraising initiatives targeting different aspects of the fight against the pandemic at home. For example, one such initiative organized by a Kyrgyz migrant in the United States gathered money for meals and transportation for medical staff in Bishkek; another initiative, also from the US, collaborated with a local activist (and politician) Tilek Toktogaziev to research and install prototypes of oxygen machines made from oxygen balloons in place of the proper equipment which was not readily available at the hospitals and COVID-19 units. Moreover, Kyrgyz migrants from all over the globe, including the US, the EU, Turkey, China, and Russia, used social media in the same way: to organize, fundraise, and purchase medical equipment and manage logistics and delivery of it to different regions, cities, and villages in Kyrgyzstan. The pandemic gave rise to an unprecedented level of activism that transcended continental borders, simultaneously utilized different types of social networks for the same projects, and thinned the line between online and offline participation.

The reaction of migrant communities to the public health crisis revealed three key trends. Firstly, this case study shows that under rare conditions of crisis, migrant communities utilize social media groups for tangible political action. While at first glance it may seem like community organizing is a top-down affair, meaning diaspora leaders mobilize migrant populations, genuine grassroots initiatives are not uncommon, but they require a sense of urgency to gain traction. Secondly, this example also demonstrates that online activism may take different forms and it cannot be simply reduced to the notion of "clicktivism". For example, fundraising projects to purchase medical equipment required continuous engagement via multiple different social media platforms and websites, such Facebook for raising awareness, WhatsApp for coordinating logistics and distribution, and Instagram to showcase the results which, of course, happened in the real world. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, social media has become an essential tool of transnational collective action. In this case, once a fundraising project started, the contributions to it could be made globally by anyone who holds a credit or debit card. Moreover, in several instances, such campaigns that originally started in one country, like the US, would spend the money they gathered in another country, often in China or Poland, where medical supplies are cheaper. Therefore, the COVID-19 crisis and the government's inability to combat it provoked the emergence of complex networks of migrant activists that required

online–offline collaboration among many individuals in different countries, including the homeland.

On 4 October 2020, during the parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan, observers noted a series of irregularities including busing, fraud, and vote-buying. The following day, President Jeenbekov asserted that the elections had been democratic and transparent, which sparked protests as an increasing number of people gathered in Bishkek's Ala-Too Square. Amidst the protests, political prisoners, including Sadyr Japarov, were released and brought to the Square. Just a couple of days later, Japarov was the self-proclaimed Prime Minister and, with the firm backing of his supporters, has remained in power ever since. In January he was elected the President of the Kyrgyz Republic. Sadyr Japarov's incredible rise to power has often been attributed to his popularity on social media. Journalists and scholars alike pointed to Japarov's immense social media presence as one of the main ingredients of his political success (Doolotkeldieva 2021a; Baialieva and Kutmanaliev 2020; Ismailbekova 2021). In one of his interviews, Japarov claimed that he planned the revolution from his prison cell[2] by creating groups on various social media websites, such as Facebook, Odnoklassniki, and Instagram, as well as messenger apps like WhatsApp to spread the word about his political views and gain loyal followers. Japarov estimated that at the time he had more than ten thousand contacts in his cell phone and he curated more than 50 social media groups. Currently, there are dozens of Japarov fan pages across various social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp, among others, with sometimes tens or even hundreds of thousands of members and followers. Some YouTube videos featuring Japarov received hundreds of thousands of views within the span of a few days that October. However, the comment sections of these social media pages are filled with bots and trolls who spread distorted news and conspiracy theories about anti-Japarov politicians, activists, and civil society organizations, as well as harassed and intimidated users who posted anti-Japarov comments on social media.

Migrants comprise a significant proportion of Japarov's supporters both online and offline (Ryskulova 2021). In fact, the majority of members in Japrov's right-wing nationalist conservative Mekenchil Party that was founded in 2010 were labor migrants. Today, among the most active users of pro-Japarov Facebook pages are Kyrgyz migrants from Russia and Kazakhstan, who eagerly announce their support for the new leader (Esenmanova Nurgul 2021). These findings are corroborated by my analysis of social media groups. Although there was a good amount of support for Japarov in these conversations, there were also many voices questioning his legitimacy and authority. Therefore, the political crisis of regime change triggered online political activism not only in Japarov's fan pages but also in previously apolitical social media groups, such as those included in this study.

The burst of online political activism during the October revolution revealed two important dimensions of Kyrgyz migrants' participation in homeland politics. Firstly, it underscored the sensitivity of labor migrants to populist discourse. Although migrants comprise a large pool of potential voters, few contenders for political office were able to successfully appeal to these populations. This is not to say that migrants were not incentivized to vote through clientelist or coercive mechanisms, but Japarov's approach was novel because of its ability to convey populist ideas through social media networks and to organize strong grassroots following. Japarov, like many other right-wing populist leaders, capitalized on the feelings of deprivation, humiliation, and marginalization among the poor and especially those who were forced to leave their homes due to economic hardship. The typical Manichean outlook of a world divided into "good people" and "corrupt elites" is at the center of Japarov's discourse and it resonates with many low-income labor migrants. Yet, there was also significant push back against Japarov's rapid rise to power, primarily from more liberal segments of Kyrgyz migrant populations, such as students and young professionals. The political debates that emerged in social media groups during the events of the October revolution accentuated the diversity and polarization among migrants of different political ideologies and socioeconomic status. Therefore, this case demonstrates that engagement in virtual political activism through posts, likes, shares, and comments

can be a powerful tool of political mobilization, and perhaps one of the few tools of political participation in the hands of migrants, that can go as far as helping tear down old regimes and bring about new ones. Although the social media space is susceptible to being overtaken by populist illiberal messages, especially with heavy presence of bots and trolls, it can also become a space where common and rival political identities are forged and developed.

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

This final case represents a form of political action that was prompted by ideational factors but required collaboration across geographies and across online–offline modalities to become realized. In the case of the October Revolution's online mobilization, Japarov's populist framing of ideas played a crucial role; during the conflict on the Kyrgyz–Tajik border, nationalist ideas were amplified by pro-Rahmon narratives in Russian state media, prompting activist both in Kyrgyzstan and abroad to express protest on social media. The environment of competing narratives created the sense of urgency to raise global awareness which motivated online protests and petitions, which spilled over to the streets of Berlin, Paris, Rome, and San Francisco. Furthermore, similar to humanitarian projects during the COVID-19 crisis, the border conflict prompted collaboration among many individuals across different geographic locations that engaged in fundraising for reconstruction of villages and homes destroyed in the attacks. Undoubtedly, this is not a unique case of transnational activism during an armed conflict. Many other immigrant communities, most recently the Ukrainian diaspora, have been particularly impactful in organizing transnational online–offline campaigns for global awareness and humanitarian action.

7. Conclusions

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

Online political participation that gives rise to transnational collective actions with real-life political and social consequences has several important implications. First it becomes abundantly clear that rapid development of Internet and cell phone technologies, as well as the growing influence of social media, creates new channels for meaningful political engagement with homeland politics for migrants who reside hundreds and thousands of

miles away from their states. Virtual activities cannot be discounted as "clicktivism" but rather should be viewed as a legitimate form of political communication that is capable of inspiring collective action. Secondly, the type of transnational online–offline collective action discussed in this article has ideational underpinnings. These ideational factors, such as majoritarianism and a Manichean outlook, can be polarizing; but at the same time, other ideas, such as nationalism and humanitarianism, can be unifying and can serve as foundations for the inception of a grassroots virtual diaspora community. Nevertheless, for ideas to be translated into actions, crisis conditions are necessary.

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

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Notes

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

[2]   Prior to the October revolution, Sadyr Japarov was incarcerated for kidnapping; he was released during the protests.

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