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Gendered Nationalism and
Feminist Activism in Kyrgyzstan:
A Thematic Analysis of Online Debates

MASTER'S THESIS

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Gendered Nationalism, Feminist Activism, Kyrgyzstan, Nationalism, Netnography, Gender Relations, Thematic Analysis

The thesis analyses the Kyrgyz people's perception of feminist activism expressed in social media debates. It aims to explore if and how these perceptions relate to gender roles and are influenced by nationalist ideas. After conducting a thematic analysis of data gathered using observational netnographic approach (Facebook comments), the thesis presents the main themes that were distinguished based on the theoretical concepts of nationalism and gender.

This thesis showed that in the case of Kyrgyzstan, challenging traditional gender roles in support of women's emancipation can evoke various reactions from supportive to extremely hostile expressed by both women and men. Part of those reactions also relates feminist initiatives to a broader narrative of national belonging and its implications. The thesis also demonstrated that conservative opinions assert that the nation's dignity, its women's purity, values and moral standards are threatened by the feminist movement, which, according to them, promotes perversion and is operated by the West. However, the opinions that advocated for cultural change represented a different kind of patriotism: although national traditions are important, the nation will remain 'backward' if gender equality is not achieved, therefore, feminist actions must be supported.

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Introduction

According to the United Nations Development Programme, Kyrgyzstan is one of the leading countries 'in developing a national legal framework on women's rights in compliance with international standards' in the Commonwealth of Independent States (UNDP 2018, 6). However, despite the adopted gender-sensitive laws in social, political and economic spheres, equality remains difficult to accomplish due to traditional perceptions of gender roles. Women continue being subjected to various forms of discrimination and abuse such as domestic violence and bride kidnapping[1]. Even though bride kidnapping was outlawed in 2013, the Kyrgyz Internal Ministry figures showed that over the years 2013–2018 there had been 895 cases of abduction reported to the police, but only 168 were brought to court (Eshaliyeva 2020). The abductions persist and are underreported due to their perception as Kyrgyz tradition. Speaking of domestic violence, based on the records from the Internal Ministry, in 2015 the police registered 1,736 domestic violence cases. Out of 6,145 registered cases in 2019, just 649 resulted in criminal cases (Margolis 2020). Although the number of reports has risen, domestic abuse is also under-prosecuted and underreported, mainly because women are shamed for that (Akylbekova 2018). They have to compromise their safety to maintain a decent public image.

Women's situation in Kyrgyzstan encourages feminist activists to create various actions and performances in an attempt to call public attention to the discrimination and abuse experienced by women and initiate change. However, with patriarchy still being deeply entrenched in society, the feminist movement is under rigorous public scrutiny and often receives many negative comments.

On March 8th, 2020 participants of a parade to support women's rights were attacked by masked men and detained by the police. This event sparked a heated debate with some people defending the women, and others saying that they should not have gone out in the first place. They also insisted that such parades should not take place in Kyrgyzstan (Kaktus Media 2020). In 2019 some exhibits were censored from

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[1] *Ala Kachuu* in Kyrgyz, bride kidnapping is perceived as a tradition, where a woman is abducted by her future husband, brought to his family and forced to marry. It often results in rape, domestic violence and psychological trauma (Amnesty 2018).

the first feminist exhibition Feminnale[2] by the Ministry of Culture for being 'inappropriate' because there was nudity involved. Many people expressed their disapproval of Feminnale's performances by calling them 'shameful' and 'aimed against the Kyrgyz nation' (Mamedov 2020). A year earlier, a similar reaction had been triggered by Zere Asylbek's video for her song *Kyz* (Girl), where she promotes women's rights to dress and express themselves freely. Many people were outraged at the video, mainly because she appeared in it wearing a bra (Ashakeeva 2018).

These three events are peculiar because even though their main focus was on women's rights, they evoked various discussions about Kyrgyzstan's culture, tradition and worldview in general – a national debate. 'The Context of the Feminist Actions' presents a more detailed description and explanation of how the performances are related. They were chosen to analyse Kyrgyz people's reactions to and opinions of the feminist actions because they received a lot of public attention, and are part of a movement that fights for women's rights, safety, and seeks to ensure that women in Kyrgyzstan have freedom of expression.

Research Question

As will be explained further in the introduction, some researchers link Kyrgyz nationalism with a restrictive understanding of women's role in society, a patriarchal view of gender norms and a particular image of how a true Kyrgyz national, especially a woman, should look and act (Megoran 2010; Handrahan 2012; Suyarkulova 2016). However, it is not clear how these views of gender relations informed by nationalist ideas of conformity to a specific set of social norms are reflected in people's opinion on women's most recent attempts to speak out their minds and express their concerns. This brings us to the **main question** of the paper: how do nationalist ideas shape the views on gender roles in Kyrgyzstan and affect people's perception of feminist actions? How does it operate as a tool against gender equality? What is the link between gender and national sentiment in present-day Kyrgyzstan?

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[2] In some news sources Feminnale is spelt as Feminale. The spelling in the paper is based on the official posters and social media pages of the event.

Research Aim

Explore if and how nationalist ideas shape the perception of gender roles and people's views of feminist performances.

Research Object

Kyrgyz people's opinions expressed online in comments under posts about the chosen feminist actions (Feminnale, Zere Asylbek's video for the song *Kyz* and the events on the 8th March).

Research Objectives

1) To examine the features and interrelation of nationalism and gender studies.
2) To determine Kyrgyz people's attitudes towards feminist innitiatives through the distribution of their online reactions to the chosen feminist actions (Feminnale, Zere Asylbek's video for the song *Kyz* and the parade for women's rights on March 8th).
3) To identify the main themes and traits of nationalist ideas that shape the perception of gender roles through common expressions, references, comparisons etc. that are used by the research subjects in reaction to the feminist actions.

Research Methods

To answer the main question of the thesis, it was chosen to conduct a thematic analysis of people's opinions gathered from observational netnography of Facebook comments under posts that are related to Zere Asylbek's song Kyz, Feminnale and the events on the 8th March 2020.

Netnography

Online qualitative analysis allows ethnographers to move beyond their traditional ways of learning about the people and their world. It creates opportunities for scholars to obtain information without interfering with people's response, and allows them to extract ideas from users' opinions, which are directly related to their research question. A research method that focuses on social interactions in digital communication platforms is called netnography. It can be active, where the researcher

engages in online discussions with the research subjects, observational, meaning that the researcher only observes and analyses the online activity of the subjects or the combination of the two (Kozinets 2019). Netnography increases accessibility to the research population, which is especially 'useful for difficult to reach groups and sensitive research topics such as illegal actions, illnesses, health concerns and interests, stigmatic phenomena and groups (migrants, disabled, LGBTs, etc.)' (Addeo et al. 2020, 34).

Netnography is perceived differently by various scholars. Some say that it can never be as fruitful as traditional face-to-face communication (live interviews, field trips). We cannot observe the participants' movements and facial expressions that could add to the overall image of the question that we are trying to answer. Also, it is more difficult to create their social profile. However, there is a different side of this debate. When facing the researcher face-to-face, participants might be reluctant to state their honest opinion, especially if the topic is controversial. To protect their image, they might prefer to stick to more moderate views and expressions, avoid strong language and bold statements. Gathering the data online allows the researcher to be less intrusive and potentially capture the language of participants without the risk of disturbance. It is especially important in this research because the sensitive nature of the research question, the nationality of the researcher (Lithuanian) and sex (woman) might be perceived with caution that would lead to filtered answers.

Thematic Comment Analysis

The comment analysis was chosen because commenting on online posts is considered one of the most common ways of public online participation (Ziegele et al. 2017, 318). The comments will be treated as a socio-cultural text and analysed following the guidelines of thematic analysis defined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). It 'is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Ibid., 79). The authors distinguished six steps that are shown in Table 1, which have been followed in this research.

Table 1. Phases of Thematic Analysis

Phase	Description of the Process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Authors: Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke 2006, 87.

Social Media in Kyrgyzstan

According to the latest data (from February 2020), there are 2.5 million active social media users in Kyrgyzstan. It adds up to about 39% of the entire nation. Growth in social media usage grows by 33% annually, which means that more people are joining social platforms and studying their actions online becomes more relevant for the exploration of their opinions (Kemp, 2020). Another important reason for online media research is its growing impact on the way people's opinions are shaped. According to the specialists of the United Nations, the boom of social media in Kyrgyzstan has encouraged nationalist rhetoric in the country (Alkanova, 2018).

The most popular social media platforms in Kyrgyzstan are Instagram (2.1 million users: 47.4% female and 52.6% male) and Facebook (610 thousand users: 47.5% female and 52.5% male) (Kemp, 2020). A prominent AI-powered social media marketing company Socialbakers determined that Facebook pages, which gather the largest audience in Kyrgyzstan are news pages Azattyk Media (286,934 followers), Kyrgyz Azattyk Unalgysy (251,354 followers) and Kaktus Media (143,487 followers) (Socialbakers 2020). Azattyk Media and Kaktus Media produce their content in

Russian, whereas Kyrgyz Azattyk Unalgysy post in Kyrgyz. After reviewing comments under posts related to the research on Instagram and Facebook, it was decided to conduct the thematic comment analysis only on Facebook because, firstly, the ideas expressed on both platforms were overlapping, and secondly, it was easier to track the comments and create a basic social profile of a Facebook user. For linguistic reasons, only Azattyk Media and Kaktus Media posts' comments will be considered for the thematic analysis.

Research Ethics

People's privacy online has gradually become one of the most important topics that are discussed when addressing the use and research of social media. Especially after scandals like Cambridge Analytica, which have raised awareness of how people's footprint online can serve various parties in an undesirable manner without their consent (Isaak and Hanna 2018). Therefore, even though social media analysis is convenient and often full of relevant data, it also raises many questions in terms of ethics. Do we need to obtain users' consent? Is it allowed to quote them directly? How should we store the data? These are crucial questions to answer to conduct the research respectfully.

As mentioned earlier, Facebook will be used to gather empirical data for this research. Its Terms of Service (Facebook 2020) state that:

> You, other people using Facebook and Instagram, and we can provide access to or send public information to anyone on or off our Products, including in other Facebook Company Products, in search results or through tools and APIs. Public information can also be seen, accessed, reshared or downloaded through third-party services such as search engines, APIs and offline media such as TV, and by apps, websites and other services that integrate with our Products.

The users are informed that their public information (username, information shared with a public audience) can be seen and used by anyone, including people that do not have an account. There is also a separate mention of Facebook comments being visible to anyone that can view the post owner's account, except for the ones that are protected by the commentators' privacy settings. 'They can download, screenshot or re-share that content to others across or off our Products, in person or in

virtual reality experiences' (Facebook 2020). The only exception that is mentioned in terms of the platforms' usage and data collection is the prohibition to use automated means and to share anything misleading, discriminatory or unlawful.

Scholars' opinions on the ethics of social media research differ. Some say that platforms like Facebook and Twitter are usually completely open (if it is not a closed Facebook group or a private conversation) and people's posts and comments can be reached even without having an account. It means that this information is openly accessible and safe for researchers to use and quote, and that is why they do not consider explaining how the research was conducted (Langer and Beckman, 2005). Tuikka et al. (2017) concluded that out of 52 online ethnographies that they have examined, 70% had no explanation of their ethical practices. Other researchers argue that even if people post things online, it does not mean that they allow their thoughts to be used for someone's research and put in a specific context. Moreover, most of them do not read the Terms and Conditions before using an online service. American professor Robert Kozinets calls this phenomenon 'the consent gap' (Kozinets 2019, 172–173).

In the 3rd edition of his book *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research*, Kozinets presents a detailed explanation of complex ethical challenges in online ethnography (netnography). Some of the main questions that he raises are the vulnerability of the participants (age, the content of their comments), the openness of the source, the role of analysed platforms and international regulations (Kozinets 2019, 167–168). The author also presents the concepts of deontological and consequentialist ethics. Deontological ethics are based on moral absolutes – potentially all of the research subjects would like to be asked if their comment or post can be used in research. Consequentialist ethics, however, consider the result of an action – it must justify the means.

This research also follows Townsend and Wallace's (2016) advice for navigating and approaching social media research. The key areas of concern that they have identified are the distinction between public and private data; the necessity of obtaining informed consent; the users' anonymity and the risk of harm. Kelsey Beninger's et. al. (2014) analysis on how to improve research practices and make them ethically rigorous also focuses on similar issues. Both papers suggest that it is

necessary to consider the sensitivity of the research question, the openness of the platform and the traceability of the comments used without users' consent. The sites and pages used are public, therefore, it is not required to obtain any legal permissions to conduct the research. Terms of Service of the platforms have been reviewed, and users' rights will not be compromised. The sensitivity of the obtained information has also been assessed and all of the data sets were anonymised.

Three main rules to protect the users' identity will be followed:

1. All of the comments have been stored anonymously.

2. In the practical impossibility of obtaining direct consent for verbatim quotes, the original ones in Russian will not be used. The quotes in the text were, therefore, translated from Russian and presented anonymously. That way the original comments become impossible to trace.

3. User profiles have been reviewed to eliminate people under 18 from the data sample.

Literature Review

The notion of gender has been an important aspect of many recent works on nationalism in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia in general. Researchers are focusing on women's roles in society and the link between their image and the countries' national identity. For instance, American scholar Lori Handrahan (2012), whose research focuses on gender and ethnicity, explains that in Kyrgyzstan these two notions lie at the core of the country's political, social and economic structures. One of her main conclusions is that in the current transitional period of Kyrgyz democracy, women greatly suffer from gender-related restrictions. These restrictions are part of the country's strategy to recreate and preserve the nationhood of Kyrgyzstan by renegotiating its Soviet, Muslim and tribal identity and protecting it from the 'looming' Western influence.

Handrihan agrees with Kyrgyz scholar and activist M. Suyarkulova (she was one of the organisers of Feminnale), whose research will be discussed next, that it is common for Kyrgyz women to wear traditional clothes and veils in a particular way that does not resemble a hijab, which emphasises their national belonging. There is a

similar tendency in other parts of Central Asia, for example, Tajikistan. Women's bodies and attires become a way to oppose 'Islamic' culture and 'embody the interests of the "nation"' (Irby 2018).

Mohira Suyarkulova (2016) explains how clothes represent a national narrative of what a 'proper' Kyrgyz woman and man should look like. Authenticity, tradition and patriarchy (predominance of men in political, moral and other social spheres) embody the country's Muslim, tribal and Soviet heritage, and the national discourse does not support any experiments in people's style (which is promoted by the West). M. Suyarkulova highlights that women's dress is subjected to greater scrutiny and stricter rules because of their particular place in the society – they are responsible for the reproduction of the nation, and they symbolise its honour. According to Anara Tabyshalieva (2000, 55 in Beyer and Finke 2019, 318), women's discrimination is based on 'traditions of patriarchy, Soviet ideals and images from the West'.

Helge Blakkisrud and Nuraida Abdykapar (2017) focus on the creation of the Kyrgyz nation and the representation of women in state-approved school history books. Their article reveals that among prominent historical figures that represent the Kyrgyz 'self' there were only four women. The authors note that in the description of their deeds the women were portrayed in a masculine way or holding significant connections to men, which diminishes their achievements. Blakkisrud and Abdykapar conclude that Kyrgyz nation-builders have largely disregarded the historical contributions of women to the development of the Kyrgyz nation. This underrepresentation might have harmful consequences on how young girls perceive themselves both as individuals and part of their nation.

When discussing gendered nationalism in Central Asia, Fabio Belafatti (2019) acknowledges the reasons for the strongly gendered social relations, which are a consequence of the nation-building process and the patriarchal past of the countries. However, to avoid generalisation, he proposes to explore the link between gender and the ruling regimes of Central Asian countries (in this case Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan). The author concludes that women's representation and acknowledgement of their rights seem to depend on the extent to which their equal representation benefits the winning coalition or the person that rules the country.

The relationship between gender and nationalism in Kyrgyzstan has been explored from various perspectives: historical and institutional reasons that lead to women's subordinate role in national representation, the restrictive understanding of their style and limited portrayal in history books. However, no study focuses on women's struggles to fight for their rights: the most recent feminist actions and their gender-restrictive perception due to nationalist ideas that are embedded in society. That is why the aim of this thesis is particularly relevant to the further study of gender relations and nationalism in Kyrgyzstan.

Structure of the Thesis

The first part of the thesis presents the theoretical concepts of nationalism and gender that grounded and facilitated the analysis of people's perception of feminist actions. It is divided into four subchapters: the first one explains the origin and role of the nation in society; the second one defines the purpose and importance of tradition and 'Othering' in construction of national identity; the third section focuses on the definition of gendered nationalism and the last one presents the context of nation-building in Kyrgyzstan, which illustrates the significance of nationalism and tradition in the country. The second chapter presents the main results from the initial comment analysis focusing on the general distribution of codes and gender among the comments. The third chapter focuses on the themes, which describe the relationship between gender and nationalism in Kyrgyzstan, their description and explanation, based on the theoretical suppositions. The last chapter concludes the paper and gives recommendations for further research.

1. Theoretical Framework and the Historical Context of Kyrgyzstan

This chapter will introduce the overview and scientific debate over the theoretical concepts of the construction of a nation, the role of tradition and the meaning of 'Othering' in that process. It will also explore the relationship between gender and nationalism and present the nation-building process in Kyrgyzstan. The theoretical studies will help recognise and explain the main themes distinguished after conducting the comment analysis.

1.1. Nationalism and the Social Construction of a Nation

Various scholars have approached nationalism based on realist, primordial, constructivist and other paradigms. In this paper, nation and nationalism will mainly be defined based on the constructivist approach. Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1991) introduced the term 'social construction' into the social sciences as an explanation of the roles, concepts and representations within society that are produced by social interactions. From the constructivist point of view, nationalism depends on social change and people's experiences at a certain time in history. American sociologist Craig Calhoun states that nationalism can be understood as 1) a discourse that reifies the idea of a nation; 2) a project realised by social movements and 3) an ideology defining national superiority (Calhoun 1997, 6). This section will focus on the idea of a nation and theoretical discussions about it.

Irish political scientist Benedict Anderson perceives nation and nation-ness as socially constructed 'cultural artefacts' (Anderson 2006, 4). In short, he describes the nation as an imagined community that is limited and sovereign (Ibid., 6–7). Anderson explains that we will never know all of the members of our nation personally, but we still feel linked to them. Also, no matter how flexible or large a national community is, it has finite boundaries. Thai scholar Thongchai Winichakul also emphasises on the territorial aspect in his work on nationalism. He states that the 'geo-body' of a nation – the formation of its territory – is an essential element in the construction of the collective 'self' (Winichakul 1994, 16). Along with the territory, national sovereignty is a crucial element in the understanding of nations because they were born at a time

when hierarchy and divinity were no longer seen as unquestionable powers that can explain and provide guidance for all aspects of our lives – people needed new ways of linking their community (Anderson 2006, 36; Winichakul 1994, 81–83).

Anderson views the decline of the divine and hereditary ruler, capitalism, printing technology and linguistic unification as the main processes that encouraged the birth of nations. The printed language created a sense of antiquity and continuity – an integral part of the idea of a nation. It also united speakers of different dialects (i.e., 'Frenches') by using a standardised language and helped them see themselves as related[3] (Anderson 2006, 43–44). Political, religious and cultural ceremonies, the use of national media, museums and education maintain the vitality of national consciousness (Mayer 2000, 3). Rogers Brubaker argues that instead of viewing nations as 'enduring collectivities' and using a 'substantialist approach' to define what they resulted from, which is the case in Anderson's theory, it is more productive to treat them as a practical category. He suggests that nationhood must be understood as a cultural and institutionalised form of state practices. It is relevant to focus on the social reality of the nation's happening rather than focusing on its theorisation and using it as a category of analysis. Brubaker also points out that nationalising policy is often undertaken by the elite to complete insufficient national attributes of a state (Brubaker 1996, 9–21), which also happened in the case of Kyrgyzstan. British-Ghanian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah takes this thought further by saying that it is important to 'recognise that nations are invented and you'll see they're always being reinvented' (Appiah 2018, 64). The idea of viewing nations as everchanging and dependent on various social circumstances, which has been expressed by all of the above-mentioned scholars, is crucial to understand the logic behind the national sentiment and its origins in Kyrgyzstan.

Speaking of nationalism in formerly colonised parts of the world, Anderson skillfully uses the notion of 'administrative pilgrimage', which is one of the essential processes that gave birth to nationalism in South America and is also relevant to understand the origin of the nations in Central Asia (Akiner 1998, 12–13). People's

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[3] Kyrgyz language was also one of the main elements, facilitating the idea of a common Kyrgyz nation. It was especially important in the early 1990s when the Akayev government used it as a tool to define independent Kyrgyzstan. Today, the main spoken language, especially in the cities, is Russian (Ferdinand 2016).

travels to the capital of their administration for work created a sense of unity and home. They became aware of their common linguistic and cultural traits. Anderson relates them to religious pilgrimages and rituals that inspire a continuity and common identity (Anderson 2006, 53–58). He also distinguishes three elements that were employed by the colonisers to understand their dominions better. Although he did not touch upon Central Asia, those elements are still highly relevant for its analysis:

1) Census – definition, traits and classification of a ruled community;

2) Map – clear geographical borders;

3) Museum – a traceable historical path that defined the dominion (Anderson 2006, 163–170). These ideas of what constitutes a nation and how one must define it come from a colonial perspective, however, they are still used in the construction of national consciousness by now independent states.

1.2. Tradition, Othering and Occidentalism as a Means of Reinforcing National Identity

People share their unique environment, cultural experiences, historical events and symbols that with time turn into common traditions. It becomes an influential part of their collective and personal identity and develops hope for a shared destiny (Anderson 2006, 80–81; Smith 2005, 62–5). Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger add to the debate of tradition, in a way that has been effectively used in the postcolonial context, by introducing the notion of the 'invented tradition'. According to the authors (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992, 1), this phenomenon is observed everywhere throughout the entirety of history and:

> is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.

The process of the invention is more active when there are social changes and the cultural reality of a community becomes insufficient – it must be adapted. It means that there are new reasons (new authorities, new communities and national arrangements, modern nation-states) that encourage the society to create traditions,

languages, even history, based on ancient materials that are sculpted using social engineering (Ibid., 6–7). These practices are often much vaguer than the actual old customs and their values are based on 'patriotism', 'loyalty', etc. The tendency of a vague definition of tradition yet a strong representation of patriotism is particularly important for the research because it was commonly observed in the analysed comments.

'Othering' is also a significant element in the definition of both personal and national cultural identity. During the development process of the 'self', we are creating a preliminary distinction between who we are and how we differ from people that are outside of our community – the 'others'. As we explore our similarities and differences, stereotypical images – collective constructions – are created to lay boundaries between 'us' and 'them' (Moore 2003, 14). Gradually, we might start projecting traits that we disapprove of onto that other group. Everything that we do not want to be becomes embedded in the image of the 'other'. Therefore, the imagined typical behaviour of the 'other' cannot be associated with 'us', it even appears threatening and hostile. The dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' establishes a convenient platform to highlight the importance of local values and righteousness of national policies. 'We' are hardworking, moral, and pure and 'they' are lazy, immoral, and perverted (Alexander et al. 1999, 75–80; Vuorinen 2012, 1–6): another tendency that was common among the analysed comments.

In postcolonial theory, 'Othering' is also one of the key concepts. Edward Said's 'Orientalism' (1978), which focuses on the construction of the 'Orient' (the East) versus the 'Occident' (the West) in the context of European imperialism, reveals that the knowledge production about the 'other' is used as means to legitimise domination, establish superiority and is closely connected to power relations. Said also briefly mentions Occidentalism, the conceptualisation of which was criticised by Joseph Massad because it was self-contradicting. Massad argues that Said seemingly views Occidentalism as an opposite of Orientalism yet it is not symmetrical because 'it lacks its power as a dominating or authoritative discourse and set of institutions' (Massad 2015, 85). He criticised Said's point of view and insisted that Occidentalism and Orientalism are both productive concepts in the studying of knowledge production because they equally presuppose each other.

Despite its subtended relations with Orientalism, there are different interpretations of Occidentalism in scholarly works. It is a relevant concept for this research because various references to 'the West' were frequently met in the analysed comments. According to Hanafi (1992), Occidentalism is a way for the East to recover after being subjected to the stereotyping by the West. He promotes the idea that Western culture should be studied from a non-Western point of view and useful practices could be adopted (while still carefully preserving the local identity of the East). Buruma and Margalit define Occidentalism completely differently – as a form of hostility against the West, 'the dehumanizing picture of the West painted by its enemies' (Buruma and Margalit 2005, 5). According to them, Occidentalism opposes Western ideals and values, modernity, capitalism etc. Both of these interpretations will be considered in the analysis of how the definition of the West is related to nationalism and gender in Kyrgyz people's opinions.

1.3. The Interrelation of Gender and Nationalism

In this research, gender is the element of analysis that focuses on men and women's participation in the construction of nationhood and their social relations in general. According to Nira Yuval-Davis, gender 'should be understood not as a 'real' social difference between men and women, but as a mode of discourse, which relates to groups of subjects whose social roles are defined by their sexual/biological difference as opposed to their economic positions or their membership in ethnic and racial collectives' (Yuval-Davis 1994, 20). Eve Sedgwick describes it as the 'social production and reproduction of male and female identities and behaviours' (Sedgwick 1990, 27). These concepts are relevant for the analysis because, as we will see, even though those differences are biological, they are further deepened by referring to cultural, societal and moral norms. Judith Butler describes this process as the institution of identity 'through a stylised repetition of acts' the centre of which is the body, its movements and appearance (Butler 1988, 519).

When it comes to the theorisation of nationalism, Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias raise an important issue, and that is its lack of attention to women's role (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989, 12). Feminist scholar Ann McClintock asserts that

'all nationalisms are gendered' (McClintock 1993, 61). However, because of a failure to realise that a nation is formed not only in the public sphere, which was usually dominated by men, but also comes from a private domain – precisely where women were located, this element has been ignored. For example, Anderson (2006) is addressing the race question, when discussing nationalism, but overlooks gender, which was affected in the same way. The importance of gender has been missed because of women's exclusion from public and civilised domains, which fed into the perception of women being less valuable members of the society. (Yuval-Davis 1997, 13–17) Language, tradition and community, together with historical, political circumstances and ideology are important for the creation of a nation, but it is crucial to acknowledge that it is 'women <…> who reproduce nations biologically, culturally and symbolically' (Ibid., 14).

Yuval-Davis defines women's role in the nationalist discourse as part of 1) biological reproduction that supports the idea of a nation's purity and, thus, its quality (*Volknation*); 2) cultural continuation – the idea of women as protectors and representers of tradition and honour (*Kulturnation*) and 3) citizenship in its broader sense, limiting women's ability and excluding them from the participation in public affairs (*Staatnation*) (Ibid., 36–58). The conceptualisation of these rules becomes a form of oppression and makes women's attempts to take control of their bodies unacceptable. They struggle to liberate themselves from traditional boundaries, clothes and rituals because the nation's future – its reproductive capacity and cultural strength – is challenged by women's emancipation.

As Joane Nagel insightfully notes, it is essential to acknowledge men as a gender category that both constructs and is constructed by national discourse. They have been ignored in this debate to recover from the insufficient representation of women in the initial study of nationalism (Nagel 1998, 243). Nagel explains that men are raised to be patriotic fighters that must defend their country's honour, and women are expected to support them and embody that national honour. Women's purity and sexuality are particularly important because they are responsible for the continuation of the nation and that is why their inappropriate behaviour brings shame to the entire country (Nagel 1998, 251–255). Tamar Mayer agrees with Nagel and highlights three main traits of a pursued ideal national narrative: purity, modesty and moral code.

These values are part of a national project that is often patriarchal, designed by the elite, and based on masculinity and heterosexuality. They are generally represented by women for the same reasons of pure continuation. Mayer (2000, 10) argues that:

> Representing women in this way guarantees women's inferiority, for the favoured members of the nation — the loyal sons — must defend our women's "purity," as well as the "moral code" of the nation. These men praise traditional roles for women but embrace for themselves practices which are based on modernity.

It is important to note that this notion of local 'pure' women is also used as an instrument to depict other nations as hostile because their women are 'immoral', which was commonly observed in the analysed comments (Ibid., 11–12).

The previous paragraph presented the logic behind and differences between male and female roles in national projects. S. Walby argues that with the societal changes brought by capitalism and the first wave of feminism, there was a 'transition from the domestic to a public gender regime' (Walby 2000, 529), especially in the West. It meant that women were no longer passive participants in the nation-building process, but they also started actively participating. The velocity and form of this transition vary from country to country, depending on their worldview, religion, education, traditions, and regime. Turkish researcher of gender relations Deniz Kandiyoti highlights a contradiction between the growing importance of citizen's rights and attempts to preserve traditions (Kandiyoti 2000, 492). This internal conflict leaves women's position in society quite undetermined because traditional duties restrict their will and opportunities to participate in public affairs (including feminist actions).

1.4. Nation-Building in Kyrgyzstan

Studies about nation-building in Kyrgyzstan clearly indicate the validity of using the constructivist approach for the analysis of Kyrgyz nationalist ideas. Over the centuries, the Kyrgyz tribes have been under the influence of many different powers. They became part of the Mongol Empire in 1207 and remained under their control in various forms for hundreds of years, the latest of which was exercised by the Dzungar tribe. In the mid 18th century the Dzungars were defeated by China, and the Kyrgyz

tribes became part of the Qing empire of China (Sahadeo 2018, 29). In the early 19th century the tribes were overrun by the Uzbek Khanate of Kokand, which reinforced the manifestation of Islam in the southern territories and gradually converted the northern tribes as well[4]. In 1867 the region of Alai (modern-day southern Kyrgyzstan) was annexed by the Russian empire. After the Russian revolution and the birth of the Soviet Union, the territory was gradually reshaped and reformed starting with the establishment of the Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast in 1924. The constituent Union Republic of the Soviet Union, the Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic was established in 1936. The Socialist Republic remained until August 1991, in which the Republic of Kyrgyzstan declared independence (Sinor and Allworth 2019).

These historical developments produced some of the main elements of the contemporary Kyrgyz national identity: the respect for the nomadic tradition, Islamic culture, post-soviet heritage and Western ideas, which either support or challenge its traditional ways. Before describing the Kyrgyz 'traditional ways', it is relevant to ask: when can we start talking about a common Kyrgyz national identity?

Until the 20th century, the Kyrgyz structure was tribal rather than national. Kyrgyzsness was not an imagined community, but a network of kinship ties. They could trace some sort of connection to all of their ancestors and define their communal belonging practically, unlike members of a national community, where a lot of it is imagined (Sahadeo 2018, 31) . It morphed into a modern nation only as a result of Soviet nationality policies. Even though nationalism and communism seem like contradicting ideologies, Russian-born American historian Yuri Slezkine explained that Lenin and Stalin's early strategy to establish communism and ensure the 'way to unity in content was diversity in form. By "fostering national cultures" and creating national autonomies, national schools, national languages and national cadres, the bolsheviks would overcome national distrust and reach national audiences' (Slezkine 1994, 420). It was necessary to develop and promote local cultural manifestations in their native language to help fight 'backwardness' of the nations and progress in a way that would facilitate their integration into the Soviet state. Soviet topographers, ethnographers and linguists crafted the Central Asian nations by

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[4] The Kyrgyz tribes were introduced to Islam earlier: between the eighth and twelth centuries, but before the rule of the Khanate of Kokand it was not the prevailing religion.

constructing their standard languages, folklore, borders and traditional costumes – actively 'invented' the nations. In short, the Soviets created republics that were 'national in form, but socialist in content' (Suyarkulova 2016, 249).

The ideological quest of the Soviets in Central Asia was based on the elimination of local social and political structures such as kinship systems and religious practices. A significant part of it was the emancipation of women, who were seen as oppressed due to their social and familial status and that could be enlisted as a 'surrogate proletariat' (Massell 1974). At the same time, they tried to win the support of male counterparts that were interested in keeping their patriarchal privileges (Kamp 2006, 72–78). Gradually, Soviet policy promoted laws protecting women against discrimination and provided access to education and work, which 'marked a sharp departure from the social and economic norms of a deeply religious and traditional society' (Lubin 1981, 182). However, this process was embedded in 'socialist paternalism' (Lubin 1984), where women were equal to men in terms of economic and political aspects of life, but at the same time motherhood was seen as their primary duty in society. This conflicting reality challenged the accomplishment of women's full social emancipation.

The collapse of the Soviet Union triggered two significant processes in Kyrgyzstan: 1) a policy of nationalism, which was implemented by the country's ruling elite and 2) rediscovery and, in many cases, reinvention of traditions. The new government made the establishment of a separate identity, which, according to them, was silenced by Soviet modernisation, one of its main priorities. American professor Eugene Huskey argues that this process was particularly difficult because, unlike some of the other post-soviet states, Kyrgyzstan lacked 'usable national history, with which to construct a new identity' (Huskey, 1999, 8). Although it was difficult to distinguish between historically authentic traditions and Soviet inventions, the first President of the Kyrgyz Republic Askar Akaev tried to 'revive' what he considered true, legitimate and ethnic Kyrgyz culture and traditions, which became essential for the maintenance of political power (Ibid., 15). One of the examples is the epic of *Manas*, a hero, who united the Kyrgyz people, which according to Akaev (2003) creates the basis for Kyrgyz national identity. In 1995 the government celebrated the 1000th anniversary of the epic even though officially it is dating to the 18th century.

Both processes mentioned earlier were carried through daily actions and representations, that in a way merged the understanding of the nation and women's role in it. The attempts to steer away from the Soviet past and ideology and restore the true Kyrgyz identity meant that 'the language of women's emancipation', which was associated with the Soviet rule, was replaced with gender hierarchy and women were actively encouraged and pressured by society to go back to their traditional roles (Kandiyoti 2007, 616–617). The quest for authentic national identity became one of the main components of the political process, which encouraged the propagation of patriarchal norms in public, political and religious spheres.

It is noteworthy that after the Soviets established the new borders within Central Asia, some of the distinct ethnic groups found themselves part of a different majority nation-state. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, there is a large Uzbek population living in the south of the country. The ethnic tensions led to conflicts in 1990 and 2010, which gave further rise to Kyrgyz nationalism. Marlène Laruelle (2012, 47) states that:

> What thus 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.

The presence of the minorities represents a threat to the sovereignty of the Kyrgyz state and the fact that they attack feminists for biding Western powers is another manifestation of the same logic.

Nationalism and gender believe that nations are socially constructed and the national identity of an individual is established through the practice of reinvented tradition and 'Othering': a perceived opposition against other hostile nations. Gender roles also reinforce national identity through the reproductional continuity that is taken care of by women and the protection of the nation and its traditions by men. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the practice of traditions and the reevaluation of gender roles throughout its Soviet and post-soviet history show that these elements were essential in the nation-building process and remain at the core of its current nationalist policies.

2. The Initial Results of the Thematic Comment Analysis

2.1. The Context of the Feminist Actions

This part will define the main themes and ideas of the feminist performances the reactions to which are the core of this study. It is divided into three subsections dedicated to each event. The section will help understand what unites them and what might have evoked the nationalist ideas, which will be explored later.

Zere Asylbek's Video For the Song Kyz

Zere Asylbek is a Kyrgyz singer and women's rights activist. Her song *Kyz* (Girl) that came out in 2018 (*Kyz,* Asylbek 2018) expresses a desire for women to be free to decide what they want to do with their lives, wear or say:

> I wish a time came, / A time where no one tells me /
> 'Don't wear this, don't wear that' – / Don't shout at me like that.

It seems that these lyrics are the main inspiration for the visual representation of the song. The music video is set at Issyk Kul – the biggest lake in Kyrgyzstan that is surrounded by Tian Shan mountains. It portrays seven women, including the singer, wearing different clothes. One of them is dressed in a traditional Kyrgyz costume, one looks like a tomboy, and another one is wearing a hijab. There is a girl, who is dressed in 'Western' clothes, and the singer herself is wearing a bra, a blazer and a short skirt. At the beginning of the video, all women have their outfits covered by black capes – arguably is an allegory for the societal constraints that follow them throughout their lives. The image of the mountains surrounding the women strengthens the message: the change cannot come from the outside, it has to be from within the country. The girls immerse themselves in water and dive out without the capes, which symbolises that they are free to look however they want (See Image 1).

Image 1. Zere Asylbek Kyz, Image taken from the video, 2018

The main idea of the song is that women have to be free to express and live their lives for themselves. In the video, this message is embodied through their ability to wear what they want, which shows the importance of this aspect of personal expression that the singer sees as being severely restricted in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. Proving just how real this restriction is, Zere was subjected to furious attacks and death threats primarily because of her outfit, which many saw as bringing shame to the Kyrgyz nation, and not because of the song's message.

Feminnale – the First Feminist Exhibition

Feminnale was the first feminist exhibition in Kyrgyzstan that took place at Bishkek's National Museum of Fine Arts in 2019 (Suyarkulova 2020). The numerous works of art and performances addressed issues of women's labour, sexual abuse, domestic violence, gender restrictions and bodily integrity. The paintings, installations, sculptures and performances showed different aspects of women's struggles.

The most debated and eventually censored works included a performance by Danish artist Julie Savery that wanted to point out a lack of rights for sex workers. She appeared naked and then slowly started putting on clothes. Among 'controversial' and later censored exhibits was Zoya Falkova's 'Evermust' – a punching bag shaped like a woman's torso, highlighting the suffering endured by victims of domestic abuse (See Image 2). Another censored artwork was a clothesline with embroidered

underwear, which featured the date of abortion legalisation in the USSR in recognition of women's right to abortion (Titova 2019).

Image 2. Zoya Falkova 'Evermust', Feminnale, 2019.

The exhibition triggered a considerable backlash. A nationalist group organised a protest against Feminnale displaying the slogan 'Nation above rights', which was feared to turn violent. The organisers were subjected to various threats (including threats of physical violence and murder) and insults, one of them was attacked by far-right radicals on her way to the museum. As a result of this immense pressure from the public, museum director Mira Djangaracheva had to resign (Najibullah 2019). After the resignation, former President Roza Otunbaeva made a public statement defending the exhibition and saying that the Kyrgyz people are acting like 'villagers', which also sparked resentment among many.

Mohira Suyrakulova wrote an opinion piece where she argued that the censorship of the Ministry of Culture, the attacks by the Kyrgyz nationalist groups and the public's attacks against 'aggressive feminism' are ways to disregard the problems that women are trying to highlight (Suyarkulova, 2020). As the analysis of the social media comments will show, the attempts to represent a woman's body the way women wanted and talk about the issues that matter to them were 'justifiably' repressed by referring to the traditions of the country and also its religion, even though Kyrgyzstan is a secular country.

Parade for Women's Rights on March 8th

The main message of the march for women's rights is to express a strong position against violence against women. However, Kyrgyz women that want to participate in this annual act of solidarity often face institutional struggles. Even though domestic violence is a painful reality of Kyrgyz women, the municipality of Bishkek often comes up with reasons to forbid the parade in the capital, push it to a later date, and later withdraw restrictions.

This year the parade was initially forbidden because of COVID-19 (even though there were zero confirmed cases at the time), whereas official gatherings and public celebrations were still allowed to take place (Djanibekova 2020). Local feminists believe that the parade was prohibited because it is associated with the LGBT community, which is not welcomed in the country (Bakirova 2020). Eventually, it took place on March 8th following the last-minute reversal of the ban. Shortly after the start of the parade, the women were attacked by masked men wearing traditional hats called *ak-kalpak*. Upon the arrival of the police, the men escaped, and approximately 70 women were detained (See Image 3). Among them were Zere Asylbek and Mohira Suyarkulova. Member of Parliament Elvira Surabaldieva tweeted that the participants should have given more notice to ensure their safety (even though it is an annual event) and that the violent reaction was to be expected because of rumours that the parade was going to promote LGBT rights (Djanibekova 2020). However, the organisers of the event had not made LGBT issues a focus of their event.

Just as in the case of Zere's video, anti-feminist activists used other issues as a pretest to avoid engaging with the actual problems that were being raised.

Image 3. Kyrgyz police detains an activist of the FEMEN women's movement on International Women's Day, 2020. Photograph: Igor Kovalenko/EPA

The three events are different in form but joined through their message: women must have the right to decide how they want to live and feel safe in their country. They also demonstrate that the government and nationalist-oriented sectors of the public disregard the problems because they are presented in a non-conformist, tradition-breaking way.

2.2. Comment and Code Distribution

The initial results of the analysis of the attitudes regarding gender and how it is influenced by nationalist ideas in Kyrgyzstan were centred around the distribution of comments across different codes and the gradual reviewing of their correlation. The analysis includes all of the posts and comments related to Feminnale, Zere Asylbek's song *Kyz* and the events of March 8th that could be found on the Facebook pages of Azattyk Media and Kaktus Media. The posts were searched by using keywords in Russian: *Феминнале (*Feminnale), *Зере Асылбек* (Zere Asylbek), *Кыз* (*Kyz*) and *8 Марта* (March 8th). There were **80 posts** found and **4,959 comments** analysed in total. The total number of comments indicated under the posts is higher because some of them are only visible to the users' 'friends' or obscured by the moderators. Table 2 shows how the posts and comments were distributed between Azattyk Media and Kaktus Media Facebook pages.

Table 2. The distribution of posts and comments.

	Zere Asylbek *Kyz*		Feminnale		Parade on March 8th	
	Posts	Comments	Posts	Comments	Posts	Comments
Azattyk Media	6	554	6	736	13	822
Kaktus Media	1	184	37	1,977	17	686
Total	*7*	*738*	*43*	*2,713*	*30*	*1,508*

Overall, Feminnale received the most attention from the public: 2,713 comments. Kaktus Media made substantially more posts than Azattyk media, reporting on every opinion and update in the story: 37 in total, which produced 1,977 comments. Azattyk Media only made 6 posts, focusing on the main news including the censorship of certain exhibits, the resignation of the museum director and the former President Otunbaeva's comments. These posts resulted in 736 comments. The second most reported story was the parade, with 1508 comments in total. There was no notable difference in the number of posts between Azattyk Media and Kaktus Media – 13 (822 comments) and 17 (686 comments) posts respectively. Overall, the least attention was given to Zere Asylbek's song *Kyz* that got 738 comments, with only one post from Kaktus Media (184 comments). Even though Azattyk Media made the same amount of posts on the song as it did on Feminnale, the former received fewer comments: 554.

The coding of the comments started by using six main codes that were later divided into subcodes. Here are the **six main categories** of opinions that were found among the comments:

1) **Conservative Views:** comments that urged others to protect national values by mentioning traditions, national honour and women that have to follow those traditions: 734 comments;

2) **Cultural Change Advocacy:** comments, which argued that there has to be a change in the way that women are perceived traditionally and that they have to be treated equally to men: 539 comments;

3) **Supporting Women:** comments that supported the feminist actions without relating them to national sentiments: 490 comments;

4) **Opposing Feminist Acts:** comments that were against the feminist actions without relating them to national sentiments: 427 comments;

5) **Kyrgyz language:** comments that could not be analysed because of the unreliability of the online translators[5]: 891 comments;

6) **Other:** comments that neither supported or were against the feminist actions: it included stickers, gifs, emojis etc: 1,878 comments. A significant number of comments were reactions to negative or positive comments, but on their own they could not be classified as belonging to one or the other category. Also, they did not introduce any new points that could be useful for qualitative analysis.

As mentioned before, the initial coding process showed the distribution of the comments and provided a general overview of the themes that were evoked by the commentators. Among the comments that carried meaning for the analysis, the largest one was labelled as 'Conservative Views' with 736 comments. The following category is 'Cultural Change Advocacy' with 538 comments. These two categories will be the base for further thematic analysis. The third and fourth categories were coded as 'Supporting Women': 490 comments, and 'Opposing Feminist Acts': 427 comments. These categories comprise opinions about the feminist actions (supportive and hostile attitudes respectively), which did not relate them to the national traditions of Kyrgyzstan. Even though they presumably correlate with people's views on tradition and the Kyrgyz nation, those comments could not have been speculatively included in further study.

It is important to note that the difference between the number of supporting and opposing comments is relatively small, especially in the 'non-nationalist' categories of 'Supporting Women' (n=490) and 'Opposing Feminist Acts' (n=427) (a

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[5] Even though the meaning of some words was clear (e.g., *Америка* (America), *уят* (shame), *салт* (tradition), due to a lack of context, they were not included into further analysis.

63 comment difference in favour of the support of the feminist actions). It indicates that the two Facebook pages that were selected for the analysis target various people and encourage the expression of different opinions. The difference between the number of comments in the 'Conservative Views' (n=736) and 'Cultural Change Advocacy' (n=538) categories is more prominent – a 198-comment difference in favour of conservative attitudes. Although this number is quite high, it is clear that the debate was not one-sided and monopolised by conservative commentators.

'Conservative Views' and 'Cultural Change Advocacy' codes

The in-depth analysis was continued with 1,273 comments within the codes of 'Conservative Views' and 'Cultural Change Advocacy' because those were the two categories directly related to the research question. 22 codes were created for the comments that had various nationalist implications. Table 3 shows the codes, their brief explanation and the number of comments (N) that were coded using them. Some of the codes naturally turned into individual themes because they had many productive comments that featured explicit opinions. Others were merged according to their common ideas.

Table 3. The Explanation and Distribution of Codes within the Data Set

Code	Explanation	N
Them versus Us	Explained in more detail in section 3.1.2.	232
Allegations of National Hypocrisy	Explained in more detail in section 3.1.3.	103
Kyrgyz State is Doing Well	Comments insisting that there is no need for feminist actions, because there are no issues in the country.	54
Kyrgyz State Needs to Be Defended	Comments insisting that feminist actions are threatening.	29
Kyrgyz Mentality	Comments either excluding and praising Kyrgyz mentality, which cannot accept feminist actions or calling it 'backward'.	48
Traditions and Values	Comments either praising national traditions and values, lamenting that they are being forgotten or insisting that they are overrated.	123
Nation Has More Serious Problems	References to political issues and corruption that are more important than women's rights.	93

Morality	Comments praising Kyrgyz moral standards, which cannot accept feminist actions.	34
Kyrk Choro	Comments either praising or condemning the nationalist organisation Kyrk Choro that were involved in some of the protests against feminist actions.	30
Nation (not) Above Rights	Comments either supporting the idea that women's rights should not be promoted if it contradicts the national values or condemning this idea.	32
Nudity Against Culture/ Not a Way to Fight	Nudity cannot be part of a national museum: it is a way to pervert the nation. Even if it is acceptable, it cannot be used to fight for women's rights.	131
Nudity is a Choice	Comments insisting that nudity in performance is normal and that it is a tool to call the public attention to important issues.	28
Feminists are Destabilising the Country	Comments discrediting the feminist actions because their only goal is to ruin the nation.	14
Women's Image/ Body /Clothes	Explained in more detail in section 3.2.1.	131
Women are (not) Mothers and Wives	Explained in more detail in section 3.2.2.	105
Women's Honour and Shame	Explained in more detail in section 3.2.3.	88
Women are Oppressed/ Disrespected/ Manipulated by Society	Explained in more detail in section 3.2.4.	147
Women Do not Want to be Protected by Feminists	Comments insisting that Kyrgyz women do not want to be represented by feminists.	16
Sex Workers	Comments either attacking sex workers and shaming them or defending their right to work and be protected by society.	15
Men are (not) Bad	Comments either defending Kyrgyz men and saying that they would never hurt women or blaming them for women's struggles.	15
LGBT	Comments that brought up LGBT community into the discussion either by attacking it and describing it as a threat to the Kyrgyz natio or insisting that all people are equal and should be respected.	91
References to Islam	Comments either referring to Islam in Kyrgyzstan, which cannot justify feminist actions or insisting that Kyrgyzstan is secular and not an Islamic state.	67

2.2. Opinions Expressed in Relation to Gender

When it comes to the definition of the social profile of the commentators, the only two pieces of information that were not beyond the reach of privacy settings were the users' name and sex. Initially, various personal details (age, city, marital status, education, etc.) that found on the user's profiles were coded as well, but due to the inconsistency and unreliability of that information, they were excluded from the analysis.

Three codes were used to analyse users' sex ratio:

1) Male – a user that had a clearly identifiable male name and/ or indicated his sex as male: 2,343 comments;

2) Female – a user that had a clearly identifiable female name and/ or indicated her sex as female: 2,409 comments;

3) Unidentified – a potential troll (user that causes distress), fake account or name that cannot clearly fall into either male or female category: 207 comments.

The number of male and female commentators is balanced: 2,343 and 2,409 users respectively. There were 207 unidentifiable comments because the commentators used unusual symbols, words, and abbreviations in their usernames, and used wallpapers from the internet as their profile pictures. It is possible that among the coded male and female users there were some fake accounts as well, but unfortunately, there was no way to check their authenticity.

The sex ratio was further analysed within the main two categories of the research: 'Conservative Views' and 'Cultural Change Advocacy'. Chart 1 shows the distribution of male and female commentators.

Chart 1. The sex ratio among 'Conservative Views' and 'Cultural Change Advocacy' categories.
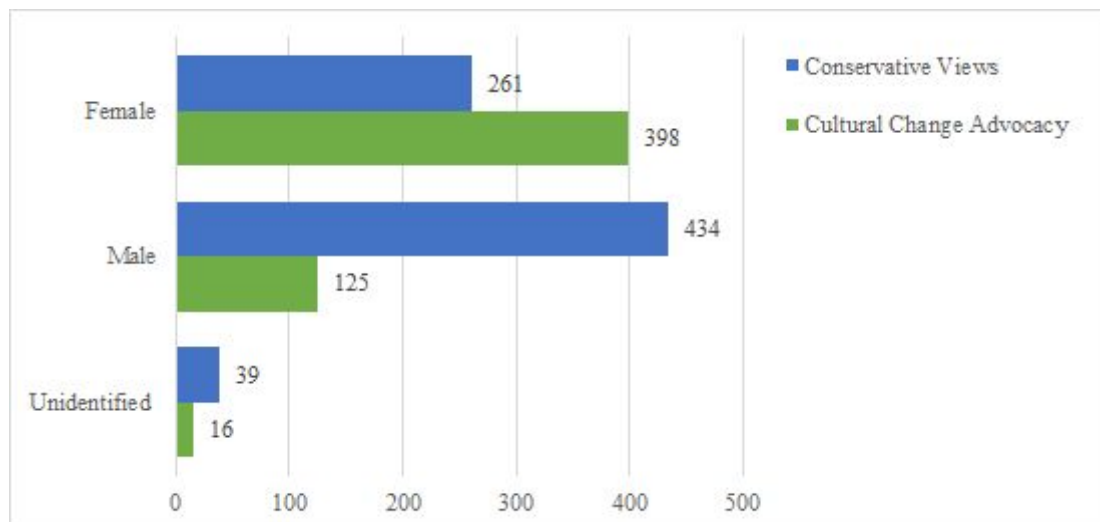
The ratio within 'Conservative Views' is 434 male versus 261 female and 39 unidentified users. It means that more men expressed their conservative views than women, but there was still a significant number of female users who supported tradition. The situation within 'Cultural Change Advocacy' is quite different. The balance is 398 female versus 125 male commentators and 16 unidentified users. There were notably more female than male users advocating for cultural change. These tendencies within the two categories were not unexpected as the discussed questions were mostly concerned with women's rights. Interestingly, there were more unidentified users within the 'Conservative Views' category. It could mean that users, who hold strong traditional views and are against feminist actions are more likely to create fake accounts and engage in trolling.

After reviewing the Kyrgyz Facebook users' comments on Azattyk Media and Kaktus Media posts related to the most recent feminist actions (Feminnale, Zere Asylbek's song *Kyz* and the parade for women's rights on March 8th) in Kyrgyzstan over three years (2018–2020), the following themes were distinguished:
1) Conservative Views; 2) Cultural Change Advocacy; 3) Supporting Women;
4) Against Feminist Acts; 5) Kyrgyz language; 6) Other.

The initial coding process revealed that the feminist actions evoked nationalist discussions in the fourth of the comments. They were coded under the themes of

Conservative Views and Cultural Change Advocacy. Even though more comments were coded as conservative, the debates about the nation were not monopolised and there was a relatively high number of cultural change advocates. Overall, the sex ratio among all of the categories was balanced: 2,343 male and 2,409 female comments (207 unidentified). However, it differed within the codes related to nationalist debates. The Conservative Views category had somewhat more male (n=434) than female (n=261) comments, whereas Cultural Change Advocacy had significantly more female (n=398) than male (n=125) comments. We can conclude that conservative views regarding Kyrgyz culture, evoked by feminist actions, are prominent among both men and women, but the advocacy for change is more common among women, who can relate with the struggle.

3. Discussions about Gender Relations and the Nation in Kyrgyzstan

3.1. Debates over Kyrgyz Culture: 'Where are We Going'?

The 'Debates over Kyrgyz Culture' category includes opinions and debates about the Kyrgyz nation, its traditions and mentality, which were evoked as a response to the posts about the feminist actions discussed earlier. 'Where are we going?' is a crucial question that appeared in both 'Cultural Change Advocacy' and 'Conservative Views' categories. The former group emphasised that the country is going down a *'backward'* way and is rejecting modernity. The latter insisted that feminist actions are leading the country down a perverted path instead of supporting tradition.

The category features **three main themes**:

1) Kyrgyz Culture is Traditional versus Outdated – 577 comments;
2) Them versus Us – 232 comments;
3) Allegations of National Hypocrisy – 103 comments.

This section presents the analysis of each theme.

3.1.1. Kyrgyz Culture is Traditional versus Outdated

All three feminist actions received many comments that featured people's opinions on the Kyrgyz state, its traditions and national community. Conservative male commentators asserted that Kyrgyzstan is doing well, its traditions are thriving, and the country is as democratic and liberal as it should be. There is no need for feminist ventures because women have nothing to be protected from. However, a few users lamented that because of feminist activism, society is degrading and Kyrgyz traditions need to be defended from these so-called 'perverted' ideas. The question which one is more important between women's well-being and traditions is easily answered to those that would fall into Mayer's definition of 'the loyal sons' of the nation: it is tradition. The most common expression among conservative comments was that 'this is not how it works around here'. Some commentators admitted that wearing a bra in a video, creating a performance that involves nudity – those actions are modern and progressive, but 'it cannot take place in Kyrgyzstan' because the

country is not ready yet. The organisers of such events must bear that in mind, and act as part of the society that they come from, conforming to the groups' dominating norms.

Concerns about the decency of the form of expression are a way to discredit the cause, as it is postulated that it cannot challenge the traditional values of the country and must instead conform to its norms. 'Nudity is not acceptable in Kyrgyzstan' was another common opinion about both the exhibition and Zere's video, which falls under the category of decency. Both male and female conservative commentators were concerned with the display of a naked body in the national museum, and how it can affect the culture of the nation: 'How can this degeneracy be promoted? How can this be considered cultural?' More importantly, 'how can you fight for someone's rights that way?' Some of these opinions supported the protesters against Feminnale, whose main slogan was 'Nation above rights'. Others agreed that women's rights are indeed an existing issue in Kyrgyzstan but it cannot be addressed by women 'with no dignity', 'moral standards' and 'shame'. There is a widespread feeling that art and struggle for one's rights cannot go beyond the commentator's own moral and cultural norms, which he/ she sees as coinciding with the hegemonic values of the society that he/ she is a part of.

Some users, advocating for cultural change, expressed regret that Kyrgyzstan became 'extremely dark' with a 'Medieval mentality that promotes shame'. 'Medieval' was a common word used to describe the Kyrgyz mentality, culture, traditions, political system and women's rights situation. These commentators insisted that the country needs to develop and grow, be more open to change, more democratic and listen to what the feminist activists are trying to say as such actors are viewed as being more progressive and ahead of Kyrgyz society as a whole. This criticism was directed at both politicians and the public, especially in regards to the attacks on women during the parade. A male commentator stated that 'the country is rich with tradition and the beauty of its language is unquestionable, but it is a shame that we cannot accept anything new'. He was among those, who expressed a wish for Kyrgyz culture to become more modern and welcoming. The advocates for change praised the activists for being courageous and trying to change the 'backward' mentality of Kyrgyzstan. A few commentators ridiculed the conservative point of view by making

it seem very primitive. For example, a male commentator stated that 'a bright bra and a meaningful song are too much for our people. It has to be explained in simple cartoons'. This type of comments shows people's disappointment over the fact that good initiatives are disregarded because of the perceived stupidity of the opposing camp.

3.1.2. Them versus Us

The most common opinion among users who displayed conservative views was that the West is trying to destroy the Kyrgyz culture, by poisoning its children with immorality, and that feminists are complicit in this by selling national traditions. Interestingly, these commentators rarely cared to elaborate as to which exact traditions were being endangered because of feminism activism: people were simply referring to traditions in general and instead promoted loyalty to the national ideal and patriotism. These ideas were strengthened by using battle language: 'we must fight for our traditions', 'we have to defend our Fatherland'. The most common Western 'norms' mentioned in the comments were: 'nudity in the streets', 'debauchery' and 'LGBT', which was also considered as debauchery.

Moreover, conservative commentators encouraged the feminist activists to leave Kyrgyzstan and go to Western countries, most commonly the United States, where they could freely promote debauchery. Cultural change advocates, on the other hand, called Kyrgyz people to follow Europe's example and start solving national problems instead of avoiding them. A part of them expressed confusion: 'against whom are we meant to fight?' Some users considered people who believe in 'threatening' Western propaganda as delusional. A female commentator mocked them: 'European countries have been planning to ruin Kyrgyz traditions for years. Sure, international organisations want to destroy our mentality, so that we stop giving up young girls to perverts. Have you gone mad? Most people in Europe do not even know where Kyrgyzstan is. Wake up.' Interestingly, instead of alienating Kyrgyzstan from the West, some cultural change advocates expressed fear that the country is following in the steps of Afghanistan, Iran and Syria, viewing them as dangerous and 'backward'.

Roza Otunbaeva's comment on the public reaction to Feminnale sparked another debate. She called out the 'villagers' and criticised their lack of education. Cultural change advocates supported her by pointing out that the majority of Kyrgyz society is rural and the core structures of the country (the government, schools, police, etc.) are ruled by people with such mentality, which harms the nation and its people. More conservative people were offended by those claims and insisted that there would be no Kyrgyzstan without the so-called 'rural' people, who have much higher moral standards than the 'urban' people. It seems that the 'Them versus Us' debate is concerned not only about Kyrgyzstan and 'Other' countries, but it also happens within its territory – between urban and rural populations.

Another dividing topic that enabled 'othering' was morality. It can partly be related to the urban and rural division because people that considered themselves more virtuous spoke out against modernity that is generally related to cities. They blamed those defending Feminnale and Zere's video of having low moral standards (mainly because they supported art that involved nudity). There is no need to modernise the country if it leads to the end of righteous behaviour. On the contrary, people that were advocating for change in the country insisted that traditional views promote immorality because it justifies violent behaviour and manipulation of women.

3.1.3 Allegations of National Hypocrisy

A major theme, which emerged in the debate over the Kyrgyz culture and the way feminist activism influences were a set of arguments that can be classified as allegations of national hypocrisy. The majority of these comments come from the Cultural Change Advocacy category and were made by women.

One of the main allegations centred on the fact that whenever non-conformist feminist acts take place, conservative people, mostly men, preach about morality, tradition and ancestors that knew what a Kyrgyz woman should act like while accusing feminists of harming those traditions; however, the same people do not bother condemning the violent crimes of domestic violence or bride kidnappings and solidarising with its victims. Instead of addressing existing problems in society, they get provoked by initiatives that are trying to solve them.

The commentators called out different members of society for these alleged hypocrisies. One group were politicians, who seem uninterested in ensuring equality and instead focus on banning and preventing the much-needed feminist initiatives. Another group were men that feel superior over women and prioritise tradition over their safety. The last group were women that support traditions, which undermine their own rights and deprive them of free expression.

Another significant debate centred on double standards concerning nudity. People referred to beachwear, which does not evoke any negative emotions from the public. They also brought up models and social media influencers that often wear revealing attires but are supported and admired by many nonetheless. A female commentator stated that 'If instead of Zere there was a naked model in stockings, everyone would applaud and admire her beauty and courage.' In these commentators' view, the public's biggest concern is not the naked body itself but rather the question of who is demonstrating it and what cause it is being displayed for. While on the surface it would appear that the feminist message was lost to anti-feminist commentators because of their focus on nudity, commentators that used the allegation of national hypocrisy show that the message was indeed understood, but people deliberately decided to use its format as a means to discredit and avoid addressing it.

Conservative commentators also expressed allegations of national hypocrisy, although, they did so through the logical fallacy of whataboutism by calling to disregard women's issues highlighted by the feminist activists because the Kyrgyz society has more troubling ones. This attitude can be related to the choice between two evils with feminism being the less threatening one and, therefore, less urgent. 'Why does society not speak out against prostitution that is thriving in Kyrgyzstan? What about pornography?' These commentators viewed prostitution and pornography as much more threatening influences on Kyrgyz morality and culture than feminist actions and were upset that there is no prominent movement against it.

The comments on the feminist acts in the 'Debates over Kyrgyz Culture' category features conflicting opinions about the Kyrgyz nation, its traditions and culture. From the conservative point of view, the feminist performances elicited

people's reflection on the Kyrgyz values and how such values are threatened by the feminist movement. Some of them blamed the West, others blamed 'modern' and 'urban' locals for trying to sabotage the country's morality and culture. Cultural change advocates, on the other hand, insisted that the Kyrgyz traditional worldview is outdated and feminist performances should be welcomed. They also accused conservative people of pretending to care about national values only when they are challenged by nonconformist women, otherwise their concerns with morality and tradition are practically non-existent.

3.2. Kyrgyz Women: Properly Dressed Obedient Wives or Free Individuals?

Codes for users' opinions about the Kyrgyz women's status and role in society and family, their appearance or dignity, constituted a significant part of the analysis. Some of them were overlapping, for example, a user could mention both women's dress and marital status or women's dignity and figure. The 'Debates Over Kyrgyz Women' category focuses on **five main themes**:

1) Women's Image/ Body/ Clothes – 131 comments;
2) Women are (not) Mothers and Wives – 105 comments;
3) Women's Honour and Shame – 88 comments;
4) Women are Oppressed/ Disrespected/ Manipulated by Society – 147 comments;
5) Other – 60 comments.

These themes appeared in both 'Cultural Change Advocacy' and 'Conservative Views' categories. In this section, each of them will be analysed in detail.

3.2.1. Women's Image/ Body/ Clothes

This theme features opinions and expressions related to women's appearance and their image in Kyrgyz society. They mostly came up in people's reactions to Zere Asylbek's video and Feminnale's exhibits.

Some users accused the artists of immorality and stated that such behaviour will harm Kyrgyzstan's values and its women. Others argued that the feminist actions are offensive to Muslims. They stressed that such provocative performances are

incompatible with the Kyrgyz culture and mentality. One of the male commentators on Zere's video expressed that '19-year-old's saggy breasts are not bravery. You do not need talent for that. A girl wearing a headscarf looks wonderful, but a half-dressed, half-shaved girl looks vulgar and horrible. Girls have to preserve traditions, be humble, soft and mysterious like our ancestors. The calling of the video is wrong'. This user, among many others, not only called out the singer for her lack of clothing that shows a bad example and destroys tradition but firstly had shown disapproval of the shape of her breasts. It is peculiar because, among comments that seemingly supported Zere's message, there also was a mention that such breasts or the *ugly* bra should not be publicly demonstrated. Whether you follow the traditions or break them, you must have a *good* body.

In this group of comments, there were a few that connected this 'immoral' style with Western culture, which is trying to take over Kyrgyzstan and destroy its traditions. Interestingly, this 'othering' strategy was also used when referring to women that organised the women's parade – users described them as 'ugly', 'lesbian', 'lacking love and sex' and opposed them to *'good'* women that stayed at home and received flowers and attention from men.

Other users, however, supported Zere and Feminnale participants' bodily integrity, saying that all women should have the right to wear what they want. They were also referring to beachwear, and how everyone is barely wearing any clothes on the beach, but no one has problems with that. Many people emphasised that the idea of Zere's video was not to promote nudity or call people's attention to her bra, but to show that people can dress and express themselves freely. A woman showed concern that the female body is trapped in men's understanding of beauty and tradition and that each step that might challenge it is condemned. Another female commentator stated that 'she (Zere) is also defending the rights of girls in headscarves when they are hired according to specific dress-codes or cannot wear scarves in school. We all can decide how we want to look and what to wear'. This opinion shows us that the person, who promotes the freedom of expression, is not against traditional or religious clothing – she truly wants to speak out for everyone. Also, a male commentator noted that Zere's song has nothing to do with the West and that she is exclusively discussing and representing Kyrgyz women.

3.2.2. Women are (not) Mothers and Wives

This theme was evoked quite equally in the comments on all three feminist actions.

When reacting to Feminnale's artwork, the conservative commentators (both men and women) insisted that feminism shows a bad example to Kyrgyz women and seeks total annihilation of the family values. They were worried that their future mothers will be perverted and that the country is going down the wrong path. These attitudes reflect Yuval-Davis' definition of women who are perceived as 'biological wombs' of the nation. The understanding of women as central figures in Kyrgyz families is especially noticeable in the comments on the parade and the attacks on women. A male commentator stated that 'women are protectors of the family hearth, not demonstrations'. A few more users similarly underlined that the women would not have been attacked if they stayed at home with their husbands and children. It is their proper place, where they are respected and loved.

Some users speculated that Zere Asylbek, the organisers of Feminnale and participants of the parade have no husbands or boyfriends and are probably lesbian. The advertisement of such diversity in women's love lives 'threatens true Kyrgyz values', which revolve around heterosexual families. Again, this was sometimes related to degrading Western countries, which 'are ruining the family institution'. Some of the examples of that destruction are as follows: 'young girls are encouraged to do abortions', and 'Western daughters come back home pregnant without knowing who the father is and then abandon their parents when they are old'. This behaviour is harmful to Kyrgyzstan, and that is why the country needs protection from such influences.

Many users, mostly women, quite sharply reacted to comments that labelled them as 'mothers' and 'wives'. 'What if a woman is not a mother (does not want or cannot give birth) - will you not respect her? Or is she only a food processor and birth-giver?' Statements like that point out that women must be respected for who they are as individuals and not for their social status (wife, mother or sister). Some commentators were accusing men of having very specific expectations for Kyrgyz women and being abusive towards them if they failed to fulfil them. They promoted

the women's right to decide for themselves if they want to 'experience the joy of motherhood' or not and that society should not judge them for either choice. Others also raised questions about men's involvement in family building. A female user asked: 'How come they can get divorced and then forget about their children? Women, however, must stick to their husbands because Kyrgyzstan is no place for single women.'

3.2.3. Women's Honour and Shame

Honour and shame were common themes in conservative comments. According to them, by engaging in feminist actions, women have lost their dignity and should be shamed for that. More importantly, they brought shame not only upon themselves but also Kyrgyzstan. The users mostly referred to Julie Savery's performance because she appeared naked in the museum and Zere Asylbek's image as she wore a bra in her video. Some male commentators stated that 'nudity is shameful for Kyrgyzstan/ us'; 'without shame, you will become perverted'; 'these idiots (feminists) are putting our country to shame'; 'they are embarrassing Muslims'; 'they are calling Kyrgyz girls to lose their shame'. In this context, the commentators consider shame and dignity as essential elements to ensure the 'purity' of women, which is essential for the 'ideal nation'.

Commentators that advocated for cultural change used shame to refer to the attacks on women and, in general, to the situation of women's rights in the country. It is interesting how the same concept can be used as a core of the nation's values and as a tool to shame it. A female commentator lamented: 'Happy women's day. What a shame. There is no future in this country. You cannot get married to locals because you will either be killed or beaten up by your 'husband'.' The idea of not marrying Kyrgyz locals popped up quite a few times, which again, challenges the image and continuation of a pure nation as it is understood by the 'true nationals'. A few users said that because of what happened to the participants of the parade, Kyrgyzstan should be shamed in front of the whole world. A male user was upset because a national symbol that he strongly related to had been misused: 'The attackers are embarrassing the honour and dignity of the Ak-kalpak'. The person seemingly cares

about the traditional hat that has been worn by the attackers and wants to protect it because it symbolised his own identity.

3.2.4. Women are Oppressed/ Disrespected/ Manipulated by Society

This theme was evoked in response to all three feminist actions and mostly observed in the comments within the category of 'Cultural Change Advocacy'.

The main idea of most comments was that the nation has to ensure equal treatment and protection of all its members. National interests must not exclusively revolve around the preservation of traditions, and they have to consider the people. Many commentators were angered that women's attempts to strive for equality and call the public's attention to their problems, were met with a backlash. They were most disappointed that the organisers of the parade were attacked and then arrested as if the country's authorities had no understanding of what is right and wrong.

Some people said that 'women are the slaves of Kyrgyz society' and that 'they are deprived of their fundamental rights', others stated that 'young people are not taught how to respect women'. They were questioning the purpose of traditions, which enable manipulation and even violence against women. The most common examples were domestic violence and kidnapping for marriage. Even though this tradition is banned, there are approximately 12,000 bridal kidnappings each year (Women's Support Centre, 2016). A few commentators reminded others of the murder of Burulai − a girl that was kidnapped as a bride and then killed by her attacker at the police station, where she was hiding. They were concerned that more cases like that might emerge if nothing changes in the culture. A female commentator was concerned that conservative upbringing does more harm than good for another reason: 'Isn't it weird that girls, who throw kids into toilets, are the ones raised under the strictest rules?' She highlights that women are restricted not only by traditions that involve them directly, but they also suffer from indirect, psychological pressure that pushes them to do anything to comply with family values and rules.

3.2.5. Other

Comments coded as 'Other' in the Women's category were mostly addressing sex workers' position in Kyrgyzstan. Conservative commentators stated that such

professions should not exist in their country, whereas cultural change advocates defended their right to work and be socially protected.

Other comments focused on feminism in Kyrgyzstan. Some commentators insisted that feminist activism promotes women's perversion, without explaining what exactly influences it. They also blamed feminists 'for destabilising the country and nation', but again, with no elaboration on how they are doing it. There was also an ironic opinion expressed by a male commentator that instead of doing arts and organising parades, women should 'work and fight like men if they want equal treatment'. A few women stated that they do not want to be represented by feminists and they are happy to live in Kyrgyzstan as it is today. There is no need for the promotion of foreign values, useless demonstrations, and obscure performances.

The section 'Debates Over Kyrgyz Women' features a variety of people's opinions on women's role in Kyrgyz society, their appearance and social status. Conservative commentators mostly referred to the decency of women in various spheres: the way they dress, relationships, family and work. In their opinion, feminists are shameful and they bring shame to Kyrgyzstan by misguiding its women. Interestingly, people, who seemingly supported the feminist messages still disapproved of the demonstration of the naked body. However, both supporters and non-supporters of feminism were seemingly more concerned not with the nudity but the appearance of women. On the contrary, cultural change advocates promoted women's freedom to decide what is best for them. They questioned the purpose of tradition that puts constraints on women and deprives them of the right to own their bodies. In their eyes that is shameful and not feminist performances.

The analysis of the themes 'Conservative Views' and 'Cultural Change Advocacy' revealed that feminist performances mainly elicited debates concerning either the Kyrgyz women or national culture in a broader sense. As expected, according to the theoretical framework, the conservative comments viewed the feminist actions as threatening to the purity and honour of the Kyrgyz women and

nation because they promote abortions, nudity, indecent clothing, 'lesbianism' and 'perversion' – ideas that challenge the traditional worldview and gender relations. Nationalists largely blamed the West for introducing such trends and trying to destroy the Kyrgyz values. The conservative commentators strongly identify with Kyrgyz traditions, and actions that challenge them in any way are immediately perceived as threatening for the future of the nation and its continuity, which must be protected. A significant part of them condemned the feminist performances not because they disagreed with their message but because of their appearance or way of life, which is incompatible with what they consider appropriate in Kyrgyzstan. Concerns over the decency of the form became a way of discrediting the cause or, in other words, morality comes before rights.

The commentators within the Cultural Change Advocacy category referred to similar things: the clothes of the performers, their appearance and lifestyle, but in a completely different way. They expressed respect for their choice and encouraged others to do the same. They embodied a non-conventional form of nationalism, where people are concerned about their nation's future and they care for its traditions, but not at the cost of women's well-being. The culture, traditions, marriage, family, purity or shame cannot be above people's rights: it is more important to develop the freedom of expression and create a safe environment for women than stick to traditions just for the sake of it. This feeling evoked a new theme: allegations of national hypocrisy. Commentators accused conservative members of the society of teaching about morality in Kyrgyzstan only when they are challenged by women or their appearance, but not when women become victims of actual immoral behaviour. They also pointed out that when women are attractive – models or influencers – their behaviour and nudity does not bother anyone.

Conclusion

The thesis analysed a sample of Kyrgyz people's opinions, perceptions and worldviews expressed online in reaction to feminist actions. Even though institutionally Kyrgyzstan is taking measures to improve women's situation in society, de facto, they are still subjected to a high degree of discrimination. Partially, it is because of the patriarchy that still prevails in the culture of Kyrgyzstan, but there is more to it. Women's role in society is also determined by nationalist ideas, which is explained by the theory of gendered nationalism. This thesis presented the themes that occurred from people's comments online – a space where they can freely share their ideas. They give a better understanding of the phenomena of gendered nationalism in Kyrgyzstan and fall into a larger debate concerning the struggle of the feminist movement in the country.

According to research of nationalism and gender examined in this thesis, nations are socially constructed and the national identity of an individual is established through the practice of reinvented tradition and 'Othering'. Gender roles also reinforce national identity through the reproductional continuity that is taken care of by women and the protection of the nation and its traditions by men.

This thesis showed that in the case of Kyrgyzstan, challenging traditional gender roles in support of women's emancipation can evoke various reactions from supportive to extremely hostile expressed by both women and men. Part of those reactions also relates feminist initiatives to a broader narrative of national belonging and its implications.

The thesis also demonstrated that conservative opinions confirmed the theoretical suppositions by asserting that the nation's dignity, its women's purity, values and moral standards are threatened by the feminist movement, which, according to them, promotes perversion and is operated by the West. The ideas that challenge the traditional worldview upon which, through a process of invention of tradition and similar to the ones described by Hobsbawm, an identity centred on the "imagined community" (to borrow Anderson's term) of the Kyrgyz nation comes to be constructed. For this identity, gender traditionalism represents a constitutive element,

as it allows to 'link' the present of the nation with its putative past; goals of control of gender relations – reactionary behaviours included – therefore serve the purpose of structuring male domination within the nation and at the same time structure the nation around a certain type of past' that the hegemonic group finds useful to legitimise a power dynamic. It must be protected as part of a nationalist policy that began after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but that was not, per se, in contradiction with ideas of the nation developed in Soviet times – it is in fact a continuation of Soviet nationality policies. Additionally, they showed that in some cases the expression of a feminist action (e.g. nudity), which, in their view, threatens the national values, is used as a pretext to disregard the attempts to address gender inequality. However, the opinions that advocated for cultural change represented a different kind of nationalism: although national traditions are important, the nation will remain 'backward' if gender equality is not achieved, therefore, feminist actions must be supported. Personal protection within the nation is more important to them than the national culture, which turns the argument of tradition-nation-gender connection upside down. They do not want to be defined by a national culture that threatens its members and, in their opinion, is often hypocritically manifested as a way to maintain women's oppression. At the same time, they still feel part of it and represent a change in the national sentiment influenced by the social reality of the country.

It is necessary to acknowledge that observational online ethnography of social media does not allow to create a thorough and accurate social profile of the research subjects. Therefore, it would be recommended to conduct face-to-face interviews and surveys with people from different parts of Kyrgyzstan to compose a more detailed picture of how nationalist ideas on gender relations differ between various age groups, cities, education levels, marital status etc. Also, to avoid alienation, it is crucial to analyse how the Kyrgyz case of gendered nationalism falls into a broader picture, both in and outside of Central Asia. We could ask, how does the nationalist aspect of gender perceptions affect feminism in Europe?

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**SOCIALINĖ LYTIS, NACIONALIZMAS IR FEMINIZMAS KIRGIZSTANE:
TEMINĖ INTERNETINIŲ DISKUSIJŲ ANALIZĖ**

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Santrauka

Per pastaruosius trejus metus Kirgizstane įvyko nemažai feministinių akcijų, sukėlusių daugybę diskusijų visuomenėje. Skambiausios iš jų – Zerės Asylbek daina "Kyz" ("Mergaitė"), pirmoji feministinė paroda "Feminnale" ir šių metų kovo 8-osios eisena už moterų teises, susilaukusios kritikos tiek iš vyrų, tiek iš moterų. Dažnai pasisakymuose pabrėžiama, kad šios iniciatyvos yra nukreiptos "prieš kirgizų tautą" arba tiesiog yra jai "nesuvokiamos". Pasak mokslininkų, galima sieti tokią reakciją su visuomenės socialinės lyties suvokimu per nacionalistinių idėjų diktuojamą socialinių normų prizmę, ypač tautos įvaizdžio kontekste. Visgi, nėra ištirta, kaip tiksliai ji pasireiškia, kalbant būtent apie moterų bandymus kovoti už savo teises. Šio tyrimo tikslas yra išsiaiškinti ar ir kaip nacionalistinės idėjos formuoja kirgizų suvokimą apie lyčių santykius ir požiūrį į feministines iniciatyvas. Tai bus siekiama išsiaiškinti atliekant internetinių "Facebook" diskusijų teminę analizę populiariausiuose naujienų puslapiuose "Azattyk Media" ir "Kaktus Media", tiriant komentarus į įrašus, susijusius su aukščiau minėtomis feministinėmis iniciatyvomis.

Tyrimo teorinis pagrindas sudarytas iš nacionalizmo studijų sąvokų ir sampratų, aprėpiančių: socialiai konstruojamą "įsivaizduojamą bendruomenę", "išrastas tradicijas", "Kito" ir "Oksidentalizacijos" sąvokas bei socialinės lyties ir nacionalizmo sąveiką. Remiantis šiomis teorijomis, atlikus komentarų analizę, buvo išskirtos įvairios temos ir potemės, iš kurių esminės yra "Konservatyvios pažiūros" ir "Kultūrinių permainų propagavimas".

Tolimesnė šių dviejų temų analizė išskyrė potemes, kurios aprėpė kirgizų išreikštą požiūrį į savo tautą ir moteris, reaguojant į feministines iniciatyvas. Kalbant apie konservatyvių pažiūrų kirgizų komentatorius, pagrindiniai motyvai jų pasisakymuose, kalbant tiek apie tautą bendrai, tiek apie moterų rolę joje, buvo "garbė", "tyrumas", "tradicijos", "moralė", kuriems kyla grėsmė dėl feminisčių propaguojamo "pasileidusio" ir "gėdingo" gyvenimo būdo bei bendradarbiavimo su "Vakarais". Moterų elgesys, apranga ir gyvenimo būdas buvo minimi tradicijų, moralės ir kirgizų tautiškumo kontekste. Jie naudojo feministinių iniciatyvų raišką (pavyzdžiui, nuogo kūno. apatinio trikotažo demonstravimą), kaip pretekstą ignoruoti jų keliamas opias moterų problemas. Kitoje diskusijų pusėje – kultūrinių permainų propaguotojai, kurių pagrindinė žinutė skatino visapusį moterų išlaisvinimą iš visuomenės sukurtų priespaudos konstruktų, nekeliant tradicijų aukščiau žmonių gerovės ir saugumo. Jų patriotiškumas reiškėsi ne tvirtesnio tradicijų puoselėjimo troškimu, o noru jaustis saugiai savo bendruomenėje ir valstybėje. Jie taip pat pastebėjo, kad tautiškumo saugojimas Kirgizstane reiškiasi selektyviai ir dažniausiai ekspresyviai demonstruojamas tik kaip priešprieša feminizmui, praleidžiant pro pirštus kitus procesus, kurie patriotų akimis lygiai taip pat turėtų žlugdyti tautines vertybes.