CHAPTER 6

# Kyrgyz Diaspora Online

## Understanding Transnational Political Participation

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## Abstract

In recent years, social media platforms have become sites of populist propaganda, fake news, bots, and trolls that have influenced public perceptions and the political behaviours of individuals worldwide. At the same time, social media is the primary channel of communication for migrants, connecting them to each other and to their homelands. This chapter investigates how Kyrgyz emigrants engage with virtual communities politically: does cross-border online political participation challenge illiberal institutions or add to their resiliency? The study reveals that while overall political discourse shows signs of susceptibility to populist rhetoric and a preference for strongman leaders, at the same time, the virtual space serves as an arena for emigrants in the diaspora community to exercise political membership and participate in crisis-induced nation-building experience in the homeland.

**Keywords**: Kyrgyz diaspora, social media, political participation, illiberalism, emigrant citizenship, online activism

# Introduction

In recent years social media platforms have become sites of populist propaganda, fake news, bots, and trolls that have influenced public perceptions and the political behaviours of individuals worldwide. At the same time, social media is the primary channel of communication for migrants which connects them to each other and to their homelands. This chapter investigates how Kyrgyz emigrants engage with virtual communities politically: does cross-border online political participation challenge illiberal institutions or add to their resiliency? Content analysis of Kyrgyz emigrants' posts and comments in public social media groups and pages on VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, and Facebook demonstrates that based on how information is shared, political content can be categorized into vertical and horizontal messages. The former includes content published by site administrators representing formal diaspora associations or political leaders, parties, and candidates for office; the latter emerges spontaneously among the members of the group and often leads not only to lively online discussions but also to real-life political organizing. Case studies of online-to-offline spillover effects that resulted in social and electoral mobilization during the October Revolution in 2020, as well as street-level activism during the COVID-19 pandemic and Kyrgyz–Tajik conflicts, show that online conversations are a legitimate form of political participation with important and tangible implications. Analysis of these cases also reveals that while overall political discourse shows signs of susceptibility to populist rhetoric and a preference for strongman leaders, at the same time the virtual space serves as an arena for emigrants in the diaspora community to exercise political membership and participate in crisis-induced nation-building experience in the homeland.

# Understanding the Nexus between Illiberalism, Social Media, and Emigrants' Political Participation

## *The Rise of Illiberalism in Kyrgyzstan*

One of the most significant characteristics of the decade since the mid-2010s has been the spread and strengthening of illiberal regimes around the globe: from democratic backsliding in both well-established and new democracies, such as the United States, India, Poland, and Türkiye, to the strengthening of persistent forms of authoritarianism with a democratic façade, as in Kyrgyzstan. Freedom House has reported that 2021 was the 16th consecutive year of worldwide democratic decline. In line with this general finding, Kyrgyzstan's score fell from 39/100 in 2020 to 27/100 in 2022, bringing it down from 'partly free' to 'not free' and placing it into the 'consolidated authoritarian' category (Freedom House 2022).

After gaining independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan was often dubbed an 'island of democracy' for its early liberal reforms in the 1990s, the revolutions that ousted authoritarian leaders in 2005 and 2010, and the transition to the parliamentary form of governance via referendum in June 2010. Political changes and upheavals made the country stand out among its neighbours with their long-term personalistic dictatorships. However, despite democratization efforts, the country has still struggled with widespread corruption (Transparency International 2023), weakly institutionalized parties with 'privatized' party lists (Doolotkeldieva and Wolters 2017), and civil society restrictions (Human Rights Watch 2022). The most recent revolution in October 2020 brought to power a populist leader, Sadyr Zhaparov, who rapidly put forward constitutional changes that rolled back earlier democratic reforms, significantly reduced the power of the parliament, and centralized power in the hands of the presidency (Human Rights Watch 2020).

Meanwhile, the repression of political opponents, civil society activists, and journalists has become commonplace. For instance, in October 2022, 26 political activists were detained on dubious charges of 'plotting a coup' for their opposition to the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan border deal surrounding the Kempir-Abad Reservoir (Dzhumasheva 2022). At the same time, journalists face increasing censorship and harassment in the form of surveillance, arrests, deportations, and attempts to shut down independent media outlets (Erkebayeva 2022). The crackdown on opposing voices and the tight grip that the state has over the media represent the main pillars of an illiberal political system (Rollberg and Laruelle 2015). However, while traditional forms of media such as television, radio, and newspapers are relatively easy for the state to control, digital and social media are much harder to manage. Therefore, unsurprisingly, social media has become one of the central arenas of political struggle.

### *The Role of Social Media in Shaping Political Narratives*

Years before ascending to the presidency, while still in prison, Sadyr Zhaparov used platforms such as WhatsApp to rally followers and communicate with them; this was a crucial instrument of mobilization, especially among emigrant populations in Russia (Solovyev 2021). Now, as president, he continues to use various social media such as Facebook and Instagram to spread illiberal ideologies and effectively deliver his populist messages and promote them through bots and trolls. Notably, Zhaparov is not the first politician to utilize 'troll factories'; in fact, journalist investigations revealed that identical fake social media accounts had been used to spread propaganda messages for the ousted President Sooronbai Zheenbekov too (Shabalin 2020). Therefore, Zhaparov did not create this phenomenon but amplified its magnitude. His discourse on social media reflects the key elements of typical populist rhetoric: the Manichean 'good' versus 'evil' and 'us' versus 'them' outlook. For instance, on 4 January 2021, just a few days

before the elections and the referendum, Zhaparov posted the following on his Instagram page:

> [They] proved that for thirty years they stole [from the people] and forgot about their responsibilities to the people. The proof is the organization of the so-called anti-referendum protests … Everyone needs to understand that the referendum is being carried out for the benefit of the people; it must determine the precise form of government in our country: parliamentary or presidential. The priority should be the interests of our people. It should always be so. From now on, we must learn how to follow the people, and those who refuse to do this, we will teach them. These people have got used to freely taking advantage of the wealth of the people for their own personal benefit and have changed the constitution in their own interests. And now they see that they are about to lose their meal ticket, they have started desperately fighting and organizing pointless and inefficient protests … I would like to say: don't try, the people have woken up and understood your hidden agendas. (Zhaparov 2021; my translation)

This post was written in response to street protests against constitutional changes organized by opposition political parties, as well as prominent journalists, activists, and youth organizations. In his construction of 'enemies', Zhaparov in essence splits the population into in-groups that include the 'people' who support him and out-groups that include everyone who opposes his policies. The broad category of enemies encompasses 'corrupt elites', which includes establishment politicians, parties, and businesspeople, as well as democratic civic activists and non-governmental organizations. Although in this post Zhaparov refers to mystical 'they' multiple times, he never specifies who exactly 'they' are. Nevertheless, the reader can intuitively understand that 'they', i.e. all of those protesters in the streets in early January 2021, are not part of the 'people'. This typically populist construction of the Manichean worldview of a cosmic war between good and evil necessitates a commitment to the majoritarian (not pluralist) democratic system and, at the same time, justifies the use of non-democratic means

to 'punish the enemies' and achieve the realization of the people's will. Zhaparov successfully uses all of the techniques in the populist toolkit in order to centralize and consolidate political power; he exploits existing social cleavages and amplifies the grievances of impoverished people who over the years have become disillusion with the promise of liberal democracy.

Yet Zhaparov's opponents, independent media organizations, and civil society activists also use these same social media platforms to expose corruption, violence, and socio-political problems that call into question the policies of the current government (Putz 2019). For instance, Bashtan Bashta, a youth civil movement with a strong presence on social media, particularly YouTube and Instagram, began to publish content in 2020 in response to corruption scandals and democratic backsliding. Since then the organization has developed and published video content that raises awareness on various social and political issues, such as gender violence, electoral fraud, suppression of media freedom, and the war in Ukraine. Young narrators of informational and educational content spread their messages in multiple languages using presentation formats and techniques that make their content appealing and easily accessible, especially to the younger audience. Therefore, social media embodies a site of dynamic tensions between competing narratives of illiberal forces that are often (but not always) associated with the state,[1] such as illiberal parties and politicians, and their supporters, versus resistance forces confronting the state, such as (often West-backed) independent media, political activists, and civil society organizations.

### Emigrant Participation in Homeland Politics

At the same time, social media is the primary channel of communication for Kyrgyz emigrants, which connects them to each other and to their homelands. Emigrants, who constitute a significant part of Kyrgyzstan's citizenry, play a key role in the politics of their homeland in a variety of different ways: through remittances (Ruget and Usmanalieva 2011), voting (Laruelle

and Doolotkeldieva 2013), organized political networks (Filatova 2019), and political participation via social media. The sheer numbers of emigrants signal their enormous collective impact on the Kyrgyz economy and society. According to the Ministry of Labour, which oversees inflows and outflows of labour migration, 1,118,000 Kyrgyz citizens live and work abroad, the absolute majority of them (over 1 million) in Russia and tens of thousands in Kazakhstan, Türkiye, United States, United Arab Emirates, Germany, Canada, and South Korea (Podolskaya, 2022). The variety of destinations that they choose shows that the Kyrgyz diaspora is not a monolithic political or social bloc but rather a plurality of migrant communities in various parts of the world (Ragazzi 2009).

Unsurprisingly, the political preferences of migrants also vary significantly based on their levels of education, their socioeconomic status, and the location of the host country. For instance, analysis of their voting behaviour in the 2021 presidential elections shows that the majority of Kyrgyz emigrants in Russia supported illiberal and populist Sadyr Zhaparov (77.2 per cent) and demonstrated very little support for Klara Sooronkulova (0.23 per cent), an opposition candidate who had recently been detained on the charges of 'plotting a coup'. However, emigrants in the West, i.e. the United States, Canada, and Europe, voted for Sooronkulova in much larger numbers (21.9 per cent) and showed much less support for Zhaparov compared with voters in Russia (29.4 per cent).[2] This disparity can be explained by many factors, including the local political environment of the host states and the socioeconomic characteristics of the diaspora members. High entry barriers to Western countries mean that those who emigrate there are more likely to have higher levels of education and financial security, whereas Russia is more accessible to labour migrants with lower socioeconomic status.

The disparity can also be explained by supply-side factors, meaning the efforts of political entrepreneurs to mobilize diaspora votes. For instance, the political party Zamandash was established in 2007 out of the Kyrgyz diaspora organization of the same name

in Russia and Kazakhstan. This party was particularly success-
ful in mobilizing voters in Russia during the 2010 parliamentary
election; in some Russian cities, Zamandash was able to secure
more than half of the votes. Yet within Kyrgyzstan, only 3 per cent
voted for this party (Open Data Kyrgyzstan 2010). Politicians
such as Adakhan Madumarov and his party Butun Kyrgyzstan
also turned to emigrants in Russia for electoral support and lob-
bied for the expansion of voting rights and the establishment of
additional polling stations abroad (Azattyk 2019). Similarly, Sadyr
Zhaparov and his party Mekenchil have also cultivated grassroots
connections with the Kyrgyz diaspora in Russia, and social media
has played a critical role in this process.

Nevertheless, when studying Kyrgyz emigrant engagement
with social media, at first glance it seems that it is mostly apolitical
(Ruget and Usmanalieva 2019). Conversations in public groups
and forums tend to centre around everyday problems, such as
employment, housing, social services, or legal help with immi-
gration documents. Moreover, social media serves as the primary
channel of communication with families and friends back in the
hometown or the home village, as well as a way to connect with
other emigrants from the same locality and create a 'smartphone-
based translocal community' within the host society (Urinboyev
2021, 89).

When the conversations among diaspora members turn politi-
cal, some may argue that they reflect not genuine political partici-
pation but rather the phenomenon of 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism',
suggesting that simply liking, commenting on, and sharing social
media posts does not have any tangible impact and therefore is
not a legitimate form of engagement with politics (Morozov 2009;
Gladwell 2011; Kristofferson, White and Peloza 2013). Yet others
see online activism as a form of political participation that can
help marginalized people to overcome barriers that impede their
use of political voice and establish social ties that they cannot eas-
ily build in the real world, and this naturally includes migrants
who reside thousands of miles away from their homeland and are
dispersed across vast geographies (McKenna and Bargh 1998).

Extant studies of diaspora political participation in Eurasia and beyond find that diasporic communities utilize the internet as a transnational public sphere in which to engage in discourse on the history, culture, politics, and identity of a nation striving for self-determination and democracy (NurMuhammad et al. 2016) or resistance against dominant narratives of the homeland in the host state (Chan 2005). For many immigrant groups, the internet serves as a crucial medium for political participation, fostering a sense of citizenship and belonging (Chari 2014). The advent of the internet, social media, and digital technologies has amplified the number of informal channels for socio-political activism across borders, enabling geographically dispersed compatriots to overcome barriers to forming social networks and organizing for political action (Mercea 2018). This chapter adopts the latter point of view and investigates how migrants engage with virtual communities politically and whether cross-border online-offline political participation challenges illiberal institutions or adds to their resiliency. This chapter's contribution is that it demonstrates how virtual space is a venue of persistent contention between liberal and illiberal ideas, which both state and non-state actors utilize to mobilize for action, especially in times of social crisis.

## Research Methodology

This chapter is based on inductive research studying political engagement among Kyrgyz emigrants in different host regions, including Russia, the US, the EU, and countries in the Middle East. In this work, I employ a holistic look at aggregate textual data with the goal of understanding general patterns of Kyrgyz emigrant political participation on social media. A mixed-methods approach was employed, involving software-assisted content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis of virtual communities and groups formed by Kyrgyz emigrants on Facebook, Odnoklassniki, and VKontakte. The timeframe of the analysis is between May 2020 and May 2022.

## Case Selection

The analysis of texts was carried out on three social media platforms, namely Facebook, Odnoklassniki, and VKontakte. Facebook, one of the oldest venues for virtual communication yet still popular, is more frequently used by English-speaking Kyrgyz emigrants, whereas Odnoklassniki and VKontake, platforms developed in Russia with appearance, format, and features very similar to Facebook, are more commonly used by emigrants residing in Russia and countries of the former Soviet Union. These three social media platforms were selected for three main reasons: (1) their widespread use by Kyrgyz emigrants, (2) the abundance of pages and groups with large membership and active discussion boards, and (3) the low barriers to entry, i.e. access to groups does not require much social capital, unlike private messenger chat sites such as WhatsApp, Viber, or Telegram that are based on invitations.

## Sampling Strategy

A sample of 37 social media groups and pages was selected for the analysis. The initial phase of sampling involved identifying relevant groups on Facebook, VKontakte, and Odnoklassniki through keyword searches including terms such as 'Kyrgyz', 'Kyrgyzstan', 'кыргыз', 'кыргыздар', 'кыргызы', 'кыргызстацы', and 'кыргызская диаспора'. The search was restricted based on three criteria: (1) focusing on 'groups' and 'pages' on Facebook, 'groups' on Odnoklassniki, and 'communities' on VKontakte as the types of resources; (2) selecting groups with a membership or subscriber count of at least 1,000, ensuring a substantial audience; and (3) including only public groups where content is freely accessible. This selection process did not exclusively target explicitly expatriate groups but encompassed any group containing the nation or country name in Cyrillic or Latin languages. During this process, challenges arose when encountering VKontakte and Odnoklassniki groups with high membership rates, often

managed by individuals concealing their identity. Upon reviewing the content in these groups, it became apparent that they served solely as platforms for advertising goods and services, lacking any meaningful inter-member discussions. Consequently, these groups were excluded from the research sample. However, 'pages' on Facebook operated by diaspora organizations were included in the sample, even if some had slightly fewer than 1,000 members. The subsequent step involved aggregating all textual data from group discussions on each website, then categorizing it by social media platform and organizing it into separate folders. To analyse the content, NVivo software was used to calculate word frequency distribution and conduct key term searches. Following the content analysis, a meticulous manual review of posts, images, links, and comments in each group was performed to identify discursive patterns, which were subsequently categorized with specific date stamps.

Publicly accessible open groups were specifically chosen to ensure inclusivity, as they have low barriers for emigrant participation, capturing individuals with varying levels of social capital, social media use opportunities, and technical skills.

### *Limitations*

While the emphasis on publicly open social media groups allows me to gain insight into online political participation of the broadest population of emigrants with varying degrees of social capital and skills, this approach can by no means encompass all relevant virtual spaces, and therefore the results of this study should be interpreted with some level of caution. Since closed social media venues were excluded and the study does not claim to capture an exhaustive list of all possible public virtual spaces, the results of the analysis do not show the complete picture of emigrant political engagement. Other virtual spaces not included in the study, such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Telegram, may attract different categories of individuals based on various socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, such as age,

education, and physical location. In other words, based on differences in gender, age, ethnicity, and occupation, individuals may be actively involved in political conversations beyond the scope of my sample. In addition, since online groups included in the analysis are public, their members may fear surveillance and persecution and refrain from posting certain political content, particularly if they reside in authoritarian states.

### *Ethical Considerations*

While the use of social media platforms that facilitate the creation and sharing of online content among users is increasingly prevalent in social research, there are some concerns about the ethical aspect of using social media for data collection and analysis. In an effort to present research findings in an ethical manner, several precautions were taken in preparation of this chapter. First, the research was limited to publicly open social media groups and pages without any password or membership restrictions, meaning that any internet user had access to the texts. Second, the anonymity of the participants was guaranteed by eliminating any identifying markers, such as profile pictures and usernames, from the analysis, and by refraining from using direct quotes which could be traced back to the author in the text.

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

## Vertical Political Engagement

The political discourse of Kyrgyz emigrants on social media can be categorized into two distinct types: vertical and horizontal. The former denotes messages initiated by site administrators representing organized diaspora organizations or political leaders.

Several groups and pages on platforms such as Facebook, VKontakte, and Odnoklassniki are managed by specific diaspora organizations, where administrators have control over page settings, deciding which posts are published, ignored, or deleted. They also regulate membership by determining who can join the group and who may be excluded or expelled.

For instance, the Council of Kyrgyz Diaspora is a civil society organization registered in Russia, running pages on various social media platforms, including Facebook. The organization employs these virtual spaces to disseminate information about its activities, such as events, news updates, and services. Notably, its social media presence emphasizes close collaborations with the Kyrgyz embassy, as well as government agencies in both Russia and Kyrgyzstan. This is evident through pictures featuring prominent government officials and reposts of content from state-run media sources. Despite having a follower count exceeding 3,500, the level of interpersonal conversations or other forms of engagement on this organization's virtual spaces, such as likes, or shares, remains minimal. To a large extent, this is because only site administrators can post content, which means that group members cannot bring forward ideas, questions, or concerns or otherwise initiate conversations. Similar patterns are observed on social media pages managed by other diaspora organizations such as Burimdik, as well as smaller regional diaspora organizations such as Yntymak and Manas in Yakutia, Russia, or the Kyrgyz Community Centre in Chicago. Consequently, these virtual spaces exhibit a vertical organization, where information flows from administrators—the leadership of diaspora groups—to their online followers. In other words, members of these pages are passive consumers rather than active participants in political discussions. Analysing the vertical organization of these diaspora organization-run pages on social media platforms reveals a power dynamic that limits the participatory nature of discussions within these virtual spaces. The control wielded by administrators over content creation and membership represents a top-down approach, where the dissemination of information is centralized and driven by the organization's lead-

ership. This hierarchical structure hinders open dialogue, which raises questions about the role of formalized diaspora organizations and politicians associated with them in promoting certain political ideas and candidates for office. Indeed, a number of political entrepreneurs, including Sadyr Zhaparov, have utilized these structures to distribute their messages.

Many groups and pages on Facebook, Odnoklassniki, and VKontakte represent political figures, although, when looking at their following, it is difficult to discern the emigrant and local Kyrgyz population. Sadyr Zhaparov's incredible rise to power has often been attributed to his popularity on social media (Baialieva and Kutmanaliev 2020). Journalists and scholars alike have pointed to Zhaparov's immense social media presence as one of the main ingredients of his political success (Doolotkeldieva 2021). Indeed, there are dozens of Zhaparov fan pages across various social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp among others, with thousands, sometimes tens or even hundreds of thousands, of members and followers. Some YouTube videos featuring Zhaparov received hundreds of thousands of views within the span of a few days during the October 2020 mass protests. While the exact numbers are not known, it has been established that emigrants comprise a significant proportion of Japarov's followers online (Ryskulova 2021), and some of the most active users announcing their support for or opposition to the new leader were Kyrgyz emigrants in Russia, the US, and other countries (Esenmanova 2021). During the October 2020 revolution and the subsequent change of government in Kyrgyzstan, online activity within Kyrgyz emigrant groups experienced a significant surge. Members of these groups took to social media platforms to post, share, and comment on the elections, protests, and political developments unfolding in their home country. This period witnessed a dynamic range of discussions, reflecting diverse opinions and perspectives among Kyrgyz emigrants.

The official and fan pages and groups of political leaders, including President Zhaparov, represent a form of vertical

political engagement for two reasons. First, similarly to the diaspora organization pages described above, they adopt a top-down approach, meaning that the content is created and monitored by site administrators. Second, although at first glance it might seem as if the members are engaging in genuine conversations in the comment section, a more critical look reveals bots and trolls who spread distorted versions of political news and conspiracy theories. Analysis of the rhetorical patterns, sentence structure, and word choice of comments reveals that identical statements are often posted by different accounts, or the same account reshares identical comments across multiple groups and platforms. In addition, analysis of such accounts' activities shows that they do not create personal posts or generate constructive ideas; rather, they tend to repost third-party content. These patterns of online behaviour are tell-tale signs of the presence of bots and trolls that attempt to manipulate online discussions, public opinion, and ultimately voting behaviour. These findings have been corroborated by multiple investigations conducted by independent journalists in Kyrgyzstan (Titova et al. 2020; Eshalieva 2020). The bots and trolls tend to target opposition politicians, activists, and civil society organizations; they also harass and intimidate users who are critical of Zhaparov and his government on social media. Therefore, the work of 'troll factories' attempts to imitate genuine expression of political views and interpersonal conversations, but their messages are in essence vertical because they promote a predetermined narrative and limit the direction and scope of the discussion.

Vertical political engagement is not limited to pro-regime propaganda: the top-down spread of information via social media can also stem from opposition politicians, activists, parties, and civil society organizations. Thus, while there has been a notable level of support for Sadyr Zhaparov since his rise to power in 2020, it is crucial to highlight that there have also been numerous voices within these conversations questioning his legitimacy and authority. This indicates the heterogeneous nature of political attitudes among Kyrgyz emigrants. These differences can be

traced both *among host countries*, with higher levels of support for Zhaparov among emigrants in Russia compared with those in the US or the EU member states, as well as *within emigrant communities*. Amid this contention, several social media accounts run by emigrant influencers, including student activists studying abroad and anonymous site administrators, such as Tajadym, emerged as significant actors of vertical political engagement. Similarly to administrators of diaspora organizations and political figures' social media pages, these influencers create content to set agendas for political conversations, allowing their followers to like, share, or comment but not to post within the page or group. Although bots and trolls were present in the comment section, similarly to those under the posts of Sadyr Zhaparov and other political figures, genuine commentary from real users was prominent. Therefore, despite the vertical structure and the agenda-setting and narrative-shaping nature of social media pages curated by activists and civil society organizations, these spaces provided comparatively more room for discussions and debates surrounding the political developments in Kyrgyzstan following the October Revolution.

The juxtaposition of the top-down nature of administrator-run diasporic organization and state-sponsored social media pages promoting Zhaparov's populist ideas with the emigrant online activists who are actively generating anti-Zhaparov content underscores the complexities within the Kyrgyz diaspora's political landscape and provides valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics of the Kyrgyz emigrant community's political engagement. Furthermore, the emergence of the rival discourse highlights the evolving nature of political participation facilitated by social media platforms. Both incumbent politicians and opposition activists use their online presence and platforms to actively disseminate information, express dissenting views, and mobilize support for alternative political narratives. Their influence extends beyond the confines of closed groups and reaches a wider audience, potentially shaping the perceptions and opinions of Kyrgyz emigrants who may not participate actively in politics otherwise.

However, it is important to recognize that those engaged in online political discussions represent only a segment of the Kyrgyz emigrant population. Their rhetoric should not be seen as universally representative of the entire diaspora's political sentiments, since it cannot reflect the full range of opinions within the broader Kyrgyz emigrant community. In sum, these findings demonstrate that vertical social media messages can promote illiberal sentiments among emigrant populations that are susceptible to populist and nationalist rhetoric. However, at the same time, social media is a venue where opposing narratives are constructed by civil society organizations, independent media groups, and local and emigrant political activists. In other words, neither the liberal nor the illiberal forces can claim a monopoly on vertical narrative-making in the virtual space. Instead, social media has become a key arena of political struggle, in which diaspora populations are both creators and consumers of political content.

## Horizontal Political Engagement

Horizontal political engagement on social media is characterized by an egalitarian structure of membership and the equal ability of every member to raise a question or start a new conversation. In other words, in a horizontal form of online participation, agenda-setting power is distributed among all members. In this environment, a conversation emerges spontaneously among the members of a group and under certain conditions might lead to real-life political organizing. This form of political participation among emigrants can be categorized into two forms: (1) discourse around emigrants' connection to the homeland, such as identity, belonging, and national pride, and (2) crisis-triggered political organizing.

### *Identity, Belonging, and National Pride*

The significant engagement observed in relation to posts promoting national pride and nostalgia for the homeland highlights the

deep emotional connection and sense of identity among Kyrgyz emigrants. This phenomenon can be attributed to several factors, including the desire to maintain a connection with familial roots, to preserve cultural heritage, and to reaffirm collective identity. These posts, which often feature content from news agencies and other websites highlighting Kyrgyz culture and achievements, attract high levels of engagement, including likes, shares, and comments. This indicates that the diaspora community discussions aim at maintaining connections with the homeland.

One example of this phenomenon is the discussion observed on the Facebook page of the Kyrgyz diaspora in New York. A post promoting the launch of a popular Kyrgyz dairy snack product called 'kurut' in the United States sparked a lengthy conversation among group members. This conversation not only focused on the product itself but also delved into personal stories, memories, and shared experiences related to Kyrgyzstan. Such interactions demonstrate how food and cultural practices can serve as powerful catalysts in fostering a sense of unity and nostalgia within the diaspora community. The positive reception of success stories featuring Kyrgyz celebrities further illustrates the impact of online engagement on sense of belonging and national pride. Posts about individuals such as Eduard Kubatov, who became the first Kyrgyz person to climb Mount Everest, Azamat Asangul, a ballet dancer with a New York company, and Ultimate Fighting Championship champion Valentina Shevchenko generate numerous likes, shares, and enthusiastic comments. These narratives not only celebrate individual accomplishments but also symbolize the achievements and potential of the people and the nation as a whole, instilling a sense of collective pride among the diaspora community.

The prevalence of social media content revolving around Kyrgyz history, culture, and identity indicates a deep-rooted connection to the homeland. While posts related to migrants' everyday issues, such as employment, housing, and documentation, tend to be one-way advertisements or requests for assistance, it is discussions on matters of identity and patriotism that foster substantial inter-member debates and conversations, albeit less frequently.

This finding aligns with existing literature that highlights how migrants' memories and celebrations of their homeland play a vital role in strengthening their sense of belonging and maintaining their connection with their ethnic, cultural, and national identities. In sum, the high levels of engagement observed on posts promoting national pride, cultural heritage, and Kyrgyz achievements on social media platforms reflect the emotional connection and sense of identity within the Kyrgyz diaspora community. These discussions foster a sense of unity, nostalgia, and belonging among group members. Moreover, the emphasis on national pride has implications for political engagement, as it intertwines cultural identity with political discussions and influences the diaspora's perspectives and actions related to their homeland. Understanding the role of national pride and cultural identity in online conversations provides valuable insights into the dynamics of the Kyrgyz emigrants' political engagement and how these discussions foster a sense of solidarity and collective identity among participants, laying the groundwork for collective action.

The Kyrgyz diaspora community across the globe demonstrated unprecedented levels of cross-border, cross-channel online-to-offline political activism during two recent crisis situations: the COVID-19 pandemic and the Kyrgyz–Tajik border conflict.

### *Crisis-Triggered Political Organizing: COVID-19*

The COVID-19 pandemic has spanned the globe since the winter of 2019 and reached its peak in Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 2020. During the so-called 'Dark July', the number of daily new coronavirus infection cases reached over 1,000—a very high number for a country with a population of 6.5 million. The poorly equipped healthcare system was unable to adequately meet the needs of the rapidly increasing number of cases, and a great deal of responsibility fell on the shoulders of young volunteers and medical students (Imanalieva 2020). The public health crisis triggered a burst of activity in Kyrgyz emigrant social media groups, which was not limited to just conversations but materialized into real-life

fundraising and organizing for the purchase of medical equipment and devices and the shipping of it back to different regions, cities, and villages in Kyrgyzstan.

Coordinated networks of emigrant activists were formed across borders and used multiple forms of social media to communicate with each other and with their collaborators and beneficiaries in Kyrgyzstan. Specifically, Facebook was often used for raising awareness and promoting fundraising campaigns, messenger services such as WhatsApp served as tools for managing logistics communications, and Instagram was used to visually demonstrate impacts at the local street level. Ideas and conversations that started online spilled over to the real world, and the results of this complex cooperation within and among the diaspora communities were tangible. For instance, Kyrgyz emigrants in the United States gathered money for meals and masks for medical staff in Bishkek. They also collaborated with domestic activists and funded research and the installation of prototypes of locally made oxygen machines in hospitals and COVID-19 units where proper commercial medical equipment was unavailable.

Therefore, the pandemic gave rise to an unprecedented level of activism that transcended continental borders, simultaneously utilizing different types of social networks for the same projects and thinning the line between online and offline participation. This form of political engagement has two important consequences. On the one hand, it promotes close links between diaspora communities and their homelands, as well as enhancing emigrant citizenship and helping to nurture humanitarian, egalitarian, and liberal values. However, on the other hand, the crises that induce emigrant online-offline activism also expose corruption at different levels of government, as well as the ineptitude of the state in handling social welfare problems, which are well-known supply-side factors that lead to disillusionment with established institutions, give rise to the soaring popularity of anti-establishment politicians, and facilitate a turn towards populist authoritarianism. Indeed, just a few months after 'Dark July', the

October Revolution ousted Sooronbai Zheenbekov and brought to power Sadyr Zhaparov.

### *Crisis-Triggered Political Organizing: the Kyrgyz–Tajik Border Conflict*

In late April 2021 and then again in January and September 2022, multiple episodes of violence erupted on the Kyrgyz–Tajik border, with dozens killed or injured during the clashes. Images and videos of the violence, alongside burning houses, schools, and shops, began circulating on social media. In response, Kyrgyz emigrant groups on various social media platforms actively participated in raising global awareness of the conflict. For instance, using foreign language skills to translate local news, they attempted to bring the issue to the attention of their host countries and international organizations through social media and online petitions. Hashtags such as #stopRahmon and #stoptajikagression quickly proliferated and spilled over to the real world as they became the slogans for street-level protests and demonstrations organized by Kyrgyz emigrants in their host countries, including at the United Nations building in New York as well as in Germany, France, the UK, and elsewhere. This case demonstrates that the accessibility and immediacy of the horizontal form of online communication facilitates the dissemination of information and the organization of collective action. Through social media channels, individuals can swiftly disseminate news, updates, and calls to action. This rapid flow of information galvanizes community members to mobilize and participate in offline activities, including protests and demonstrations. Furthermore, online political engagement serves as a gateway to offline participation by providing a platform for the recruitment and organization of activists. Within immigrant communities, online networks serve as a nexus for connecting geographically dispersed individuals, coordinating collective action, and mobilizing in the offline physical realm.

In the immediate aftermath of the border conflict, diasporic groups started multiple fundraising initiatives for the

reconstruction of destroyed infrastructure and humanitarian aid for the victims of violence in their homeland, paralleling the pandemic-related fundraising campaigns two years prior. The interactive and egalitarian nature of horizontal political engagement fosters a sense of community and collective identity among diaspora members, catalysing engagement with humanitarian causes. The narratives, images, and rapid updates regarding the plight of the homeland galvanized the sense of empathy and solidarity among participants, which served as a driving force behind fundraising efforts, as individuals felt compelled to contribute to the alleviation of suffering and reconstruction of the homeland. Importantly, the transparency and immediacy of online platforms enhances the accountability and credibility of fundraising campaigns, thereby bolstering trust and encouraging participation. Diaspora groups leverage social media to disseminate detailed information regarding the intended use of funds, project milestones, and impact assessments. On the one hand, this transparency and efficiency enhances the sense of citizenship through contribution by diaspora members; yet on the other hand, it also highlights the lack of state capacity to respond adequately to humanitarian crises.

In sum, the cases of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Kyrgyz–Tajik border conflict produced a series of forceful catalysts for transnational online-to-offline political participation, street-level mobilization, and fundraising for humanitarian causes, with real-life implications. Both case studies presented here show that emigrants' online engagement is undoubtedly a legitimate form of participation in homeland politics that transcends not only state borders but also multiple channels, including various types of social media and communication tools, as well as crossing over from the virtual to the physical realm. The cases also highlight the importance of social media platforms in the exercise of emigrant citizenship and their utility in providing a space for diaspora communities to actively engage in the political life of the home nation via multiple channels that spill over to the offline world and have tangible real-life consequences.

# Conclusion

The rise of illiberalism has become a major concern in the contemporary political world. The role of social media in this context has been of particular interest, as it has been both hailed as a tool for democratization and criticized for facilitating the spread of illiberal ideas and practices. The connection between emigrants' online political participation and the rise of illiberalism is a complex one, as demonstrated by the case studies of Kyrgyz emigrants. While the case studies of vertical and horizontal political engagement among Kyrgyz emigrants presented in this chapter definitively show that it is an impactful form of political participation, yet the question of whether or not cross-border online political participation challenges illiberal institutions or adds to their resiliency cannot be answered definitively.

First, the Kyrgyz emigrant population is characterized by a diversity of backgrounds, encompassing differences in race, ethnicity, education, occupation, and various other socioeconomic aspects. This diversity translates into variations in political preferences and voting behaviour, both within and among host countries. The 2021 presidential elections highlighted stark differences in support for Sadyr Zhaparov between emigrants in the US, Canada, and Europe, and those in Russia. This illustrates how emigrants, just like domestic voters, can exhibit a range of political tendencies. Some may be susceptible to populist rhetoric and favour strongman leaders, aligning with illiberal sentiments, while others leverage their presence on social media and exercise their voting power to resist authoritarianism. This diversity of political perspectives and engagement among emigrants adds complexity to the overall impact of their online political participation.

Second, social media has become a battleground where liberal and illiberal forces vie for influence on public opinion and electoral outcomes. Its decentralized nature presents challenges for authoritarian governments seeking to maintain direct control over the flow of information. This has created opportunities for civil society activists and marginalized voices to use social media as a

platform to challenge the status quo and advocate for change. The ability to disseminate content quickly and widely enables these actors to raise awareness about social and political issues, mobilize support, and foster a sense of community around shared goals.

By leveraging social media, civil society activists can amplify their voices and reach audiences that may have been inaccessible through traditional media outlets. They can expose government abuses and corruption, highlight human rights violations, and shed light on injustices that are often ignored or suppressed. Through the power of storytelling, compelling visuals, and personal narratives, activists can evoke empathy, build solidarity, and mobilize collective action.

However, the same platforms that empower civil society activists also provide avenues for illiberal regimes to advance their own agendas. Authoritarian governments have recognized the influence of social media and have sought to exploit it for their own benefit. They employ tactics such as constructing narratives that discredit opposition voices, promoting state propaganda, and engaging in coordinated disinformation campaigns. State-sponsored 'troll factories' and bots are deployed to spread misinformation, conspiracy theories, and divisive content that undermine liberal ideas and institutions. These efforts aim to manipulate public opinion, sow confusion, and undermine the credibility of critical voices. The vulnerability of social media to manipulation and distortion by those in power underscores the challenges facing online political participation as a tool for resistance against illiberalism. The democratizing potential of social media is tempered by the risks of surveillance, censorship, and online harassment. Governments can monitor online activities, identify dissenters, and target them for retribution. Algorithms and content moderation policies may be influenced or manipulated by political interests, leading to the suppression of dissenting voices or the amplification of propaganda.

Moreover, the sheer volume and diversity of information on social media can contribute to the spread of misinformation and the fragmentation of public discourse. Echo chambers and filter

bubbles can isolate individuals within their own ideological bubbles, reinforcing existing beliefs and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. This polarization can impede productive dialogue and collective problem-solving, hindering efforts to challenge illiberalism effectively.

In navigating these challenges, it is crucial to recognize that the impact of online political participation on illiberal institutions is multifaceted and context dependent. To fully understand the implications of cross-border online political participation, it is important to consider the broader social, political, and economic context within which it operates. Socioeconomic inequalities, political polarization, and historical grievances can shape the dynamics of online political discourse and its real-life outcomes.

Third, social media platforms have emerged as vital spaces for emigrant political participation, facilitating the formation and development of emigrant citizenship. The case studies reveal the spillover effects of online conversations, demonstrating how discussions and interactions on social media can extend beyond the virtual realm to offline organizing for humanitarian aid and protest activities. This highlights the transformative potential of social media in empowering emigrants to actively intervene in domestic and international affairs of their homeland, thereby asserting their citizenship rights and engaging in the nation-building process. Emigrants, through their active participation on social media, challenge the notion of being absent citizens. Despite the physical distance from their home country, emigrants remain connected and engaged through these digital platforms. The digital age has enabled emigrants to maintain strong ties with their homeland and play an influential role, particularly during times of crisis such as the October Revolution in 2020 and the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. In moments of political and social upheaval, social media has become a powerful tool for emigrants to express their opinions, share information, and mobilize collective action.

Emigrant political participation on social media contributes to the larger nation-building project, which is a crucial precursor

for democratization. By actively engaging in discussions, debates, and advocacy, emigrants contribute to shaping the narrative surrounding their homeland and its political trajectory. Moreover, emigrant political participation on social media transcends borders, allowing emigrants in different countries to connect and collaborate. This transnational engagement facilitates the exchange of ideas, experiences, and resources, fostering a sense of solidarity and collective agency. The virtual space provided by social media platforms also enables emigrants to challenge traditional power structures and hierarchies. Emigrants can bypass official channels and institutions to voice their concerns directly to a wider audience, including policymakers, non-governmental organizations, and domestic voters. This direct engagement can exert pressure on home governments to address emigrants' needs and concerns, thus influencing policy decisions and promoting greater inclusivity. However, it is important to acknowledge that emigrant political participation on social media is not without its challenges and limitations. Emigrants may encounter obstacles such as censorship, surveillance, or harassment, particularly if they reside in authoritarian regimes. The influence of social media is also not evenly distributed, as factors such as digital access, language barriers, and socioeconomic disparities can shape the extent and impact of emigrants' online participation.

Lastly, social media platforms play a pivotal role in facilitating emigrant political participation and the formation of emigrant citizenship. Through online conversations, emigrants actively intervene in domestic and international affairs, demonstrating their political presence and contributing to the nation-building project. Emigrant political participation on social media holds transformative potential, empowering emigrants to assert their rights, advocate for change, and contribute to democratization efforts in their homeland. However, it is crucial to recognize the challenges and limitations that accompany emigrant political participation and to continue exploring ways to amplify emigrant voices and ensure their meaningful inclusion in political processes.

# Notes

1   For a discussion of non-state illiberal activism on social media see Abdoubaetova (2022).
2   Based on my analysis of polling data from the Central Electoral Commission (n.d.).

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