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# URBAN PROTESTS UNDER NEOLIBERAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN CENTRAL ASIA: FRAMING ANALYSIS

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**Abstract.** The advent of neoliberal reforms in Central Asia resulted in variegated economic, social, and political transformations. Although meant to encourage fast marketization of economy and empower the population, their adverse consequences seem to have spurred social mobilizations in the region. This paper seeks to provide an overview of theoretic frameworks for the analysis of urban protests as a form of activism in the region. Authoritarian neoliberalism accurately captures the roots of social activity in the cities which provide and reveal the scope and effects of neoliberal changes. Unlike those described in mainstream literature, local social mobilizations are grassroots in nature, occurring without the support of institutionalized actors.

**Keywords:** *urban protests, social mobilizations, authoritarian neoliberalism, Central Asia, civic activism.*

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## ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДАҒЫ НЕОЛИБЕРАЛДЫҚ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯЛАР ЖАҒДАЙЫНДАҒЫ ҚАЛАЛЫҚ НАРАЗЫЛЫҚТАРДЫ ТАЛДАУДЫҢ ТЕОРИЯЛЫҚ НЕГІЗДЕРІ

**Бахыткуль Токбергенова**

**Аңдатпа.** Орталық Азиядағы неолибералдық реформалардың пайда болуы әртүрлі экономикалық, әлеуметтік және саяси өзгерістерге әкелді. Экономиканы жылдам нарықтандыруды ынталандыру және халықтың мүмкіндіктерін кеңейту мақсатында

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болғанымен, олардың келеңсіз салдары аймақтағы әлеуметтік жұмылдыруға түрткі болған сияқты. Бұл мақала аймақтағы азаматтық белсенділіктің бір түрі ретінде қалалық наразылықтарды талдаудың теориялық негіздеріне шолу жасауға тырысады. Авторитарлық неолиберализм неолибералдық өзгерістердің ауқымы мен көлемін қамтамасыз ететін және ашатын қалалардағы әлеуметтік белсенділіктің тамырын дәл қамтиды. Негізгі әдебиеттерде сипатталғандардан айырмашылығы, жергілікті әлеуметтік жұмылдырулар институционалды субъектілердің қолдауынсыз жүзеге асады және дүниесі қарапайым болып табылады.

**Түйін сөздер:** қалалық наразылықтар, әлеуметтік мобилизациялар, авторитарлық неолиберализм, Орталық Азия, азаматтық белсенділік.

## ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКИЕ РАМКИ АНАЛИЗА ГОРОДСКИХ ПРОТЕСТОВ В УСЛОВИЯХ НЕОЛИБЕРАЛЬНЫХ ПРЕОБРАЗОВАНИЙ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

Бахыткуль Токбергенова

**Аннотация.** Проведение неолиберальных реформ в Центральной Азии привело к разнообразным экономическим, социальным и политическим преобразованиям. Хотя они предназначались для поощрения быстрой коммерциализации экономики и расширения прав и возможностей населения, их неблагоприятные последствия, по-видимому, стимулировали социальную мобилизацию в регионе. В этой статье делается попытка представить обзор теоретических основ анализа городских протестов как формы гражданского активизма в регионе. Авторитарный неолиберализм улавливает корни социальной активности в городах, которые обеспечивают и раскрывают масштабы неолиберальных изменений. В отличие от описанных в основной литературе, местные социальные мобилизации носят низовой характер и происходят без поддержки институционализированных акторов.

**Ключевые слова:** городские протесты, социальные мобилизации, авторитарный неолиберализм, Центральная Азия, гражданский активизм.

### Introduction

Social movement tracking in post-Soviet Central Asia has been a rather new development. The ACLED<sup>1</sup> facility, which keeps track of any violent or non-violent conflicts and protest events around the world and whose monitoring of Central Asia was initiated early in 2018, shows that throughout 2018-2020, different media, including newly-created ones and anonymous You-tube channels, reported

about 2874 events in the region. Those span demonstrations, political violence, and other events accounting for 1589 in Kazakhstan, 814 in Kyrgyzstan, 336 in Uzbekistan, 97 in Tajikistan, and 38 in Turkmenistan<sup>2</sup>. Many of these events take place in cities which seem to provide resources for activism. Big cities in Kazakhstan have witnessed various in scope and grievances protests: people tend to protest (albeit not necessarily en

<sup>1</sup> <https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard>

<sup>2</sup> Baisalov, E. (2021). <https://cabar.asia/ru/analiz-protestiv-kyrgyzstane-chem-oni-otlichayutsya-drug-ot-druga>

masse) against a large spectrum of issues ranging from car legislation to housing and city planning. These activisms are often driven by growing inequalities of power when governing bodies in the wake of marketization ‘collude’ with business structures striving to make the most of market interests, while citizens strive to maintain their right to urban resources.

Housing issues are among those which cause city residents to resort to social mobilization. Year 2006 in Almaty was marked by dramatic stories of housing protests which ended in violence and imprisoning of activists. The stories were rooted in controversial regulations and actions by the government [1].

The global financial crisis of 2008, on the one hand, seems to have considerably contributed to the worsening of the economic situation of large masses of population, providing impetus to the growth of grievances. On the other hand, the crisis has not stopped negative repercussions of neoliberal trends in doing construction business, causing further grievances and activism.

This paper seeks to situate the analysis of urban protests as a form of activism within the framework of social movement theories with a focus on relative mobilization theory. The theoretical framework of authoritarian neoliberalism seems to provide an adequate explanation and critical evaluation of neoliberal transformations causing city residents to mobilize and reclaim their right to the city space.

### **Authoritarian neoliberalism as a theoretical framework**

Although urban mobilisations have been registered in public discourse in

Central Asia, they have not yet received deep research and conceptualization. The studies of urban activism connect it with the adverse consequences of neoliberal reforms which were initiated with the support of international institutions after the collapse of the Soviet system in the early 1990-s in the wake of fast economic and political liberalization of newly independent states [1], [2].

Neoliberalism as a political philosophy stating that a ‘society’s economic and political institutions should be robustly liberal and capitalist, but supplemented by a constitutionally limited democracy and a modest state’ [3], seems to have been favoured by political elites in Central Asia and supported, as mentioned above, by global financial institutions. Cities are viewed within neoliberalism as main engines of economic opportunity, and neoliberal restructuring should improve society’s condition and empower citizens. However, neoliberal transformations played out in a peculiar way in Central Asia: market relations have existed alongside a strong state involvement. Neoliberal reforms led to economic liberalization, privatization and deregulation of urban planning [2], which meant that construction companies were granted permission to make most important decisions without taking into account basic public needs and rights to comfortable environment: social facilities like school, medical facilities, kindergarten, also transport infrastructure, recreation territory, clean air, and water, to name a few. The state in such a case maintains and protects various neoliberal processes from public pressure [4]. Related to urban governance, authoritarian neoliberalism may feature larger imbrication of political and economic

elites, laisses-fair planning and coercion [5], [6], whereby the state with its political power and business with its economic capacities actually seem to precondition each other's existence.

The preliminary research into and analysis of the data on urban protests in Central Asia show that neoliberal transformations in the region spurred the appearance of 'cleptocratic' political regimes characterized by the 'commodification' of all basic resources, including money, land, real estate, minerals, and public goods [2] impoverishing and indebting populations, increasing the divide between the wealthy and the poor.

Authoritarian neoliberalism accurately captures the processes occurring in some parts of the world, including Central Asia. Bruff & Tansel wrote that within research into authoritarian neoliberalism, there are two focal points: one that looks at the 'intertwinement of authoritarian statisms and neoliberal reforms', and another looking into different transformations of main 'societal sites in capitalism' including states, households, workplaces, city spaces [7, p. 239].

### **Overview of key social movement theories**

Urban protest as one of this study's key concepts is understood as a form of urban activism. According to Martin<sup>1</sup>, activism refers to actions going beyond the realm of conventional politics and is present in any political environment. Since its claims centre around building awareness about a contradictory situation

or fact, without claiming political power, it receives less attention than conventional politics. Urban activism, as the name suggests, is limited to urban spaces and can comprise a wide variety of forms of social movement activity. The latter may take such various forms as wearing protest badges, boycotting a product, taking part in a protest demonstration, signing a petition [8] or marching, etc. This study limits urban protest to the activism related to the well-being of the city, to the attempts at solving city problems or affecting the city shape, architecture, and fabric. It excludes from conceptualizing focus large-scale violence-involving social protests that occurred in Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan.

Social movement as an organised collective effort by a group of people to bring about or hinder social change in the presence of certain grievances was systematically theorised in the 20<sup>th</sup> century going through transformations when theories failed to match happening events. The contagion theory<sup>2</sup> observed activities of an irrational crowd susceptible to emotional reaction, e.g., panic, acting without goals or organisation. The mass society theory<sup>3</sup> aimed to explain social behaviour, among other reasons, within ideologies of Nazism or Communism positing that in densely populated big cities, socially isolated people may be inclined to join a social movement for reasons different from those of the movement and be manipulated by strong charismatic leaders. The deprivation theory explained that social movements are born when people feel deprived of a good, resource, status. Hereby, the relative deprivation (as

<sup>1</sup> Martin, B. (2007). Activism, social and political. Published in Gary L. Anderson and Kathryn G. Herr (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007), pp. 19-27. <https://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/07Anderson.html>

<sup>2</sup> Le Bon, G. 2002 [1895]. *The Crowd*. Dover Publications.

<sup>3</sup> Kornhauser, W. 2013 [1959]. *The Politics of Mass Society*. Routledge.

opposed to absolute) deprivation theory<sup>1</sup> underlines the significance of the difference between the real and imagined states of things for the people to come together for a social movement. Still, to provide a more thorough picture of why and how social movements come to being, more research has been done.

Contemporary studies of social movement often refer to resource mobilisation theory, political process, structural strain, and newer social movement theories [9], [10]. Generally, for a social movement to succeed, certain material (financial) and human resources are necessary, as well as time, skills, leadership, network connections. There need to exist institutionalised channels (resource mobilisation theory) of the social movement and political opportunity structure (political process theory), whereby people's choices whether to join a social movement activity depend on the presence of favourable political conditions (or absence thereof), e.g., friendly or, by contrast, violently repressive government, in which case people would likely choose to abstain from activism and wait until more favourable and promising opportunity presents itself.

The mainstream literature mostly aimed to explain social movements of the Western societies of North America and Northern and Western Europe, including feminist and Civil Rights movements, later, LGBTQ and environmental movements, among others. The authors, especially so within the resource mobilisation strand, pin down the role of non-governmental organizations

and other social movement organisations (SMOs) in spurring and leading mass mobilisation [11]. With respect to urban protests in Central Asia, this literature does not seem to fully account for the kinds of protests that occur in the region. A cursory look at the instances of such protests suggests that they are largely non-institutionalized, occur ad hoc and without the leadership of SMOs.

Contemporary studies of urban activism offer own insights to theorizing social movement. Schoene [8] claimed that not only do big cities serve as suitable places for activism, but city space may act as generator of opportunities for activism and future social change. Referring to relative deprivation and resource management theories, the author observed that urbanity implies the presence of such resources as funds, organisations, and educated people. Generalised trust as another structural resource may be lacking since 'the people of former communist states in the East display much lower trust both in those around them and in social institutions than the peoples of Western and Northern Europe', and that wealthier areas are more prone to producing politically and socially active citizens [8, p. 6]. The same research concludes that people in former communist societies of Eastern Europe are much less likely to resort to stronger forms of resistance like boycotting a product or protesting.

Urbanity in research into urban social movement activities in post-socialist societies of East and Central Europe is argued to create instances of small uneventful grassroots mobilisations which may not attract mass media attention [12]. Scholars of this strand argue the need to 'capture and conceptualise' the processes

<sup>1</sup> Merton, R. (1949; rev. ed. 1968). *The Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: Free Press; Gurney, J. & Tierney, K. (1982). Relative deprivation and social movements: A critical look on twenty years of theory and research. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 23(1), 33-47.

going on in post-socialist societies to better understand civil societies' evolution in different contexts [12]. They, primarily focus on the workings of local grassroots activism as opposed to externally sponsored bureaucratic organisations. Moreover, as Jacobson & Korolchuk pointed out, these mobilisations address ordinary people's grievances related to neoliberal urbanisation [12], show how people become involved in politics and run for city government positions, and, finally, illustrate how they overcome social fragmentation of former socialist societies determined by the lack of resources and generalised trust in each other [12], [13], [14].

### **Gaps in existing knowledge**

Amid the literature on social movement, including urban protests as a form of activism, which offers multiple insights into the story of civil society's evolving in modern democracies, Central Asia remains underrepresented. The societies of the region may even project an impression of being to a great extent passive and indifferent towards their own fates, except for politically motivated violent protests which are beyond the focus of studying urban protests. The local literature underlines the importance of taking structural measures in preventing and resolving social conflicts, supporting civic participation through institutions, much in line with the mainstream scholarship [15], [16]. However, mass media have increasingly reported instances of spontaneous and leaderless urban protests in Kazakhstan's cities of Almaty and Nur-Sultan. City residents seem to mobilize to protect their basic rights to comfortable environment when it comes down to the adverse effects of excessive housing and

infill construction.

Conventional scholarship on social mobilisations focuses on the leading role of SMOs in organizing citizens, which can hardly be applied to small-scale, mainly spontaneous protests in Central Asian cities. One distinct feature of those protests is that most of them, including urban protests against neoliberal reconstructions in the city, are leaderless in that they are not led by SMOs or political parties, but are grassroots in their nature. The studies of urban mobilisations in Central and Eastern Europe seem to be the most relevant for the research into Central Asia since the civil societies of the region are (1) characterised by a common socialist past, and (2) prone to activism, albeit in various context-defined forms.

There is a lack of literature on urban activism in the region of Central Asia, although some scholarship researches how populations respond to neoliberal changes transforming the economic, political, and social landscape of the region. Satybaldieva researched the reaction of the working-class Kyrgyz citizens to neoliberal developments, who resent the established market values and resort to creating alternative positive self-identities resenting consumerist, but welcoming spiritual religious values [17]. Civic activism in Kyrgyzstan's Bishkek has covered very different forms encompassing art exhibitions, interest clubs [18], urban interventions gathering large amounts of citizens and attracting city authorities' attention<sup>1</sup>.

In Kazakhstan the stories of citizens' protests largely centre around infill development which began in 2016-2017<sup>2</sup>. Newly sprouting high-risers had residents

<sup>1</sup> Activist R. Valentin kyzy presented @peshcombishkek in 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Rastushchie tempy stroitelstva v Almaty // <https://kazpravda.kz/n/rastushchie-tempy-stroitelstva-v-almaty-zastavlyayut-iskat-novye-sposoby-sderzhvaniya-zastroyki-starogo-goroda/>

of corresponding neighbourhoods mobilize and come outdoors to protest against the construction that was not agreed with them and spurred lots of worries on their part, like threatening transport collapse, air condition deterioration, lack of social infrastructure and recreation zones among the most important. Preliminary analysis of mass media stories shows that the number of such stories has been increasing since 2019 – the time period which was also mentioned by experts and activists alike. While, for instance, there were 7 stories of urban civic protests in mass media in 2021, the same amount of them appeared only in the first half of year 2022. How far it is connected to the ongoing political processes is yet to be researched.

Studying urban protests as a form of activism in Central Asia should (1) add to the existing knowledge on the forms, structure, motives, driving forces of urban social movement activity in different geographic contexts and (2) describe how the ongoing urban activism in Central Asia contributes to the evolution of civil society in the region.

## Conclusions

Apparently socially passive populations of Central Asia present cases of urban

protests that are worth scholarly attention. While the instances are diverse in form, size, and frequency in different geographic contexts, they are far from being non-existent.

The research into urban protests in Central Asia finds that the theoretical framework of authoritarian neoliberalism accurately captures transformational processes local societies have been undergoing with the advent of capitalism (neoliberalism) largely incorporated into governance. Some of its consequences, when applied to urban space, result in chaotic urbanization, deregulated decision making on vital issues concerning housing and infill construction, growing inequalities, disruption of social infrastructure and environment, to name a few.

Amid growing grievances citizens may choose to mobilize and resort to various forms of urban activism, including protests. Social movement activity in Central Asia needs description and conceptualization since mainstream literature on social movement seems to focus on its institutionalization, SMO-led character, while that methodological approach does not fully account for the local grassroots mobilizations.

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