

Civil Society conceptions in the Kyrgyz Republic

An explorative analysis of the influence of a hegemonic discourse on the structure of and power
distribution in the Kyrgyz civil society

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Abstract

Engaging civil society has been a goal of the development industry since the end of the Cold War. In Kyrgyzstan, international efforts at civil society building have been central to the large and economically important development aid sector that developed after independence in 1991. This sector promotes economic, political, and societal changes through financing projects, reforms and the actors who embrace their conditions and ideas.

This paper examines the definitions of civil society offered by development aid donors and the local actors who are the recipients of this aid. It finds that the discourse on civil society has the properties of a hegemonic discourse, which is able to structure society by empowering or excluding certain actors. Through interviews with Kyrgyz nongovernmental organizations it then provides an insight into the self-perceptions of Kyrgyz civil society and finds a possible transfer of the importance of discursive power for material power, not only in the political but also the nongovernmental, or people's, sector: civil society.

Abstract

Aufbau und Stärkung der Zivilgesellschaft gehört seit dem Ende des Kalten Krieges zu einem der wichtigsten Ziele der Entwicklungsindustrie. In Kirgistan ist der Entwicklungshilfesektor insgesamt und mit ihm die Anstrengungen zum Aufbau einer aktiven Zivilgesellschaft seit der Unabhängigkeit des Landes extrem angewachsen und mittlerweile wirtschaftlich essentiell für das Land. Der Sektor fördert wirtschaftliche, politische und soziale Veränderungen im Land durch finanzielle Unterstützung von Projekten, Reformen und Akteuren, die bereit sind, die neuen Ideen und Konzepte anzunehmen.

Diese Arbeit untersucht die Definitionen von Zivilgesellschaft, wie sie einerseits von Entwicklungsgeldgebern und andererseits von lokalen Akteuren als Empfänger dieser Gelder geäußert werden. Es zeigt sich, dass es sich um einen hegemonialen Diskurs handelt, der über die Macht verfügt, die Gesellschaft durch Ein- und Ausschluss bestimmter Akteure zu strukturieren. Durch Interviews mit kirgisischen Nicht-Regierungs-Organisationen vermittelt die Arbeit einen ersten Eindruck in die Selbstwahrnehmung der kirgisischen Zivilgesellschaft und überträgt die Annahme, dass diskursive Macht enormen Einfluss auf materielle Macht nimmt, vom politischen und wirtschaftlichen Sektor auf die Sphäre, die eigentlich die „der Bürger“ ist: die Zivilgesellschaft.

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ABBREVIATIONS LIST

CA	Central Asia
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CPP	Call for Project Proposals
CS	Civil Society
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CSSP	Civil society strengthening program
FSU	Former Soviet Union
GNI	Gross National Income
GPSA	Global Partnership for Social Accountability
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
IO	International Organization
KR	Kyrgyz Republic
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSA	Non-State Actor(s)
SU	Soviet Union
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WB	World Bank

1. Introduction

“Growth of the civil society sector is very important for Kyrgyzstan. It enhances the lives of Kyrgyz citizens and is the most important resource of the Kyrgyz Republic¹ to improve the country”

(Michael Green, USAID at the first annual conference for non-profit management in Kyrgyzstan, June 4, 2014).

Building and strengthening civil society (CS), especially in Post-Soviet countries, is viewed as an essential component of global development programs. Therefore, many programs are dedicated to strengthen and support local CS actors in their attempts to change the situation of their countries.

In the Kyrgyz Republic, a land-locked, mountainous Central Asian country, many CS strengthening programs (CSSP) have been implemented since its independence from Soviet Union (SU) in 1991. Given its small size and population, Kyrgyzstan disposes over a large and economically, politically and socially important development aid business sector. In 2012, the total incoming aid was \$ 472.9 million, which at 7.8% of its Gross National Income (GNI) ranks Kyrgyzstan 38th in the world (World Bank 2014).

While donor organizations state that the CSSP funds strengthen local ownership and empowerment, there is evidence that some actors are excluded from support and that the country's economy has not become more independent from foreign money as a result of the CSSPs (Jailobaeva 2012).

One factor that may contribute to this ongoing dependence is the difference in how donors and Kyrgyz civil society organizations (CSOs) conceptualize the term ‘civil society’. Through a short outline of CS theory and hegemony theory (Chapter 2), the author attempts to explain how the discourse and conceptions of civil society by donors, mirrored in their practice (Chapter 3), might marginalize and exclude local, Kyrgyz conceptions of CS.

This suggests a link between the conceptions of CS held by organizations and their power and influence within Kyrgyz society, leading to the following research question:

Does the adoption of significant elements of the hegemonic discourse about civil society influence the distribution of power in the civil society development sector in the Kyrgyz Republic?

To answer this question, this paper provides insight into the CS sector and the views of local actors through key-informant interviews with CSOs in Kyrgyzstan and assesses to what extent the donor's conception of CS has been adopted by local CS actors (Chapter 4). The underlying **hypothesis** is the following: *the closer the identity of CS actors (2) to the hegemonic discourse (1) as propagated in CS*

¹ While the official name of the country is Kyrgyz Republic, it is often used interchangeably with the older name Kyrgyzstan. In this paper both names will be used without distinction.

development practice the better is their respective position inside the CS sector (3). Figure 1 illustrates this process:

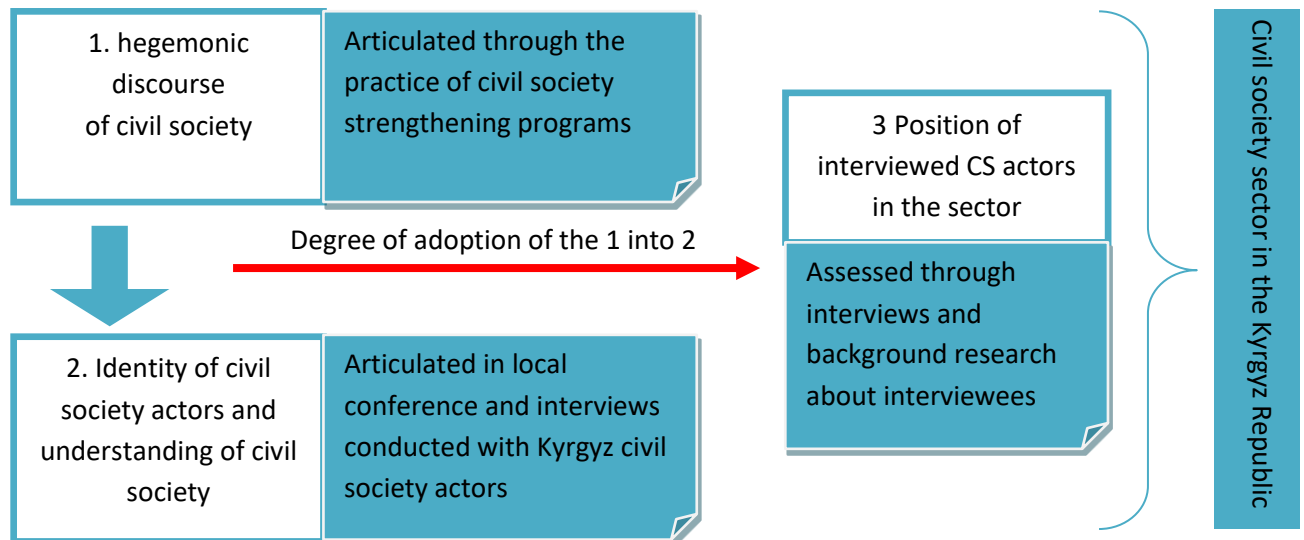


Figure 1: Visualized outline of the study, showing the main elements of the main hypothesis of the paper, their relation towards each other and the instrument to assess them.

2. Theory - Civil society and hegemony

This chapter includes a short introduction to the current state of CS theory and hegemony theory. It then links these two theoretical streams to produce the theoretical basis in order to identify elements of the hegemonic discourse.

2.1. Civil society theory – development of a meaning

The concept of CS continues to be fashionable in both practical development cooperation and theories which analyze the concept especially in a historical sense (e.g. Schade 2002; Trentmann 2004). The concept became popular in the wake of Enlightenment (Parekh 2004: 16). Linked with modernization theory, CS theory was used to contrast “civilized and commercial society” in Europe with other “backward” and “primitive” societies that lacked the concept of a functioning CS and were dominated by their leaders (ibid.). This evolved into the idea of CS as a counterpart to the state and a third sector between the state and the market. This idea, first espoused by Hegel remained the dominant conception of CS for a long time. All CS theories that have come after Hegel² draw on his work and view CS as embedded in relations with but generally detached from the state (see: Schade 2002: 15).

While Hegel (1821) viewed CS as a double-edged sword, with the potential for positive and negative outcomes, in the 21st century CS is largely perceived as a positive force. Since the end of the 20th century, when CS actors triumphed over authoritarian states, ‘civil society’ has been framed as “a solution to social, economic, and political dilemmas by politicians and thinkers from left, right, and all perspectives in between” (Chandhoke 2007: 608). It is seen as inherently positive (Lingnau 2003: 233), completely without coercion (Parekh 2004: 23; Glasius et.al. 2004: 20) and as by default linked to democratic values (Schade 2002:33) or “sine qua non of democracy” (Buxton 2011: 34).

Civil society is most often placed in a triadic model of (1) state, (2) for-profit (or business/market) and (3) non-profit (mostly NGOs) actors (Buxton 2011: 40). Within this model, the non-profit sector provides services instead of the state, and empowers or builds capacity within society (Anheier 1999; Schade 2002) It is also seen as a “buffer zone, strong enough to keep both state and market in check, thereby preventing each from becoming too powerful and dominating” (Anheier 2001).

While widely accepted, this model of CS is not without critics. Common critique is that there is no standard definition for civil society, leaving activists, citizens and researchers with the accusation that it has “ceased to mean anything” (Chandhoke 2007: 609). Others question the positive implications of

² This includes Marx, De Tocqueville, Gramsci, Parsons, Habermas and Putnam. To avoid misunderstandings it should be mentioned that everyone of these theorists had their own approach and they differ to a significant degree, e.g. regarding the democratic (Putnam) or revolutionary potential of civil society (Marx and Gramsci) or its potential to keep a nation together in solidarity (esp. American writers like de Toqueville and Putnam) (see: Schade 2002; Parekh 2004).

CS building by external actors. Instead they advocate for localization, a concept, rooted in post-development theory³, believing that CS development should come from within the society (Lingnau 2003; Glasius et.al. 2004). Advocates for this line of thought demand the West⁴ to withdraw from exercising power and knowledge over other societies (Banuri 1990: 97).

The meaning attached to civil society has changed over time and is being constantly contested. Despite these criticisms CS development is largely viewed in a positive light, and framed as counterforce to authoritarianism and as a powerful force in society next to market and state.

2.2. Analytical framework: hegemony theory and discourse

While belonging to a post-structuralist school, Laclau and Mouffe also draw on Gramsci's Post-Marxist attempt to include cultural processes into the notion of hegemony. Moreover, they refer to Foucault's discourse theory expanding his definition of discourse from mere speech acts to "all social practices and relations"⁵ (Howarth 2000: 101; Stäheli 2006: 256).

As seen in 2.1, competing definitions, or *meanings*, of civil society co-exist. Following the theory, all of these meanings attributed to one term, cannot coexist within the dominant, or hegemonic, discourse of a society and so a *surplus of meaning* exists (see Howarth 2000: 103). The same concept can be applied to society as a whole, where no dominant discourse can include all elements of society. This creates a field called *the social* where competing discourses negotiate through *articulation*.

Following the theory, identities are made up of a combination of meanings. Identities are related in terms of the differences, both internally among their meanings and externally with other identities (see Stäheli 2006: 257)⁶. The importance of differences means that discourses are always defined negatively because the elements do not carry a meaning by themselves but develop meaning only in delineation to other elements inside, and outside (Laclau/Mouffe 1991: 185). Because of this negativity the outer meanings constantly threaten to flood and disrupt the current discourse and the structure of *the social*. This means that a specific discourse consisting of the predominant meaning attributed at that given time can only be partially fixated (Nonhoff 2007: 175). To fixate and stabilize the current

³ Post-development theory (which in turn is more or less based on theories of post-colonialism) rejects all development efforts of outside actors and calls for local knowledge and community action from within. "Respect for cultural diversity [...] prohibits generalizations. There are numerous ways of living a "good life, and it is up to each society to invent its own" (Rist 1997: 241).

⁴ I want to try to go beyond the assumption of „the West“ and „the Rest“ in development, which is why I put it in quotation marks. Throughout the paper I will try to avoid this concept of simplified categorization of actors. However, this simplistic differentiation is sometimes used in post-development theory which is why I cited it that way (see: Ziai 2006)

⁵ One example is the "Yes I do" at a wedding, which is inextricably linked to the action of exchanging rings (Howarth 2000: 104).

⁶ An example for this is the construction of national identities, where there are different discursive elements attached to citizens of the respective nationality, like 'reliability' or 'honesty'. These are all different and have a different meaning but create through their connectedness an identity which stands against the identities of other nationalities that determine the outside (Stäheli 2006: 260).

discourse and its meanings, *hegemonic articulations* are made by actors who share the identity of the discourse. Hegemonic articulations seek to achieve an *imaginary closure* of the discourse to partially fix it. This is only possible through the use of *empty signifiers*, an essential element for the creation of *hegemony* (Laclau 1996: 43). Because the *empty signifier* lacks a definite meaning (Stäheli 2006: 262), it totally levels the inner discursive difference, ideally allowing the entire identity to be represented in one very general term (Stäheli 2006: 261). This term lacks meaning on its own and only takes on meaning from the other terms they are associated with it and the context of society. Laclau explains this idea with the example of the empty signifier “order” which he says can only become the powerful *signifier* of a discourse in a certain political context that is lacking this state (Laclau 1996: 44).

“In this sense various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack [...]. As society changes over time this process of identification will be always precarious and reversible and, as the identification is no longer automatic, different projects or wills will try to hegemonize the empty signifiers of the absent community”

(Laclau 1996: 44ff.).

2.3. Civil society as hegemonic articulation

“The idea of civil society has proved very elusive, escaping conceptual grasps and evading surefooted negotiation of the concept itself”

(Chandhoke 2007: 607).

For the case of civil society, Laclau and Mouffe’s theories can help to explain the changes in meaning that CS has experienced throughout different periods, as outlined in 2.1. There are hints suggesting that the term ‘civil society’ might represent an *empty signifier*, since it has an elusive character (Chandhoke 2007) and its meaning, as defined by donors, is too broad to operationalize⁷. At the same time, a lot of positive effects are attributed to it. As a “key partner for development efforts” CS serves especially to “empower poor and marginalized groups” (World Bank 2011). It is also “critical to national ownership of development processes, democratic governance, and the quality and relevance of official development programs” (UNDP 2014). Not only the elusiveness and emptiness of the definitions used in CS practice, but also the theoretical framing of CS as the antonym of authoritarianism, as was shown in 2.1, can be seen as hints that CS articulations are part of an attempt to promote the identity that goes with it and partially fixate the hegemonic meaning and understanding of the concept.

However, while the concept of Laclau and Mouffe is of importance to the ontological dimension of social theory, it was never meant to conduct empirical analysis. Nevertheless, Nonhoff (2007) has tried to establish a framework to make this possible, while at the same time acknowledging that it is

⁷ “[T]he term civil society refer[s] to the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) therefore refer to a wide of array of organizations: community groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labor unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations” (World Bank 2013)

impossible to identify and categorize an entire discourse especially in an ongoing process which has such a long history, like the one of CS building in the Kyrgyz Republic⁸. The goal, therefore, can only be to improve the understanding of “the murmur of discourses” (174).

Laclau defines “demands” as the primary elements of a discourse (Laclau 2005: 73). According to Nonhoff, in order to understand the discourse it is essential to analyze the meanings an identity is composed of and to represent the main demands, rather than simply the meaningless empty signifier⁹ (Nonhoff 2007: 190ff). An important part of the analysis is also the embedding of the findings in the political context of power. The power of a hegemonic discourse is dependent on its adoption by the population and can be enhanced by the “common will of political-societal forces” (Nonhoff 2007: 184). For example, these forces can control important aspects of power, like the distribution of knowledge and access to the institutional sphere of decision-making to restrict the power of other counter-hegemonic discourses (see also: Nonhoff 2007: 185).

To link Nonhoff’s operationalization of Laclau’s and Mouffe’s theory to the research question, it is necessary to identify major features (demands) of the CS discourse from articulations of actors, who dispose over power in regards to access and knowledge (donors) and to examine the adoption of these meanings and demands by the population (CS). Following Nonhoff (2007: 184), the theory backs the hypothesis that the level of adoption of the hegemonic articulations can improve or hamper CSOs access to material power.

⁸ For the importance of the development aid sector for the context of Kyrgyzstan see Chapter 3.

⁹ As an example Nonhoff states that articulations like the following can be seen as extensive demands because they strive to represent the entire social: “[a]s long as our economic system is social market economy, the general material welfare will exist, which is the aim of the people” (Nonhoff 2007: 183).

3. Civil Society in practice

“From a unitary model of society led by the communist party, the republics of [the] FSU have moved at different rates and in different ways to a democratic/capitalist model with separation of public, private, and civil society sectors” (Buxton 2011: 40)

This chapter reviews the existing literature on CS in Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan, examining, underlying features of the CS discourse in the Kyrgyz development sector.

3.1. Civil Society practice in Central Asia

In order to understand the current conceptions of CS in Central Asia¹⁰ it is important to take a look into the historical context of societal organization in the region. Before being integrated into the Soviet Empire, Central Asian societies were primarily¹¹ nomadic pastoralists¹². Traditional forms of association played a significant role in the region, especially family and clan linkages (Giffen et.al. 2005: 88; Freizer 2004: 131; Buxton 2011: 45). In Kyrgyzstan, the Central Asian Republic with the most tribal groups, there is evidence of consensual decision-making, such as the election of leaders and the negotiation of pastureland. Historical institutions for decision-making included the *aksakal* (elder’s council) and the *mahallas* (district committees) as well as traditional practices like *ashar* (voluntary labor from the community for the community) (Giffen et.al. 2005: 79).

Many claim that civil society did not exist during the SU because complete control by the state (Petric 2011: 43) erased all positive values and starting points for a “civil culture” (Roy 2002: 126f). However, the associations founded during the Soviet period, even though the government often strictly controlled them, still influence social organization and interactions within society. Many of these activities like the *subbotniki*¹³ built on traditional practices like *ashar* and certain traditional networks even “undermined and used state power for their own ends” to secure benefits for their peer group (Roy 2002: 128).

Despite these long-existing groups, the *term* ‘civil society’ was not frequently used until independence. External actors brought the concept to Central Asia through Western organizations and interest groups

¹⁰ There are different definitions of what is being framed as “Central Asia”. Mostly the term includes five to six countries, namely: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and, depending on the context, Afghanistan. In this paper, the author uses the narrower definition, excluding Afghanistan, both because the country does not share the experience of being part of the SU, and because of the recent war and intervention.

¹¹ With the exception of the Uzbeks who settled along the famous Silk Road cities and the Tajiks who have always been a settled people, “for the rest of the Central Asian peoples, however, the nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle was the norm” (Giffen et.al. 2005: 73). For more information about the nomadic history of Central Asia and especially Kyrgyzstan see: Anderson 1999, Paul 2012.

¹² Pastoralists are defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as follows: “Exclusive pastoralists are livestock producers who grow no crops and simply depend on the sale or exchange of animals and their products to obtain foodstuffs. Such producers are most likely to be nomads, i.e. their movements are opportunistic and follow pasture resources in a pattern that varies from year to year” (FAO 2001).

¹³ “Obligatory volunteerism” (Giffen et.al. 2005: 95) for people to work on their free day (Saturday = subbota) for the common good.

that entered the region in the early 90s. These actors focus was to overcome the legacy of the Soviet system through democratization (Giffen et.al. 2005: 109) and economic liberalization, intended to lead to a “transition west-ward” (Buxton 2011: 10). The decline of the Soviet empire aligned with the growing consensus that civil society was the “ideal elixir to counter the ills of the contemporary world” (Chandhoke 2007: 609). Thus, by the end of the 1990s, tens of millions of money had been committed to develop Central Asian CS.

3.2. Background – Kyrgyzstan: a “donor’s paradise”

“If the Netherlands are the country where the tulips flourish, Kyrgyzstan is the country where NGOs proliferate”

(Edil Baysalov, president of the Coalition for Civil Society and Democracy, in: Petric 2013: 39)

Kyrgyzstan became independent in 1991. During the early 90s, the unexpected independence led to an economic crisis and at the same time a rapid growth in the non-governmental sector. The nascent sector mostly focused on service-delivery, due to the sudden availability of external funding and the state’s inability to address the increasing poverty of the population (see: Buxton 2009: 46; Giffen et.al. 2005: 110). While other newly independent Central Asian states were equipped with substantial natural resources and larger internal markets and attracted foreign investment, Kyrgyzstan lacks resource wealth and the only branch that flourished in the country was international loans and aid, which led to an increase in the formation of new NGOs (Connery 2000: 3). By the early 2000s there were more than 3000 NGOs registered in Kyrgyzstan (Marat 2005: 268).

The explosive growth of NGOs certainly contributed to the general vision of Kyrgyzstan as an “island of democracy” in Central Asia:

“By many accounts, the Kyrgyz Republic is an example of democratic development in post-Soviet Central Asia, one where the institutions of “civil society” are growing rapidly”

(Kasybekov 1999: 71)

Following the revolutions in 2005 and 2010¹⁴, aid to Kyrgyzstan and the number of registered NGOs continued to increase (Jailobaeva 2012). It does appear that donor aid may have peaked after the 2010 revolution and has now started to decline (ACSSC 2013: 11). ACSSC counted 10.627 registered NGOs in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2013 (2013:7), of which 33% are rated as “active” (ACSSC 2013: 12). In general, they note a remarkable urban-rural divide within the NGO-sector in Kyrgyzstan (also: Buxton: 2009: 44) with 63% of the “active” NGOs located in the two biggest cities of the country – Bishkek and Osh.

¹⁴ For an overview about the riots in 2005 and 2010, which are sometimes referred to as revolutions, see: Schmitz/Wolters 2012.

3.3. Practice and the discourse: project proposals

A large NGO sector is generally seen as an indicator of a healthy civil society. However, many analysts criticize Kyrgyzstan's civil society as dominated and manipulated by donor interests (Petric 2013). But to what degree does this business sector not only exert influence on the economy but also represents a hegemonic attempt with influence on cultural understandings of civil society? Following Laclau and Nonhoff, we need to understand the demands associated with the empty signifier civil society¹⁵ (see Chapter 2). One way to do this is to examine the wide-spread practice of project proposals, whereby Calls for Proposals (CPPs) are issued by donor organizations and typically lay out project goals and the donors' vision for CS development.

A search for CPPs focused on CS strengthening in the Kyrgyz Republic during the last two years returned three results from the European Union (EU), the World Bank's Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). A content analysis of the guidelines for applicants, included with these CPPs, revealed often-used terms which here represent the *meanings*.

The most frequently mentioned term was **civil society** which often appeared in combination with verbs like **strengthening, building, or enhancing (capacity of)**, indicating a perceived lack of civil society (or its capacity) and thus giving hints that civil society could be an empty signifier (see Chapter 2).

All three donors require respondents to the CPPs to be a "registered **NGO, NSA or CSO**¹⁶", excluding other actors from access to the resources to strengthen civil society. This supports the assumption that registered CSOs are seen as the most vital agents for **civil society development** (also: Chandhoke 2007: 608). Also the importance of **projects** for a vibrant CS development is clear by the frequent use of the term. Both, the **organizations** and the way they shall act (**project, initiative**) are therefore determined as the way to fill the lack of civil society.

The negative outside of the identity on the other hand is shown in terms like: **poverty, difficulties, and challenges**, as brought about by the lack of projects and NGOs (the positive meanings). **Government** and **legislation** are mentioned in the context of needing **improvement** and **support** to function **efficiently**. This is where the CS understanding becomes most clear. CS actors (namely NGOs) are seen to have a democratizing impact on society as a counterpart to the state. Surprisingly, the term **democracy** was rarely mentioned, especially compared to other terms that basically go in line with it,

¹⁵ Reminder: it is not proven that the term is an empty signifier. However, framing it here as such helps us in that the aim of the paper is not to press assessed meanings into existing categories but keep them open as far as possible. If certain terms attributed to the empty signifier can be extracted we can get a broader picture of the equivalency chain that is represented by the signifier without putting our own presuppositions in the fore.

¹⁶ The authors of the three CPPs chose to use different abbreviations to refer to civil society actors, which in their definition are interchangeable.

like **participation** and **accountability**. These meanings, as well as **knowledge**, **sustainability**, and above all, **development** represent both the goals and the preferred way to achieve them.

Cooperation, shown by words like **network**, **partnership**, **dialogue** and **support** is a very important theme in the CPPs on three different levels. First, projects should **cooperate with, assist and support** state bodies to ensure CS actors are heard on the national level. Second, but less commonly mentioned **local** level partnerships with **citizens** or other **local NGOs** should be formed. Third, donors perceive themselves as **enablers** and **partners** for **civil society** who through their **projects** pave the way to a positive **sustainable development** and an active, **strong, capable civil society**.

More thorough analysis into CPPs undoubtedly will uncover additional conclusions and aspects, but these terms provide already a first insight into the hegemonic discourse surrounding the CS development in Kyrgyzstan.

4. The case study

After having derived the important elements of the hegemonic discourse in Chapter 3, qualitative interviews were conducted and a conference visited to identify the degree of adoption of the discourse by local actors. A convenience sample was used and thus this study does not attempt to be representative of Kyrgyzstan nor the Kyrgyz people. Rather, it provides a first look at the ideas of CS actors in Kyrgyzstan. In this chapter, the research results are outlined and linked to the hegemonic conceptions from Chapter 3.

4.1. Case study procedure and background

Four interviews were conducted in two locations in Kyrgyzstan. The interview subjects were chosen disparate organizations to get a broader perspective of CS conceptions. Given the urban-rural divide in the sector, two urban and two rural representatives were selected. Rural interviews were conducted in Talas oblast¹⁷. A 2013 report about the non-governmental sector in Kyrgyzstan shows that the distribution of “active”¹⁸ NGOs is lowest in Talas, with only 2% of all active organizations and highest in Bishkek with 53% of active organizations (ACSSC, 2013: 13):

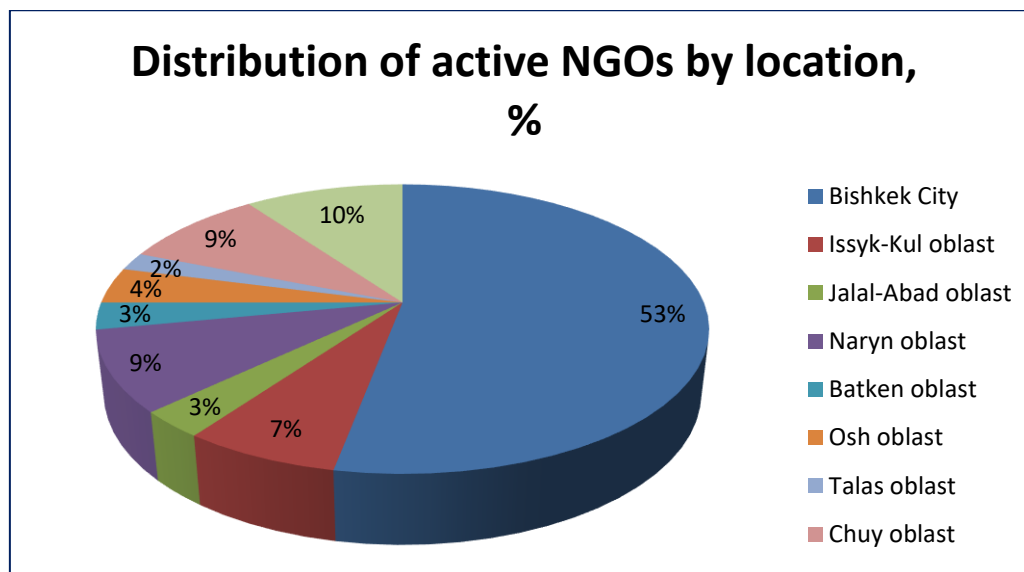


Figure 2: Distribution of active NGOs by location, copied from source: ACSSC 2013:13

Thus, Talas and Bishkek provide a reasonable urban-rural perspective and represent the areas where the CS is least and most active. However, both locations are in the Northern part of the country and therefore cannot reflect the significant North-South divide within the country. This weakness of the analysis is due to time and resource constraints.

¹⁷ There are 7 oblasts in Kyrgyzstan: Chuy, Talas, Naryn, Jalal-Abad, Issyk-Kul, Batken and Osh.

¹⁸ All the organizations that could be reached by their contacts were rated active. Out of the approximately 10.600 registered NGOs in Kyrgyzstan these were only 3.036 organizations.

Name	Айкол (Aiköl)	Нур Бала (Nurbala)	Арыш Инвест (Arysh Invest)	Свободное поколение (liberal ways) За реформы и результат (for reforms and result)
Location	Talas City	Talas City	Bishkek	Bishkek
Date of Interview	May 16, 2014	May 16, 2014	May 27, 2014	June 5, 2014
Contact person (name & position)	Gulmira Temirbekova (head of organization) Aimira Djumasheva (program manager)	Zhyldyz Turdugulova (chairperson)	Gulbara Turdumatova (chairperson of the board and director)	Timur Shaikhutdinov (chairman for strategic development) (coordinator of network)
Mission of organization	Strengthen the potential of non-profit organizations to enhance their capacity to support local citizens	Provide access and integration for the best possible development of children with disabilities, orphans and children living in difficult situations	Provide access to services and for a better livelihood for internal migrants active in the construction sector in Bishkek	Achieve a reform of the current police forces for a better safety in Kyrgyzstan, a more efficient government system and a society in which authorities listen to the voices and needs of civil society and normal citizens.
Type of organization	NGO	NGO	Microcredit agency	NGO-network
Range of activities	Talas oblast	Talas oblast	Bishkek City	Kyrgyzstan
Staff members	8	6 + 2 (part-time)	16	4 + volunteers network: 25 organizations
Foundation year	2001	2009	2012	2007 NGO 2012 network
Major international donors and partners	Misereor, International Organization on Migration, OECE, ACSSC, National Democratic Institute, Eurasia Foundation Central Asia	Every Child, Peace Corps, Soros, Eurasian Foundation in Central Asia, Fond ICCO, Ministry of Social Development of the KR	ICCO Cooperation, CAMFA II, Arysh NGO	SaferWorld, IRG (International Resource Group), East-West-Management Institute, Freedom House

Table 1: Background information to the interviewed organizations As can be seen in Table 1, all of the CSOs interviewed were relatively small, with varying missions. In Talas, *Nurbala* is engaged in traditional social work with children with disabilities and *Aiköl* provides capacity building for youth and smaller NGOs, while trying to enhance cooperation between CSOs in Talas. In Bishkek, *Arysh Invest* is a microcredit agency that provides loans for internal migrants working in Bishkek's construction industry. Liberal ways is focused on the management of the

nationwide network *for reform and results* (*За реформы и результаты*), which advocates for reform of the Kyrgyz police forces. The author also attended the first annual non-profit management conference in the Kyrgyz Republic.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Russian and translated by the author. The interviews consisted of two parts. The first part assessed the background of the CSO, including years of active work, financial and human resources, the range and nature of their actions, partnerships with local and national actors, and the level of funding from international donors. In the second part, questions covered the subjects' definitions of CS, and where inside of society they situated their organizations¹⁹. Factors that may have biased the interviews include the author's gender (female), ethnicity (as Non-Kyrgyz) and age as well as translation biases. The author aimed to achieve proper triangulation through the inclusion of more than one CSO representative in the interviews (if possible) and reviewing both information material and online sources published by the respective CSO.

4.2. Interview results

This section presents the results of the interviews structured in two sections, following the interview structure (see section 4.1.).

4.2.1. Part 1 – Settings

Interview subjects spoke freely, including information about their recent actions and their financial situation. All four CSOs mentioned that grants to Kyrgyz CSOs have shrunk over the last years and that securing their financial situation has become more difficult. The chairman of *liberal ways* described the situation as follows: "Unfortunately the Kyrgyz NGO sector is supported only by international actors. That is our [Kyrgyzstan's] weakness". *Liberal ways* was the only CSO that planned to conduct their projects without external funding²⁰. They recognize this might limit their impact and that they would have to become more economic and innovative with their operations. *Nurbala*, *Aiköl* and *Arysh Invest*, on the other hand, all postponed planned activities due to inadequate funding. *Nurbala* plans to become more independent by charging for their consulting services rather than relying on donor funding²¹. *Arysh Invest* is already in itself the attempt of their mother-NGO *Arysh*, who founded the microcredit branch to raise money and become more independent through profits from their loan portfolio.

¹⁹ The full questionnaire in Russian and English can be made available upon request..

²⁰ "Money is only an instrument to make the actions deeper and faster but through our partners in all the regions in Kyrgyzstan who work for the sake of the aim and the ideas and not for the sake of projects we will conduct our actions even if there is no money available. Money and projects should never be a goal in itself"(liberal ways).

²¹ "Right now the focus of donors is on Human Rights, but what if that changes during the next five years and they say: no, we are going to fund only ecological projects. So we have to think ahead" (*Nurbala*).

Aiköl, *Nurbala* and *liberal ways* said that many other NGOs adjust their activities align with CPPs in order to secure funding. While *Aiköl* did not refer to themselves, their projects are diverse, ranging from transparency, CS strengthening to child labor and migration and are always in line with the focus of the respective donor organization. That may be why they have a comparative advantage to other less powerful NGOs which cannot adjust as easily to the CPPs. *Aiköl* stated, that as the strongest organization in their oblast, they do not pursue small grants, so that smaller NGOs in Talas have an opportunity for funding, “because, you know, the strongest NGOs usually get the money”. *Liberal ways* was proud that 50% of their network’s proposals were successful. However, they are a relatively young foundation and have only written six project proposals to date.

Aiköl, founded in 2001, is the most experienced of the four CSOs. *Nurbala* was founded when Eurochild withdrew from Talas in 2009, due to the financial crisis in Europe, leaving their projects and parents’ centers unfinished, but donating their office facilities to *Nurbala* to help with their establishment. *Arysh Invest* was founded based on ideas and startup capital from ICCO Cooperation. The network *for reforms and result* was founded in 2012 by local organizations such as Interbilim, a powerful and established NGO in Kyrgyzstan, the Central Asian Free Market Institute and *liberal ways* and with international support from OTI/USAID and the first funding from Saferworld, a British organization.

The CSOs range in size from four to 16, mostly female, permanent staff members. Despite their small size, only *Nurbala* said that their size prevented them from carrying out planned activities. In general, constraints were primarily financial. *Arysh Invest* is actively looking for international investors, because they believe local investors would not be interested in their programs. They also face substantial competition from larger microcredit companies founded by foreign NGOs. *Nurbala* is applying for the second time for unallocated funding, so that they can retain their key staff and are able to plan ahead. *Aiköl*, in their efforts to preserve Kyrgyz heritage and teach it to young people in the region²², is attempting to operate without international funding, because they are convinced that international donors would not be interested in this kind of action.

4.2.2. Part 2 – Civil society conceptions

Organization	Definitions of civil society ²³
Arysh Invest	<i>“NGOs are an important part of civil society. In general, civil society is all citizens, but they pass their words and opinions only through NGOs or political parties. Not every opinion can be taken into account. That is why there have to be experts, and that is what NGOs are. Also, who takes care about bigger problems, like ecological or financial crises? NGOs, parties and the media”</i>

²² “Globalization dissolves former structures but we have to remember the specificity of our people [...]. This is not nationalism; [...] it is a matter of finding your identity in the big world” (*Aiköl*).

²³ The given definitions are not direct citations but are being presented in a readable form, extracting the essentials and are translated by the author of this paper.

Aiköl	<i>"In Talas, I would say that civil society is the active part of the population that helps the authorities to solve certain local problems, like with migrants, orphans or women. Civil society should not only criticize, but openly talk about problems and at the same time suggest constructive solutions to find ways out of the problems"</i>
Nurbala	<i>"Voluntary non-profit organizations, which engage in strengthening and developing the social sphere of a country. In difference to the governmental sector, where you have to negotiate and study more, in the civil society sector there is the possibility to work more freely to realize one's potential"</i>
Liberal ways	<i>"The active part of the citizens of a country that can organize themselves and take independent action or effectively cooperates with the authorities. Civil society can take many forms: NGOs, informal groups, individual activists, it can even be business if they not only work for their profits but only engage for their interests and own ideas. Most people in Kyrgyzstan think that only NGOs are civil society, but the single woman in the village who fights for her rights in a group with her neighbors can be a more effective part of civil society than NGOs who just wait for the next grant to come"</i>

Table 2: Definitions of civil society given by the respondents

Table 2 shows the interview subjects' definitions of CS. Two of the four CSOs said that NGOs are the representatives or the entirety of CS. Even *liberal ways*, whose definition of CS is very different from the rest, said that the common perception in the country is that CS consists of formal NGOs. All four CSO representatives first heard the term 'civil society' during internal trainings or trainings led by an international organization. Most of the subjects were unfamiliar with the term before they worked in the sector. *Nurbala* said that only the big and experienced NGOs knew the term, while smaller NGOs especially in the countryside, would not know what it was. *Liberal ways* and *Nurbala* said their definitions of civil society had changed substantially since they first encountered the term. For both, they initially believed that it only included the NGO-sector, while now they realize also other actors are part of CS.

Nurbala, *Arysh Invest* and *Aiköl* referred to a well-known triadic model, which defines CS as one of three forces in society, together with the market and the state, which is why Figure 3, that the author showed the participants to locate their organization inside society, caused some confusion²⁴.

²⁴ At *Aiköl*, the respondent drew her own figure consisting of the traditional three circles.

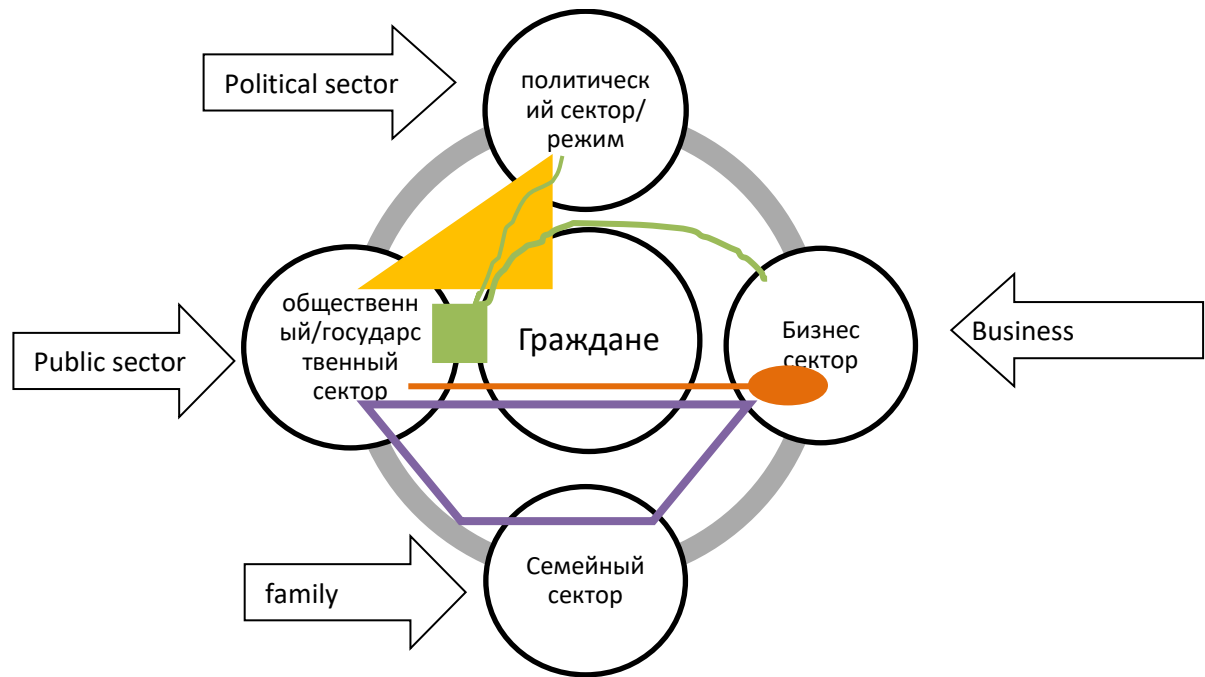


Figure 3: Position of the organizations in society on the base of the arena model by Buxton 2011 (40). The figure is shown in Russian to make the original terms clear that were used, while the arrows with the translations were not originally in the picture given to the interviewees.

The colors in Figure 3 are the same as in Table 2: *Arysh Invest* is represented in orange, *Aiköl* in green, *Nurbala* in purple and *liberal ways* in yellow. Most placed themselves in the public sector, which translates in Russian to the civic/national or public sector, reasoning that actors who are part of society are also part of the public sector. Local governments and local authorities, who were emphasized by all respondents as important partners are also seen as being part of the public sector and not as part of the political regime. However, while *Arysh Invest* saw themselves as part of the public sector, and emphasized their financial and social goals, they said they were not part of CS.

Only *liberal way* considered themselves to be part of the political sector, after clarifying that they do not engage in power politics. *Liberal ways* were also the only ones, who identified themselves as lobbyists, but all four CSOs said that they are involved in lobbying activities. *Nurbala* and *Aiköl* believe the government has a bad image of the NGO sector and views them as “grant-eater[s]” (*Nurbala*). Both hoped that this perception would change over time. According to *liberal ways*, the practice of NGOs to do “not one step without foreign support” is jointly responsible for the negative image of the Kyrgyz NGO sector.

Interestingly, three of the four CSOs see themselves as part of the business sector. Apart from *Arysh Invest* also *Nurbala* and *Aiköl* said that “what we do is business: we provide employment and pay taxes” (*Nurbala*) and “we ourselves are a business and we provide services” (*Aiköl*). *Liberal ways* aspires to become part of the business sector, but currently is only active in the public and political sphere.

Without exception, and very emphatically, all of the interviewed organizations said that they see the business sector as an important partner in the future and a source of alternative funding.

All four respondents believe the only role of the family sector is as a beneficiary. *Aiköl* pointed out that the families of their supporters are influential change agents, but none of the respondents saw their organizations as part of the sector or their actions as influenced by it.

The respondents emphasized the importance of cooperation between the sectors and within the NGO community to provide effective support for the population. While they believe this is possible at the local level in the public sector and within the NGO-sector, they see problems for enhanced cooperation with other sectors. With the political sector, the main challenge mentioned was the “closed” (*Aiköl, liberal ways, Nurbala*) government and the negative image of CSOs in national institutions. With the business sector, they perceive it as a sphere where actors do not yet take responsibility for the country (*liberal ways, Aiköl*). At the international level, the CSOs believe that international actors are not open enough to priorities from within the country and instead change their priorities based on international trends (*liberal ways, Nurbala, Arysh Invest*).

4.3. Linking conceptions – similarities and differences

The CSO and donor views of CS are highly correlated. *Aiköl* and *liberal ways* stressed the importance of **assistance, support, strengthening, developing potential** and **efficiency**. All these terms lead to the importance of **cooperation** among sectors, which is also advocated by the CPPs. *Nurbala* and *Arysh Invest* also used many terms in the same context as the CPPs. **Development** and **progress** are the goals, whereas **government** is an entity that needs to be changed. NGOs are seen as the most important actors.

The respondents' understanding of CS appears to be derived and heavily influenced by the hegemonic discourse. The term was unknown before independence and even among CSO actors, most learned their definitions from trainings conducted by IOs or INGOs. Same applies to the positioning of their organizations, because the CSOs who referred to the triadic model indicated they learned it from international actors.

Despite sharing common definitions of CS, donors and CSOs do express different priorities. *Aiköl* prioritizes strengthening of Kyrgyz traditions but because this project was not funded, they only discussed it very late in the interview. One possible reading is that they did not immediately associate it with day to day business and the sphere of CS, which was inextricably linked to funds and projects.

While the term **sustainability** was rarely mentioned during the interviews, it is a major concern for the interviewees. All the respondents were to some degree worried about their future situation and the prospects of their actions. Therefore, while it was seen as entirely positive in the CPPs, for the interviewees the term **project** equaled insecurity of funding and dependency. On the other hand the term business and cooperation with this sector took such an important part in the results of the research, that the idea suggests itself that this is perceived as the only way to sustainability and financial independence.

Cooperation at the local level was more important to the CSOs than it was in the CPPs which mostly stressed cooperation with the national government. Political decentralization and the Kyrgyz history of local decision-making, mean that a lot of political decision making is held at the local government (AO)²⁵, which the respondents view as one of their most important partners. Here they differ from the mainstream definition of CS as a counterpart and advocate to the state, rather than a partner. However, many Kyrgyz do not consider the AO as part of the political sector. Rather, they see it as part of the public sector along with the CSOs.

²⁵ The local government in Kyrgyz is the *ayıl ökmötü* (айыл окмоту).

All interviewees were registered NGOs, and therefore eligible for the CPPs, but only two of them viewed NGOs as the sole representatives of CS. The other two said NGOs are the most visible, but not the only part of CS. Thus there is a more global understanding of CS than is promoted by the CPPs, which might have roots in the history of decision-making processes on a local, individual level.

The overall adoption of the wording of the donors' discourse by the CSOs was high. One reason for this may be that all of the interviewed CSOs are relatively well established, have worked with several donors, and are currently conducting one or more projects. None of them was obviously excluded from the system. However, there are differences between the CSOs that back the hypothesis.

Aiköl, the most experienced NGO, is also the most flexible, working in a wide-variety of sectors to produce more opportunities for funding. Their success appears directly linked to their ability to adapt to changing donor priorities. *Aiköl* also framed their organization as the most influential in their oblast and least concerned about future funding.

Although *liberal ways* is a relatively young organization, they have already adopted much of the hegemonic discourse, which appears to have influenced their success. Interestingly, they equally emphasize their success in fundraising and their pride in conducting actions even without external support. *Liberal ways* appears determined to both appear and become more independent, hoping to work within the hegemonic conception of CS to achieve influence and then broaden it from within.

Nurbala is the least successful of the four CSOs. They only work in one certain sphere and are aware that this makes them more vulnerable than CSOs working in multiple spheres, should the priorities of the donors shift. Their usage of terms is least similar to the donors'. For example their chairperson was embarrassed because she could not give the official definition of CS. She then directly stated that a lot of other smaller NGOs do not even know that it exists. In line with the hypothesis of the paper *Nurbala* was then also most anxious about their future. Their limited adoption of the hegemonic discourse limits their ability to win grants, in turn limiting their power and influence.

Moreover, the four CSOs all explicitly mentioned that their adoption of the donor's wording was a comparative advantage versus smaller NGOs that do not have the vocabulary or skills to write project proposals for international donors.

5. Conclusions and prospects

The hegemonic definition appears to dominate the discourse and influence the position of CS actors. However, since all of the interviewed actors adopted the discourse to some degree it is difficult to separate the discourses' influence from other factors. Especially since the CSOs acknowledged that adopting the discourse increases their chance for success.

Over the past 24 years, the CS sector has been strongly influenced by international organizations and so it is not surprising that of CS expressed by donors and CSOs match to an overwhelming degree. But these ideas did not naturally converge, but were actively taught to the CSOs by international actors. Yet the CSOs retain some ownership of the meanings they attach to the term, like tradition, business and independence that are not part of the hegemonic definition.

Kyrgyz CS actors have identified their material dependence on the hegemonic discourse and view it as a problem. However, this view is highly likely influenced by the current decline in international support of the development of the Kyrgyz CS sector. Additionally, the national government is becoming increasingly hostile to funding from 'foreign agents', which limits the prospects of cooperation between CS and national government, the espoused goal of the IOs who fund these activities. But, whatever factor may influence this development the most, it is certain that it will change the structure of the CS sector and the meanings attributed to CS by the CSOs.

The CSOs represented in the interviews and the CS conference, envisage CS and business working closely together to influence the state, which is still associated with Soviet legacy. The results would look very different from traditional views of Western CS, where CS actors often work against the business sector or try to limit its influence on the state.

It remains to be seen whether this is the way civil society will be going in Kyrgyzstan, but if the financial influx is going to continue declining, it is highly probable that the sector will change in one or the other direction. Hopefully, if the current discourse is weakened, the CS arena will become more open to the influx of local meanings and thus more inclusive, allowing Kyrgyz conceptions of civil society to shape the discourse of their sector and their country.

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