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ARTICLES IN ENGLISH

Eliza Isabaeva

FROM DENIZENS TO CITIZENS IN BISHKEK: INFORMAL SQUATTER-SETTLEMENT RESIDENTS IN URBAN KYRGYZSTAN*

Land squatting is not a new phenomenon in the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek; it also occurred in the Soviet period due to a lack of housing. Furthermore, 1989–1991 saw another wave of squatting, caused by the fall of the Soviet Union and the resulting mass unemployment in rural areas. Unemployed rural youth became the instigators in claiming land for residence. These illegal settlements, which emerged at that time, have been given a formal recognition by the state authorities. After the "Tulip Revolution" in 2005, there was another round of land squatting in the outskirts of the capital. These new settlements have yet to gain the official recognition of the state authorities. This paper is based on ethnographic research in one of Bishkek's informal peripheral settlements, and describes the struggles of the residents in this particular settlement for citizenship. By doing so, the paper questions the suitability of the label "squatter" in describing the current residents of the settlement. The residents' status is understood as transitory from "denizen" to "citizens". The stories recounted here reveal the involvement of certain state officials in the emergence of what they call an "illegal" settlement. Despite neglect from the state, societal stigma and marginalization, the settlement residents continue their struggle for social and legal recognition, as well as membership in urban community and social rights, derived from it.

Keywords: land squatting, informal settlement, citizenship, exclusion, inclusion, Bishkek.

Introduction

Kyrgyzstan's "Tulip Revolution" in 2005 started in the provinces and quickly shifted to the capital city of Bishkek, where local elites (Radnitz 2006: 133) drove the

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insurgency of the masses, which arose in opposition to fraudulent parliamentary elections (O Beachain 2009). This was a visible and evident topic of debate for people. However, there were other long-standing problems as well, such as corruption and Kyrgyzstan's North-South political cleavage among the elites (Temirkoulov 2004; Marat 2008; Tudoroiu 2007). Following the revolution, the outskirts of Bishkek became a site of illegal land seizures. People grabbed land plots in order to establish residence in the areas of the city that they believed to be vacant. The squatters (in Russian *zakhvatchiki*)¹ promptly erected shacks in order to secure their occupation of these territories. In so doing, they established peripheral settlements known locally as *novostroika*² in Russian and *zhany konush* in Kyrgyz languages. Today, almost a decade later after squatting began, these settlements on the city edge remain intact, albeit with a poor material and social infrastructure. Some of them are still not recognized by Bishkek's municipal administration; they are not considered a part of the city, and their inhabitants are viewed as "illegals". I take this situation as my point of departure and show some strategies that residents in Kyzyl Zher³ (my research site) have employed in order to achieve recognition as full citizens of Bishkek. This leads me to the conclusion that the process of recognition contains several stages: in the initial years after Kyzyl Zher's emergence, the settlement and its dwellers had been excluded from citizenship by the state. Then, they became marginalized. This process still holds true nowadays. Finally, the last stage includes the formal legalization of Kyzyl Zher as an official administrative unit within the city, which would provide its residents with formally recognition and the extension of rights in obtaining documents such as residence permits, birth certificates, passports, and property documents. It would also open up, access to state social services and in the long run help overcome their marginalization in society.

Before the Tulip Revolution, the extensive territory of Kyzyl Zher belonged to the Alamedin Region of the District of Chui. A former Member of the Parliament leased the land to a business project for the purposes of building a market. However, this endeavor turned out to be unsuccessful and, when a settlement emerged in the vacant lot, the administration of the Region refused to enter it on their books, claiming a lack of the funds needed to provide Kyzyl Zher with the necessary infrastructure. The city of Bishkek likewise showed a reluctance to accept and recognize the settlement at the outset. As such, Kyzyl Zher has constantly faced the problem of belonging neither to the Alamedin Region nor to the city of Bishkek from the very beginning of its existence.

¹ The Russian term *zakhvatchik* for a squatter is widely used in Kyrgyzstan, both by squatters themselves as well as by state officials. I have almost never heard the usage of its Kyrgyz equivalent.

² *Novostroika* (lit. new settlement) has a two-fold meaning. Firstly, it might refer to an elite construction; secondly, it refers to a peripheral settlement, usually with poor social and material infrastructure.

³ For reasons of confidentiality, the name of the settlement is changed.

In this paper, I want to show how different actors transform the status of citizens in a variety of areas: from one's legal (non-) recognition, marketization of welfare, to people's contestation of injustice through protest activity. All these domains belong to three different spheres: the state, the market and citizens. At the same time, they constitute what citizenship is: a complex mixture of practices and institutions. The research in Kyzyl Zher took place in January–August 2012, with two more short follow-up research trips in January and July 2013. The research methods were made up of semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The interviews included topics such as housing, history of Kyzyl Zher's emergence, squatters' coping strategies with everyday life difficulties and practices of interaction with the state. Participant observation proved to be more informative in gaining insights into the lives of the people living in Kyzyl Zher than the interviews. This was because earning trust of people in this area proved to be a challenging task. One informant asked the following: "*If even our state is not interested in our problems, why would you be?*" Such a question revealed the gap in trust and cooperation between the Kyrgyz state and its marginalized, undocumented migrants in Bishkek. Besides talks with Kyzyl Zher residents, I also conducted interviews with state officials, whose work was linked to city planning, and internal migration.

In the following section, I will discuss several analytical concepts, which will enable to place my case study into the broader literature on citizenship. Then I will introduce squatters in the specific context of Bishkek and question the suitability of the label "squatter" for describing the current residents of my research site. Following this, the focus turns to the three different stages in the process of legalization: a) exclusion and neglect by the state; b) social stigma and marginalization and c) formal legalization and the prospects of inclusion into city life and the urban space. In the light of urban illegality, the role of the Kyrgyz state is also discussed because, after all, illegal practices and the governments do not always stand apart so clearly from each other. On the contrary, they often enjoy a significant degree of symbiosis (Heyman, Smart 1999: 1). Put differently, what is called illegal by the state often involves the participation of state agents.

"Denizens" of Bishkek

As Gershon Shafir observed, "[t]he tradition of citizenship commences as a framework of political life" (Shafir 1998: 3). Initially, citizenship was a status defining membership in a Greek city-state *polis*; in the Roman Empire, the concept expanded by incorporating a modified understanding of freedom. With the rise of modern state communitarians, who had been guided by the idea of the common good, citizenship came to be understood as an activity or a practice, rather than a mere legal status (Shafir 1998: 11). In the period following the second world war, citizenship as a bundle of rights became an issue through Thomas Marshall's lectures on "Citizenship and Social Class". He introduced three types of citizenship rights: civil rights concerned with individual freedom; political rights guaranteed

political participation and the exercise of political power; social rights targeted the state's social welfare and security, and represented the right "[t]o live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in society" (Marshall 1950: 11). It is with these social rights of citizenship that *the state* enters the realm of peoples' everyday life. Expecting the state to provide the necessary resources, a sense of the social rights of citizenship enabled people to make claims on the state when they lacked resources as "[i]n the eyes of the majority of the population it is primarily the state that is responsible for providing infrastructural services and help for the needy" (Finke 2005: 117). While the idea of social rights was in line with socialism, Marshall's conclusion was that social citizenship and capitalism were at war, continuously generating social conflict (Marshall 1950: 29).

The case of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan provides a salient example of this conflict, where undocumented migrants from within Kyrgyzstan have made claims on the Kyrgyz state, demanding housing and their admission as members to the city of Bishkek. Lacking proper documents such as registration (*propiska*) which would secure them an official entry into the city and state social services, they remain largely "invisible", working in the informal sector of the economy. I employ Tomas Hammar's concept of *denizens* to illustrate differences between citizens and denizens. While the former implies nominal citizens only, the latter denotes permanent settlers or long-term immigrants who enjoy a range of civil and social rights (but not political). This very dimension sets them apart from usual foreigners or migrants (cit. in Bauböck 1991). Acknowledging Hammar's use of denizens in relation to immigrants, in this paper I use it in relation to internal migrants because both groups share similarities. In Bishkek, my informants represent denizens, as most of them have been living there for many years and, according to the interviews, came to Bishkek with the intention of settling there permanently (see also Alymbaeva 2013: 143). However, this intention is opposed by a number of constraints, such as lack of a registration (*propiska*), problems with housing and a generally poor economic situation. The role of the state in this is contradictory; at times they show concern for their denizens and offer to help improve their living conditions, while at other times they deny their responsibilities to the citizenry. Furthermore, the institutionalized rules of the state tend to retard the integration of denizens into urban life, leaving them in a marginalized social position. Heathershaw noted that states in Central Asia are "at once omnipresent and perennially absent, both omniscient and powerless, both omnific and wholly lacking in productive capacity" (Heathershaw 2013: 30).

Denizens of Bishkek still lack citizenship as their lack of official registration excludes them from certain social rights. However, they still manage to enjoy some citizenship rights such as access to the city's schools (which is supposed to be restricted without registration), credits from private micro-finance companies (despite a lack of the ownership documents that usually serve as collateral), access to electricity and drinking water which they had lacked in their *de jure* illegal settlement for many years. They understand this status, however, as transitory, because their ultimate goal is to become fully-fledged Bishkek citizens.

In Kyrgyzstan, access to citizenship depends on the ownership of private property, that is to say registration in one's own house or apartment. However, it is very unusual for poverty-stricken migrants, arriving in the city to find better jobs, to be able to afford one in the near future given that the prices for private property in the city of Bishkek continues to skyrocket. It would be easier for the neglected and marginalized denizens to become citizens if they had their own house because "[p]roperty may bolster claims of belonging and citizenship" (Lund 2011: 74). Lund goes even further suggesting the interrelatedness of citizenship and property rights and says that "[c]itizenship and belonging can be avenues to secure property" (Lund 2011: 74). If Bishkek's denizens were given the opportunity to own private housing, they would be able to transform themselves into fully-fledged Bishkek citizens. However, living in a house that is located in land formally unrecognized by the authorities makes it impossible to obtain a *propiska*. This locks the denizens of Kyzyl Zher into a vicious circle they struggle to escape from.

Are There Any Squatters?

As mentioned earlier, Kyzyl Zher sprang into existence as a result of illegal mass land squatting in the immediate aftermath of the Tulip Revolution in March, 2005. A group of people known locally as *top bashy* (lit. head of a group) seized the territory of Kyzyl Zher and started chaotically distributing land plots to their family, friends, and fellow villagers¹. Some believe these actions were actually organized by agents of the state, who supported *top bashy*'s parceling out land to friends and relatives for free. Having allocated the best land, they proceeded to sell plots to anyone able to fork up the cash. Having made a good amount of money, the *top bashy* hastily disappeared from the scene. Obviously, all of this has never been made public or official but there is a tacit acknowledgement among the people of Kyzyl Zher that the money generated through sale of land plots in Kyzyl Zher was divided between the *top bashys* and their contractors. Bolstered by the backing by state officials, *top bashys* could wield the necessary symbolic power to decide which land to sell to whom and for how much. Moreover, their connections to the state authorities helped them avoid any legal consequences.

The reputation of *top bashys* in Kyzyl Zher is poor. The word "mafia" is often used with regard to them and the current leaders of Kyzyl Zher, who serve as the coordinators of the settlement. Needless to say, this usage of the term "mafia" by the people of Kyzyl Zher hints to some implicit business deals and "messy practices within the state" (Fawaz 2009: 200) rather than making any specific accusations. "*Top bashys!*" will be the immediate answer if one asks an inhabitant of Kyzyl

¹ A social worker of the local NGO "Centre for Protection of Children", who consults the parents of Kyzyl Zher on how to enroll their children in city schools, noted that once he had to speak to several parents hailing from the same village. Laughingly he recalled his ironic question to these parents "*Is anybody left in your village or have you all moved to Bishkek?*"

Zher about the emergence of their *novostroika*. Some will also hint to the names of several state officials. The "mafia" and state officials appear to be intertwined in the popular perceptions. Writing about the "informal economy" and "informal state" in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, Johan Rasanayagam studied how locals employ the word "mafia" when talking about state officials. He concluded that the state is experienced as informal and personalized. Furthermore, he proposed to look at informal activities as only one manifestation of a more general process after the collapse of the Soviet Union whereby the state, society and life-worlds have become more informal (Rasa-nayagam 2011). I would argue that state involvement in the very practices that it defines as illegal is what makes the urbanization in Bishkek unique. It is above all rent-seeking state officials (Engvall 2011) engaged in informal activities that condition illegality. The illegality that my informants pointed out, is seen through the state perspective, and thus it is defined as a violation of official laws.

It is clear that unlawful squatting as a physical practice violates the formal laws of Kyrgyzstan and is thus condemned by the state authorities. In studying squatting in Ulan-Ude, Nikolay Karbainov has noted that illegal land squatting was not just a physical practice, but workings of imagination through which squatters reasoned their action (Karbainov 2007). My informants in Kyzyl Zher justified the emergence of their squatter settlement with statements such as "*we did not have any other choice*" and "*we were forced to*". They proceeded to justify these statements with the need to survive given that extremely unfavorable conditions of unemployment and declining infrastructure in their rural homelands had forced them to migrate. Balihar Sanghera has identified five important moral justifications for illegally seizing land. First, the migrants assert their moral rights to essential basic commodities and land in order to lead a "normal" human life. Second, the urban poor feel little respect or sympathy for the rights of the property-owning class, having their own human rights violated. Third, migrants refer to the theft of national assets by high-ranking state officials to justify their own. Fourth, they legitimize their seizures on the basis of the land code and government promises. Finally, they argue that if the power grabbing of rich politicians is legitimate, why should their moral claim that they are in dire need be considered an illegal act (Sanghera 2010: 3). Another aspect in accordance with moral justifications are what Hernando de Soto calls "legal objectives": "[i]n order to survive, migrants became informals. . . . Such illegality was not antisocial in intent, like trafficking in drugs, theft, or abduction, but was designed to achieve such essentially legal objectives as building a house, providing a service, or developing a business" (Soto 2002: 12).

The current residents of Kyzyl Zher are reluctant to be identified as squatters. The clear distinction that they make is that as opposed to *zakhvatchiki* as well as *top bashys* they had purchased their houses in Kyzyl Zher. To sum up, three types of squatters can be identified in Kyzyl Zher. Firstly, there are the *top bashys*, who are also referred as the 'state's people' or 'mafia'. Secondly, there are the *zakhvatchiki*, the ordinary denizens of Bishkek who had not owned a house of their own previously and who took the opportunity to join the mass squatting after they

heard about it. Finally, there is another group of people inhabiting Kyzyl Zher which includes those who have bought their houses independently.

Three Stages to Citizenship

This section discusses some of the everyday life strategies of Kyzyl Zher inhabitants, through which they organize their lives. These strategies, as I argue, constitute the lion's share of their struggle to become citizens. Earlier in the paper I wrote that this struggle consisted of three stages, the first being exclusion and state neglect.

Exclusion and State Neglect

I remember well the first day of my research in Kyzyl Zher in the winter of 2012. Winters in Kyrgyzstan are usually far from mild but the winter of 2012 was particularly severe. I arrived at Kyzyl Zher in my companion's comfortable car, who was a social worker named Asan¹ from a local NGO. Asan was supposed to spend a few hours in the office (*kontora*) of Kyzyl Zher, the working place of the chosen community leader Kuban and his assistants. His task was to inform the residents of the settlement on how to enroll their children into the city schools. In the *kontora*, together with Kuban and his assistants, we all were sitting in our coats, freezing due to the lack of central heating in the room. I was told that this situation was representative of the entire settlement, and, in time, this was confirmed by my own research in individual households. Listening to peoples' stories, I learned that they had lived for six long years without the state provision of electricity and drinking water. During these years, they sought out their own solutions by acquiring a private generator and buying water per liter from private sellers (Isabaeva 2013). Remarks from the informants such as "*the state ignored us*" or "*the state did not care about us*" were frequent and revealed the harsh realities of being unwanted in the city. In addition, during these six years, numerous letters of complaint and request were sent to different state institutions on behalf of Kyzyl Zher inhabitants; they launched peaceful picketing and tried to draw the attention of the state to their plight. However, all these attempts proved to be unsuccessful.

As I learnt from my fieldwork, in 2005, with mass land squatting at a critical moment in Kyrgyzstan, the state agents failed to clear squatter settlements on the edge of Bishkek because the ordinary citizens challenged their work. As Kyrgyzstan's citizens (in Kyrgyz *zharan*) they claimed that they were free to move within the country and make a living where they wished. Still reluctant to recognize the squatters as Bishkek citizens and Kyzyl Zher as a city settlement, both the Alamedin Region as well as the Bishkek city administration explained the people in Kyzyl Zher about the hazards in the settlement. When this did not work out, the office of architecture of the Alamedin Region released a document, which stated:

¹ All the names of the informants have been changed.

The Alamedin regional office for architecture, construction and control informs you that your buildings, according to the report of the city development office, are located on a subsidence site. In case of emergencies caused by natural disasters or other calamities with possible destructive consequences, the state institutions of the Kyrgyz Republic shall not be accountable for any damages.

Four state officials signed the document. Surprisingly, the document emphasizes potential damage to buildings, not mentioning a single word about any threat to human life. This piece of document demonstrates how state institutions disclaim their responsibility to care for the citizens/denizens by shifting the responsibility to the people. This shift involves the presence of external actors and is well documented by Béatrice Hibou (2004), who considers the example of several North and Sub-Saharan African countries. Similarly in Kyzyl Zher, electrification work was carried out by a private company, a mosque was built by a private affluent person, several social projects were set up by local NGOs that were financed by international sources, and local residents of the settlement were asked to raise their own funds to finance the rest of the incomplete work. Thus, a game of hide and seek is played by the state institutions in Kyrgyzstan; in the eyes of the people they are ever-present in the form of a stifling bureaucracy but when faced by citizens' demands they hide behind excuses of a struggling economy and dire state finances.

The partial absence of the state is tolerated to a certain point, beyond which the citizens practice active citizenship (Eckert 2006) by claiming rights, staging protests or strikes, negotiating their terms with the state. In September 2011, the residents of Kyzyl Zher engaged in another large-scale protest by blocking one of the strategically important streets in Bishkek. The time period was appropriate because it was the time when Kyrgyzstan was experiencing the consequences of its second popular revolt (April 2010) and its second ethnic conflict (June 2010) since independence in 1991. The April political turmoil brought about the removal of president Kurmanbek Bakiyev from office, who had succeeded Askar Akaev after the Tulip Revolution. The interim government after April 2010 was not capable of controlling the fragile and uneasy political situation in the country, which resulted in a conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in June 2010 in the South of the country. In times of such political crisis the leaders of Kyrgyzstan were reluctant to deal with more protests; maintaining power was seen as more important and, as such, "city administrations have started to legalize settlements partly to defuse political and social tensions, and partly to respond to a depressed property market" (Sanghera et al. 2012: 7). As far as road blocking is concerned, Kyzyl Zher dwellers achieved success on this occasion because high-ranking state authorities came to talk to them. The result of the negotiations brought a promise from politicians to resolve everyday problems and incorporate Kyzyl Zher into Bishkek municipality. The then prime minister Almazbek Atambaev visited Kyzyl Zher and promised to legalize it in order to secure a significant amount of votes on forthcoming presidential elections. Thus, the continuously changing political situation in Kyrgyzstan did have essential consequences on the lives of Kyzyl Zher dwellers.

Social Stigma and Marginalization

Following the visit of the politicians in Kyzyl Zher, the settlement residents indeed gained access to electricity and drinking water provided by the state. Private companies installed electrical pylons and water wells along the main street of the settlement but these resources remained inaccessible to houses located far from it. People were unofficially told to raise their own funds, to which they agreed and began aiding the state in filling in this gap, despite the fact this was the state's responsibility. I interpret this willingness on the part of Kyzyl Zher inhabitants to be a sign of wanting to accelerate the process of Kyzyl Zher's legalization. As the residents believe, if all the settlement dwellers are provided with light and water and if they get paved roads and thus not distort the image of the city, they can relatively quickly become citizens. Legalization is not only a legal issue in this context but it is also a means by which Kyzyl Zher residents would be able to get rid of the social stigma attached to them as *zakhvatchiki* and elevate themselves from a marginal status.

The generic negative term for an unwanted migrant in Bishkek is *myrka*, which designates someone from the provinces, who has not yet been able to assimilate him or herself into the urban life with distinct urban manners. Lack of proficiency in Russian language, rude behavior and tasteless appearance are seen to be the features of a *myrka* (Schröder 2010: 455–456). M. Flynn and N. Kosmarskaya suggest that internal migrants have fallen victim because in the wider context of socio-economic, political and cultural difficulties in Kyrgyzstan, they were scapegoated (Flynn, Kosmarskaya 2012: 467). The *de jure* illegal status of the land reinforces stigmatization. Such a separation from the rest of the city population resulted in the marginalization of Kyzyl Zher dwellers. Being at the margins of the city, not only had they little contact with the Bishkek residents (Flynn, Kosmarskaya 2012: 460) but also they were left to deal with their internal problems themselves. For instance, during the frequent land conflicts in the settlement, people first and foremost turned to Kuban for the resolution of the conflict, despite the fact that he is not officially responsible for this. Sometimes a local police officer (*uchastkovyi*), who is an official state agent, is also present during conflicts but, except for listening to conflicting parties and asking them to write their complaint letters (*aryz*), the *uchastkovyi* is largely unable to do anything. Thus, Kuban's the most frequent way of resolving a conflict states, "Submit your *aryz*. Your case will be tried in a regional court when Kyzyl Zher becomes legalized". It is very surprising that conflicting parties agree to the "final" informal conflict resolution of Kuban and almost never question when the long-awaited legalization should take place. Hence, they internalize marginalization by recognizing the absence of legal solutions and at the same time they await the near future, when this marginalization will wither away with recognition as full citizens.

Future Prospects of Inclusion

The process of legalization is a long and onerous one. The last stage in this long journey is the shift from denizens to citizens, i.e. fully-fledged and integrated

members of the Bishkek community who are no longer neglected, stigmatized or marginalized. The resilience, resourcefulness and creative ways of finding solutions to existing difficulties by Kyzyl Zher residents demonstrates their willingness to belong to the city (Isabaeva 2013). There are some examples of resilience: many households share electricity that is insufficiently provided in the neighborhood, and accordingly share the bill at the end of each month. Some still transport water from a far distance, they work in the informal sector and do not heavily rely on the state. When asked whether they are willing to pay land tax after the legalization of Kyzyl Zher, they firmly answer "Yes, we are ready to pay". Being pragmatic and realizing that acquiring expensive private housing in the city center or in other legalized settlements of Bishkek is essentially impossible for the overwhelmingly poor Kyzyl Zher population, Bishkek's denizens try to make the best out of current situation. On the other hand, the dwellers of Kyzyl Zher use resilience and resourcefulness as a way to gain membership to the city and legalize their settlement. Moreover, they would like to make Kyzyl Zher a place they can unreservedly call home. Nira Yuval-Davis views social location as a part of belonging, which includes an emotional attachment (Yuval-Davis 2006). Denizens of Kyzyl Zher have certainly developed it throughout many years that they live in Bishkek. "All of my children are here in Bishkek, so how can I go back?" said one of my informants in her mid-fifties, attaching the meaning of being in Bishkek to her family. Another informant stated:

I cannot go back to the village. What will I do there if I go back? It has been many years that I live in the city now, so I got used to it. Back in the village, I do not understand their "system". Moreover, I have neither a land plot nor animals nor a house in the village. How can I go to my parental house with my own family?

This informant emphasized the economic aspect of returning, namely that he did not have any possessions. Thus, the opportunity to acquire housing in an illegal, poor and peripheral squatter settlement in Bishkek and earning a living in the informal sector was seen by the informant as a more promising future than staying in the village.

Another example of eagerness for integration can be found in the story of development plan (*genplan*) of Kyzyl Zher. I was told that the Alamedin Region of Chui District, where Kyzyl Zher was situated prior to squatting in 2005, was supposed to work out development plan of Kyzyl Zher and only then make the transfer to the municipality of Bishkek. However, claiming a lack of funds, the administration of the Alamedin Region disavowed itself of this responsibility. Unofficially, the administration authorities made it clear to Kuban that it was possible to "buy" the *genplan*. According to the recounted stories of Kuban, he summoned people of the settlement to a general meeting, where he asked them whether they (each household) would contribute 500 Kyrgyz Soms (10–12 USD) in order to purchase the *genplan* and thus accelerate the process of the legalization of Kyzyl Zher. The people agreed, and for 500 Soms that they gave, they received a receipt which confirmed the payment. At the time of my research in Kyzyl Zher,

Kuban told me that he had collected up to 60–70% of the requested sum by the Alamedin Region. Sharing, solidarity and mutual support together with formal and informal practices shape denizens' path to membership in Bishkek and the consequential full recognition of their citizenship.

Conclusion

Land squatting is not a new phenomenon in Bishkek; it already happened once during the Soviet time because of lack of housing (Alymbaeva 2008). The second large wave of squatting dates back to 1989–1991, which was caused by the fall of the USSR, the outcome of which was mass unemployment in rural areas (Alymbaeva 2013; Kostyukova 1994). Unemployed rural youth became the initiators in claiming land for residence. The illegal settlements, which emerged at that time, have been given a formal recognition by the state authorities. The relatively recent squatter-settlements are inhabited by the denizens of Bishkek, who have been living in the city for a reasonably long time without owning a house of their own. Using the moment of state "fragility" after critical junctures such as the Tulip Revolution of 2005, political turmoil and the "ethnic conflict" of 2010, Kyrgyzstanis grabbed land and started making claims to recognize their *de jure* illegal settlements and themselves as Bishkek citizens.

One could argue that urbanization in Kyrgyzstan follows "classical" patterns of city development in the Post-Soviet space, in as far as capital city Bishkek is growing because of internal migration and incorporation of peripheral settlements. I, however, would emphasize an important part of this process, namely the emergence of illegal squatter settlements on the edge of Bishkek, which is produced in part by involvement of state officials. I showed that the dwellers of Kyzyl Zher obtained partial access to citizenship through three stages that passed from state non-recognition of their status, through to marginalization and learning from the marginal status, and ending with protest demands. Due to the political situation in Kyrgyzstan and the availability of official and unofficial means of obtaining citizenship, the current inhabitants of Kyzyl Zher are in the process of transforming their identity: from stigmatized and marginalized *zakhvatchiki*, *myrki*, law-breakers, illegals and denizens into fully recognized, accepted and included citizens of Bishkek.

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