



**WOMEN SUPPORT CENTER**

**OBON «as a mirror...»  
(development of political activism  
or the use of women's resource  
for purposes of interest groups)**

**STUDY REPORT**

**Bishkek – 2014**

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## List of Acronyms

<b>Ayil Okmoty (AO)</b>	– local/village level authority
<b>FGD</b>	– focus group discussions
<b>Jogorky Kenesh</b>	– Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic
<b>KR</b>	– Kyrgyz Republic
<b>NGO</b>	– Non-Governmental Organization
<b>OBON</b>	– Special Purpose Women’s Detachment
<b>Piketchitsa, piketchitsy (pl.)</b>	– refers to a woman/women, participant on picket, she-picketer
<b>Rayon</b>	– district in Kyrgyzstan
<b>Rayon akimiats</b>	– district level local authority
<b>Rayon akim</b>	– head of rayon level authority

– *Mityuh, hey, Mityuh! Why are we shouting here?*

– *Hey... How should I know?*

*«Boris Godunov», opera, Mussorgsky<sup>1</sup>*

## INTRODUCTION

Rallies, pickets, and road blocking have become an everyday reality of today's Kyrgyzstan. Actions take place at the central square of the capital, as well as in rayon centers, near akimiats. As a result, opposition rallies and authorities' actions are obstructed, members of the Jogorku Kenesh (Parliament, JK) are deprived of the opportunity to pass to the workplaces, mayors and heads of Ayil Okmoty (AO) are being illegally «removed» from their offices, while their sits are taken by «necessary», «own» people.

With the reference to the Ministry of the Interior, news agencies and portals have widely distributed information on 685 organized rallies and protests that have taken place in Kyrgyzstan in 2010; of these 585 are unsanctioned, 524 are with political requirements, and 161 are under socio-economic and domestic motives. [ ]

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1 Сцена, в которой сторонники Бориса Годунова, одного из претендентов на царский трон, организовали «народные» выступления, в которых простой люд, по их замыслу, должен молить Бориса Годунова не уходить с престола. Согнанных с окрестных деревень крестьян бьют палками и заставляют на коленях плакать и кричать. Это сопровождается грустной песней, исполняемой хором: «Ах, на кого ты нас покидаешь, отец наш? Ах, на кого ты нас покидаешь, кормилец?», которая передает общий смысл «обращений народа и его просьб» к Борису Годунову. Эту же мысль передает и приведенный краткий диалог двух крестьян, которые не могут понять, почему они должны кричать и плакать, и о чем должны просить, стоя на коленях. Таким образом производилась «народная» легитимизация Бориса Годунова на российском престоле.

According to the agency «24.kg», in 2011, the total number of such protests exceeded 2,000. [ ] According to our respondent, in Bishkek's Pervomaysky rayon only, whereas the Government House, the Supreme Court, and other building are located, there were more than 400 rallies in 2011.[ ]

A noticeable feature of the protests in recent years is the participation of women. The phenomenon has become widespread and well-known to the public in 2005, when the word «piketchitsy» first appeared in the mass media publications. They have given this name to women selling their services of participation in rallies and, often acting, in groups. [ ]

Later, in the Parliament, Dooronbek Sadyrbaev, a politician and a film director, ironically and, by analogy with the well-known acronym OMON (riot militia detachment, «Otryad militsii osobogo naznachenia») dubbed this group or OBON or «otryad bab osobogo naznachenia», literary translating into English as the «special purpose women's detachment.»

The word «baba» (transcription: [baba]) is used in a neglectful and insulting way in this phrase. [ ] This terminology is now firmly established in the everyday vocabulary commonly used by media and among the public. In this report, we continue using the term «OBON.» However, it should be noted that during the primary data collection researchers have taken possible more negative connotations of the term into account and applied different terminology. This, however, is sometimes not understood or perceived well by the respondents.

OBON's actions range from participation in, organization and disruption of both the government and the opposition rallies, to the conquest of physical objects (buildings and rooms, most often happens in state and municipal property), arbitrary displacement and appointment of officials. OBON's actions often can be qualified as violations of the law under the Administrative and Criminal codes of the Kyrgyz Republic (KR). Well-known methods of OBON are loud, scandalous scenes, blocking roads, «hair pulling», verbal and non-verbal abuse, intimidation, «displacement of officials from their

offices», blackmailing, and disclosing a true or false information about opponents.

OBON technology has spread everywhere in the country and is used not only by those who traditionally comprise these groups. Men, groups of young men and women, and mixed groups of citizens exhibit themselves more often today. In addition, participants of such actions may comprise of several related groups, such as women (OBON) and youth. A statement by one of respondents of the expert survey that «every village has its own OBON», perhaps is an exaggeration, but it points to the trends prevailing in the society. This is confirmed by articles in media (see the separate section of this document for a full monitoring report on media covering the activities of the members of OBON).

The media and a part of the society has formed a negative view on the OBON participants because of their contradictory engagement and utilized methods, as well as because of a destabilizing influence on society's life.

From our point of view, the problem has taken on an especial actuality and social significance because of its scale and impact on the public consciousness. Non-application of legal measures to the members of OBON (because of stereotypes, lack of resources, and other) has still allowed the phenomenon to successfully develop in the entire country, justifying in the public consciousness illegitimate methods of achieving goals.

«They have formed in the society into a separate force. They know well who needs them, they are united, you find one... and others will be here in a moment. They have widely opened their branches and deeply put their roots, they have their representatives and leaders in each village of Kyrgyzstan. Stretched out on the scale and the numbers, they have no equal.»

*The newspaper «Kerege» № 28 from 07.12.2011/p.10*  
<http://www.gezitter.org/society/7270/>

The fact of a sustainable presence of OBON in the Kyrgyz society indicates that deep transformations in the political sphere, regrouping, and, possibly, strengthening of the criminal element, and an emergence of new «rules of the game» are taking place. Thus, the study of the phenomenon and its causes will help to better understand the processes and to develop a point of view on their development prospects and methods of work with this phenomenon.

Thus, the aim of our study was to analyze the phenomenon of illegitimate activities of informal women's groups OBON, conditions and reasons for their emergence and development and their potential impact on the state of political culture in modern Kyrgyzstan by examining the views of a wider civil society about the role of these groups, as well as to stimulate public debate aimed at constructive resolution of the phenomenon with respect to the principles of democracy and the rule of law.

The research aims at residents of urban and rural areas of all oblasts of Kyrgyzstan, cities Bishkek and Osh, civil society and government representatives and experts, as well as representatives of OBON.

The subject of this study is:

- Knowledge, experience, attitude, rationalizing, and opinion of the target group on the activities of OBON.

We have developed a study methodology and carried out the field work and the content analysis of media and Internet publications. Primary data collection includes methods of in-depth interviews with members of the OBON (49 respondents, all female), focus group discussions with civil society organizations (FGD, 16 focus group discussions with total 174 respondents, 2 of FGDs with members of OBON groups, 25 male respondents), mass survey (792 respondents), as well as expert interviews (65 respondents, 39 women and 26 men, 18 national and 47 oblast experts the field of gender and human rights, managers and employees of NGOs and other civil society activists, as well as representatives of the state and local authorities, including members of the National Parliament and local parliaments,

state and local authorities' employees, and representatives of law enforcement agencies).

The data for this study is collected in all oblasts of Kyrgyzstan, including the provincial capitals (except Tokmok) and in Bishkek. Selecting oblast centers and the city of Bishkek is based on the fact that these places are traditionally areas of OBON activities. Furthermore, in each oblast we have identified and examined one rayon with an intense presence of OBON. Thus, the study covered urban and rural areas.

## RESULTS

### Definition of OBON

What is OBON? Who are OBON? – Discussion of these questions has taken place at all stages of the study, i.e. during the development of instruments, primary data collection, and, of course, during the preparation of this report.

Respondents of the expert survey and focus group discussions have been asked to give their own definitions of OBON. We have identified and further discuss the following categories of statements:

- OBON as civic or pseudo-civic groups;
- OBON as a term that applies only to women, or not related only to women;
- OBON as a means of achieving political goals of interest groups, method of pressure and advocacy.

#### **OBON as a group, organization of the civil society**

Answers of the respondents regarding the place of OBON in the structure of the civil society are grouped as follows:

- «Artificial group of pseudo-civic organizations.»
- «Groups deliberately organized by someone.»

...OBON attended dozens of meetings... one can feel affectedness, [they are] trying to work out their money. They pose similar requirements in different actions; faces are the same, mainly women... All this unwittingly suggests that behind these dolls are... yes... the puppeteers...

...Sometimes they get a phone call, they say, «Kelesinerbi, kelbeysinerbi? Bashtadyk!» [Auth. [ ] – Trans. from Kyrg. – Will you come, will you not come? We have already begun!...]... It can be

seen that they are arranged by someone... Also, the way they go to have meals... either they are organized to go somewhere or somebody brings their food in vehicles...

... There is a demand, and there is a supply. It seemed to me that behind various rallies there were people from the floors of the White House (Government building), that they coordinated, provided guidance. Several times it was like this... you watch on TV that some issue is lobbied, and immediately they [OBON] appear [on the streets]...

*Law enforcement official, Bishkek*

- «[these are ] informal groups, informal organizations, but at the same time, everyone knows who to go to in one or another situation (if necessary, to organize activities of OBON)»
- «[OBON] do not identify themselves with a particular organization... status, office, staff etc.»

Thus, an understanding of OBON by FGD and expert survey respondents is prevailed by the definition of OBON as of well-established (and well known) informal groups, purposefully formed and not being true civic groups.

There is a seemingly clear contrast between OBON and public associations and groups, but, in fact, the line between the two categories (or groups) cannot be drawn precisely. During further discussions respondents confirmed that OBON can also use legitimate methods of influence, thus mimicking «truly civil» organizations and groups; they also promote interests of ordinary people by becoming members of the real social activism with no financial or other dividends. At the same time, the formal public groups/organizations are able to employ illegitimate methods and also support illegitimate activities of other groups, such as OBON. Only one respondent, a representative of law enforcement, has stated that «OBON is one of the democratic institutes; they have a right to express their views.»

An analysis of the relationships between OBON groups and community organizations is provided further in this report.

### **OBON: women or women's groups**

The word «OBON» abbreviates the phrase «special purpose women's detachment» and, therefore, defines the term as «referring to women», «consisting of women», and «belonging to women.» In fact, in most cases, respondents have given us the definition of OBON as of:

- «A group of women; women's groups; poor women of KR.»

### **OBON: not just women**

During discussions and interviews respondents also confirmed our assumption that the word «OBON» can be attributed to mixed groups, however, in most cases, it indicates the leading role of women:

- «There exist mixed groups. OBON groups are composed primarily of women; women are the leaders and the core of OBON groups, women are the backbone.»

### **OBON: men and youth**

Standing out definitions of OBON that do not relate the term to women only, but rather relate it to men and young people:

- «There exists men's and youth OBON.»

### **OBON: a way of achieving political or other goals, a method of pressure to pursue objectives of interest groups, including authorities**

The following definitions of «OBON» are also worth mentioning: «OBON is a way of achieving political or other goals, OBON is a method of pressure to pursue objectives of interest groups, including of the authorities.»

The question «For whose purpose is OBON being used?» has produced the following answers:

- politicians, political groups;
- officials, authorities;
- businessmen, groups of economic interests;
- circles in need of putting pressure on the government;
- individuals who want to fake popularity, imitate having numerous followers;
- semi-criminal elements.

...an instrument for making decisions. That is, the group is manipulated, perhaps they get paid, they are promised benefits, because of this they go out into the streets with these protest moods.

*National expert, NGO representative*

Interestingly, in most discussions and interviews, respondents indicated that both the power and the opposition use OBON. Commenting 'OBON-authorities' relationship, the respondents argue that «people who are able to act so [to act as OBON acts] should be «shielded» (protected) by someone who «secures them «from above» so that these actions are not punished.»

A separate section contains a more detailed discussion on the relationship of power and OBON.

### **Connotations of «OBON»**

The existence of such definitions as «consisting of essentially of women» and «youth and male OBON» and derivatives, such as «OBONisty» (OBON-like), «OBONschina» (OBONship), «OBONizatsiya» (OBONization), indicates that new connotations of this abbreviation have evolved and continue evolving. These meanings may not apply directly to OBON groups and their representatives, but have a judgmental nature and represent a subjective emotional attitude to OBON, characterization of their actions, modes of behavior,

and methods of struggle. Thus, in addition to designating the OBON groups the word «OBON» and its derivatives acquired additional meanings, mostly negative, indicating:

- behaviors beyond acceptable: aggressive, loud-mouthed, provoking a fight and swearing, insulting;
- activities outside the legal framework, violating the law, such as disorderly conduct, assault, seizure of buildings, intimidation;
- recourse to violent, extreme forms of struggle;
- those who do not understand a «normal speech», insisting on his/her own in any case, going ahead bluntly;
- lack of principles, sold-out, deformed value scale, a primacy of material interest over a declared public interest, irresponsible attitude to the consequences of own activities.

Quotes from respondents evaluating OBON from the moral-ethical point of view of and with regards to a legitimacy of their actions, are in a table below:

Evaluation of moral-ethical qualities of OBON	Evaluation of legitimacy of OBON's actions
<p>...Do not have the moral values;</p> <p>...They do not have their own values, principles; they do not care who to work for, they are not personally attached to protest actions;</p> <p>...Working for a pay, they take money for this, all depends on the contract;</p>	<p>...Legitimate peaceful rallies are ok, but when they move to threats and violent methods, we can say this is OBON;</p> <p>...Often do not comply with the law;</p> <p>...When there is a tendency to use violent methods;</p> <p>...Use extreme forms;</p>

Evaluation of moral-ethical qualities of OBON	Evaluation of legitimacy of OBON's actions
<p>...They misunderstand what they bring into the society; they are not responsible for their actions;</p> <p>...Cursing, saying bad words;</p> <p>...OBON? ...Yet there are some women in the Parliament... Look how they behave! Apparently, according to the psychology of the fighting sides the one who wins is cool... and they [these women in Parliament] think they are cool... they are not thinking that the whole country is looking at them... that their behavior is being reproduced ... In general, this OBON is the lowest of the low...</p>	<p>...Used by semi-criminal elements;</p> <p>...They do not necessarily violate the laws... on rallies and public processions. Basically, they act within the law, but there are also illegal activities (capturing buildings) falling under provisions of the Criminal and Civil Codes.</p> <p>...Women's groups [OBON] can also violate laws. It will, most likely, be a disobeying the lawful demands of officials, disorderly conduct, disturbing a public order, or, if it is a serious matter, a criminal case of hooliganism.</p>

Respondents also assess OBON representatives and groups in a positive and neutral ways (see below). However, negative connotations absolutely prevail in their definitions of OBON. Possibly, the positive connotations are only being developed in the current period, subject to an ongoing spread of the phenomenon and an emergence of social tolerance towards, or justification of OBON, by the public. For our purposes, these positive meanings are the most interesting because of the following two reasons: Firstly, they can bring us closer to understanding the points of entry and the impact

on the studied groups, including with the goal of creating a positive attitude towards and image of OBON; and, secondly, these definitions reflect quite possibly existing positive qualities of this category of people and their groups, the qualities that are or could become of a public benefit and, inter alia, be used by civil society actors:

- efficient, lightning-quick actions and rapid achievement of objectives;
- fearless, desperate;
- leaders; and
- organized.

It is worth noting that the acronym «OMON» (which also contains the phrase «special purpose detachment» as discussed earlier) has not received such additional connotations, although it directly relates to riot forces, their actions, and ways of working.

Thus, a generalized definition of OBON based on the replies from expert surveys and focus group discussions looks as follows:

**OBON are established informal groups of civilians, consisting mostly of women, intentionally formed and working for the purposes of third parties, or customers (power and other political structures, business, semi-criminal elements). OBON regularly use aggressive, violent, emotional, illegitimate methods. OBON does not belong to true civic groups, as it represents neither own interests nor the interests of vulnerable groups.**

Despite the existing negative associations, in this report we use the term «OBON», for the term is actually existing and «living», widely multiplied by media, and used in everyday life.

### Attitude of respondents to representatives of protest groups

This section presents data on the attitude of respondents to OBON representatives.

The data of the study shows that slightly more than one-third (35.3 %) of respondents agree that «OBON contributes to solving social problems.» Apparently, this is because of the fact that, on the one hand, from time to time the members of OBON groups can and actually act to solve social problems of their neighborhoods (villages or streets) at the request of local dwellers and free of charge. On the other hand, the pseudo-pro-people's rhetoric of OBON appears to bear fruits by making people think that members of the OBON groups actually are the ones who stand for «truth and justice» and work exclusively for the needs and aspirations of ordinary people. It is interesting that this viewpoint is more relevant to women-respondents than to men-respondents. The proportion of positive answers for women-respondents is 1.5 times higher than that for men. Possibly, certain gender stereotypes and women's solidarity play a role, reflecting on a kind of «confrontation» between men and women on the issue of who makes politics and has a stronger impact on the life of the country.

Opinions are more balanced, when respondents are to checkmark the statement «OBON are an instrument to achieve the goals of others.» 53.1 % of women and 57.6 % of men, or 55 % of all respondents, agree with this statement. Thus, more than half of the respondents believe that the OBON women are instruments in the hands of others and carry out orders.

Proportions of male and female respondents assessing the statement «OBON is a group of individuals who use aggressive techniques and destabilize a situation,» are almost identical, making up 29.8 % and 29.6 %, respectively for women and men. A total number of respondents who agree that OBON destabilizes a situation, thus, amounts to 29.8 %, that is, as nearly one third of all respondents.

*Table 1. Respondents' opinion about OBON, disaggregated by sex  
(% of positive responses from respondents' answers)*

Question/statement	Women	Men	Total
Contribute to solving social problems	41.6	27.1	35.3
A tool to achieve the goal of others	53.1	57.6	54.6
Groups of individuals who use aggressive techniques and destabilize a situation	29.6	29.8	29.6

In the analysis of the frequency of answers by age categories we can see that the proportion of positive answers in different age groups are approximately even, while the largest share of positive answers (OBON contributes to solving social problems) falls to the age groups of 36-45 and 46-55 years old.

Majority of respondents of 36 years old and older believe that «OBON is a tool for achieving the goals of others», with the highest result (66.7%) for the respondents at age group «56-65 years old» (see Table 2 below).

*Table 2. Respondents' opinions about OBON, by age categories  
(% of positive responses from the respondents' answers)*

Question/statement	Age					
	15-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	65 +
Contribute to solving social problems	36.1	31.3	39.9	35.7	30.8	28.6
A tool to achieve the goal of others	51.4	47.0	56.1	59.1	66.7	57.1
Groups of individuals who use aggressive techniques and destabilize a situation	20.8	30.7	35.7	31.6	24.5	28.6

## RESULTS

Analysis of the respondents' views on OBON by geographical criteria reveals three oblasts showing similar data (See Table 3 below). Notably, these are the oblasts of the Kyrgyz Republic with a high capacity of population's activism which have survived the tragic events in 2010 (Osh and Jalal-Abad provinces) and played a major role in pre-revolutionary events in April of the same year (Talas province). For the two southern provinces (Osh and Djalal-Abad) it is also important that the OBON technology was tested here for the first time. This can also be considered as an important factor in forming a certain attitude to this phenomenon among local population. The three oblasts have the highest share, compared with other areas, of positive answers to the statement «OBON is a tool for achieving goals of others» (68 %, 70.1 % and 71.3 % respectively for Talas, Osh, and Djalal-Abad oblasts). The same pattern occurs with the statement «OBON is a group of individuals who use aggressive techniques and destabilize the situation» – 39 %, 42.3 % and 33 %, respectively, for Talas, Osh and Jalal-Abad oblasts. Other areas have lower rates.

*Table 3. Respondents' opinion about OBON, by oblast (% of positive responses from total number of answers, % of the respondents)*

	Issyk-Kul oblast	Talas oblast	Naryn oblast	Chuy oblast	Osh oblast	Batken oblast	Djalal-Abad oblast	Bishkek	Total
Contribute to solving social problems	31.8	54.0	48.9	28.4	16.5	39.5	22.6	44.4	35.5
A tool to achieve the goal of others	50.6	68.0	36.2	44.1	70.1	48.8	71.3	45.6	55
Groups of individuals who use aggressive techniques and destabilize a situation	22.7	39.0	28.7	19.6	42.3	32.6	33.0	19.2	29.7

### What do members of OBON think about themselves?

The views of the OBON members about themselves and own activities also differ. Apparently, such a divergence of opinions is the result of existing differing assessments, as well as an effect of the process of establishing trust and communication between an interviewer and a respondent.

A frequent comment interviewers give about interviews is a comment on an increasing degree of openness of OBON members and their willingness to tell their stories. As a result, in the beginning of interviews respondents can give up ties with OBON, and in the end of interviews they name specific actions, prices, and future plans.

In most of the interviews, members of OBON hide the fact that they are involved in their activities for payment and claim they are not members of OBON groups and that they advocate for justice solely because of their beliefs.

Those who have had been OBON leaders in the past, especially the ones who are currently working for authorities, actively express their opposition to the ongoing actions of OBON, sort of reject their past. On the one hand, the recognition of the fact that they have been leading an OBON group might damage their current political status. On the other hand, their current belonging to power may create an illusion and belief in the righteousness and uprightness of their own and of their companions – within and outside power structures, thus, de-legitimizing the actions of the groups that are opposing authorities in the present moment (i.e. those who acting in favor of today's political opposition).

For these reasons, it is natural that OBON members make statements about themselves as of the people who have had to refer to such activities in search of justice and livelihoods.

Life has forced me. I've done my first protest in school, where I was a teacher. Having seen an injustice from the school management with respect to students, I raised the alarm. I was on the side of the school pupils, TV [channel/s] got involved, [lists names of famous politicians], there was a big scandal, and I won. Then I made a big scandal in [a department of a hospital]. They did not want to put in the hospital for treatment, I've been waiting for this and come several times to get into the hospital, but it did not work out, they always referred to the lack of space. Then my patience had exhausted, I went to the chief doctor, I screamed and revolted as I could, I behaved very aggressively, I threatened them, only then I was hospitalized... Not long ago, too, they established electric lines in our area, it turned out without pillars. Just installed high-voltage lines on the fences of the houses, the height was like a rope for drying clothes. Is this acceptable? This is especially dangerous for children. I organized a women's meeting to get a normal installation of the electric lines according to all their rules. Only then they established pillars. Why did not they put it at once? You see, circumstances compel me to be vociferous and aggressive!

My life and lives of my family and neighbors push me for such steps. Recently there was no electricity for three days in our area. Neighbors came up to me and said, «Eje, you go as our leader, you are pretty good at it, how long can we be sitting without light? I have young neighbors, but they do not want to go [to resolve such issues], so I solve their problems too. I am as a non-indifferent person; when I see an injustice, I cannot sit idly by. My motto is «Jatyp olgoncho, atyp ol!» [Trans. from Kyrgyz – «Better die shooting than die lying down!»].

A very few of the surveyed 49 members OBON claimed openly and directly that they are members of OBON groups, that they earn on the profession and that they intend to continue pursuing such activities.

One of them said, «How am I different? How am I worse than those who work for the election campaigns of a politician and get paid for it? We also receive fees for a similar work.» [ ]

### **Members of OBON from the point of view of interviewers**

Below we have compiled some of the most interesting descriptions of OBON leaders made by researchers during and after interviews (see also Appendix 2 to this report.) Authors have decided not to change the original texts (except for the amendments to confidentiality issues) in order to allow readers to see the views of different people involved in the study.

In my opinion, the woman was not always sincere. At the present moment, she is a member of the Revolutionary Committee and seems to promote the interests of her party. Her attendance of the meetings and pickets is based on the interests of her party. Also, she is being invited by authorities to all meetings and appointments as a member of the Revolutionary Committee.

An active woman, not indifferent to social problems and aspirations of ordinary people. Participated in only one action, spending 10 days in the regional center. This was enough for her to analyze the situation and understand how they [OBON] were used by influential and wealthy people. Smart and sensible, she has not given up activism and continues working on in the public space and on projects. Enhances her education, works with the public to raise its consciousness. A representative of a local NGO praised her a lot, talking about her achievements in the social work...

The woman replied sincerely, quietly, it is clear that she is disillusioned about pickets, as the main purpose of her participation was to get help for starting a business with friends, to improve the financial situation of their families. From her replies it can be concluded that the candidates for elective seats

have not financially supported her, moreover, they have not even thanked her for the work she has done. She was an active member of pickets against local state administration (2005) in one of the regional centers...

The woman is very energetic, her appearance shows that she has gone through a lot in life; her answers prove that she has become a member of OBON because of the difficult circumstances and persecution from local authorities since 2001. Apparently, all these life difficulties have forced her to leave her village and move to Bishkek and to live a disastrous period. Recently, she has been re-established at her previous position in the village. Perhaps, if she were receiving a sort of support in the past, she would have become a good specialist. She has been frequently using the words «kyjrdanuunu jaratty» and «karapayym elderdin koygoyloru» [Trans. from Kyrgyz – «embittered me» and «the problems of ordinary people»]. Now she has somehow taken heart and believes that she is helping ordinary people, and she feels people's necessity in her activities. In my opinion, she has her own truth, in which she is convinced, so some questions are answered with her own prepared phrases.

At an interview with a female participant of the events of 2005, one can feel nostalgia for the old days when they were “coddled” by all authorities and all the doors were open to them. They were invited to cafes «to have plov [ ]» monthly, received gifts, awards, and certificates; had vacations at Issyk-Kul lake resorts and care in Bishkek hospitals. They were feeling their importance and respect. There is a visible resentment that now they are not wanted and continue their existence by doing a heavy, low-paid work...

Also I could sense that she was having fears about being interviewed, and she asked again and again about her safety. The woman wrote down the phone numbers of researchers, the name and contacts of our organization. Apparently this is due to

the fact that in the past she was persecuted by the authorities... The woman was disappointed she could not showcase her awards and a photograph with [former] president Bakiev, because during a search she had to burn it all...

A woman firmly believed that the revolution in 2005, as compared to the one in 2010, was a truly people's revolution, and that they were fighting for a justice, lost health, and now, when they are ill (with disabilities), they are not wanted. She and her fellow members believe they were true revolutionaries, while women participating in the events of 2010 were OBON. Very colorfully and enthusiastically, as if it happened yesterday, she was describing the events of 2005 in the oblast center in detail. She admitted that only after all these years she realized that she risked her life and all she had for the sake of higher goals. According to her, both men and women - participants in the events of 2005 – keep connections between themselves, which, unfortunately, weaken from year to year. Overall, the interview was held in a friendly atmosphere, the woman was direct, open, but speaking cautiously...

### Structure of protest groups

This section describes the structure of OBON groups. It should be noted that during the focus group discussions with experts, the majority of respondents identified a number of roles of OBON members, pointing out that some of them can be carried out by one person, depending on the specific situation, experience, abilities, and other.

- Leaders, organizers, OBON heads, including hidden ones («ideological leaders»);
- «Regular fighters» of OBON, «cannon fodder», «masses»;
- Speakers, provocateurs – performing speeches and asking sharp questions; «provoking the crowd»; starting fist fights etc.

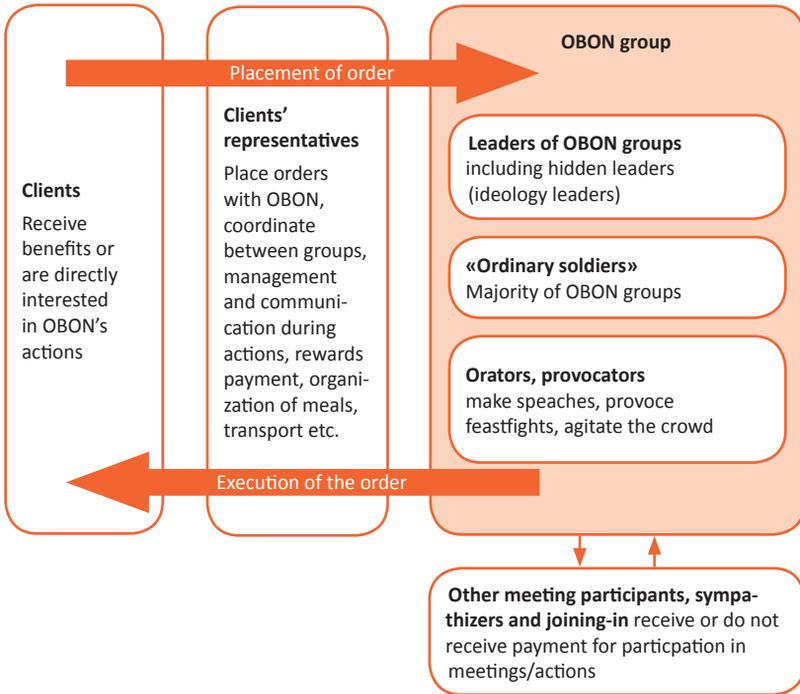
In addition, most meetings are attended by those who come out of curiosity, out of conviction, or to support relatives, i. e. with no direct selfish interest:

- Sympathetic.

Separately, respondents indicated that there are customers, and the connection between customers and OBON managers can be made through intermediate links. Respondents cited several examples of how it works:

- Customers – those who receive benefits or are directly interested in the actions of OBON;
- Representatives of the customer – persons placing orders with OBON groups and performing a coordination between the hired groups, management and communication at the time of the actions, payment of fees, and organization of meals and transportation.

Figure 1. The structure of OBON groups and relationships with groups of influence



Thus, a whole chain of initiators and participants of actions and the relationships between them is lined up. Majority of respondents spoke about a mandatory existence of the customer/s and their representatives, as well as about participation of sympathizers in major actions with OBON.

But then, I noticed that nearby there was a young man with a bandage on his forehead. Another man came up and whispered something to him, and then he went into the darkened foreign make car, sat there for a while, then came out and whispered

something to a woman. The woman rolled up her sleeves and went into the crowd and began to shout: «This is a provocateur! Scout of Akaev! Get him!» At that time, I was approached by a woman who was sympathetic to me, believed that I came with open intentions. She told me: «Balam (son), you better get out of here, because they will scratch you face.» It was clear that they were instruments of...

*Expert, NGO, Bishkek*

In 2011, [the protest are organized] with or without cause around the National Parliament. I notice one man, he is constantly organizing rallies, someone manages him... Apparently, some people need these meetings, [they] hire the man, and he brings [OBON] women. When Parliament members were returning from one event, they were not allowed in building of the Parliament. The doors were wrapped with belts. [Members of Parliament] are asking «Why?» And they [the OBON members answer] «We were told so – not to let anyone in or out!»

*Expert, national authorities*

An interesting fact is that the structure of OBON groups can vary significantly in different oblasts. For example, researchers have noted that in some areas there are more close-knit groups, consisting of several leaders acting together and their support group, while in other areas there are more independent OBON leaders having their «personal» support groups. In both cases, the OBON leaders are able to organize mass and restless protests in the shortest time, including provocations at large rallies and a seizure and looting of buildings.

They [OBON] act so, they say, «you are corrupt, get out of here!» There are a few women there... one or two of them are the leaders ... Immediately [in this oblast center] they entered

government offices ... take the head [of such office] at the shirt collar... in all of the organizations where their customer needs to change [the existing] heads of offices. These were the men who used women ...

*Expert, national level authority*

Many respondents note that men are the customers.

### **Who and why come to protest groups?**

If we are talking about the fact that these women receive money, the group you are talking about, then it's probably all of them [these women] can be categorized [as OBON]: performance for the money.

But she may come with her own problem and be interested in solving this problem, but at this time she can also get paid, then why not take it? She has the dividends, while her problem is resolved.

I have not seen rich and middle class among these women.

Majority of the actions that I have seen and was involved in, after all, were linked to the fact that people were there not because of the money, but because of solving a problem. And for the cases when the money was given, I know, the team is recruited not in the center, but rather in the oblasts. During the election they find people, usually among the marginalized ... new settlements, the unemployed areas and other... where there are poor. It only takes one to say «handing out money over there», they immediately begin running for the money. These are less-educated, easy to manipulate people. One only needs resources [to organize a protest].

If we, for example, were offered to go for the money, we would not have done so, because it is dangerous, it's a crowd, you never know how it may end up, and the people who agree and risk, they

understand that if they do not take the risk then, in the evening they have nothing to feed their children with. Because of these reasons they agree.

That my acquaintance, who came to these events [protests] and received money for it, she is uneducated, unemployed, and there is a domestic violence ... husband often beats her up, he comes drunken, he is often looking for a job or has a low-paid job, [she] is really marginalized.

*Expert, NGO, Bishkek*

Who comes into OBON groups? What were these people doing in the past? What is their status, how do they substantiate their decisions to join OBON groups? These questions were discussed with the respondents, both with experts and with the participants of OBON groups.

### **Ordinary members of OBON groups**

Opinions of the respondents of the FGDs and expert interviews largely coincide. The prevailing view is that most of the «regular fighters» of OBON are vulnerable middle-aged women who do not have permanent jobs, have financial difficulties, and come to OBON because of a needy situation; they are self-employed or have or have had low-paying jobs.

For example, an expert from a oblast center, when talking about a particular action in 2010, describes the regular fighters of OBON as «women from the bazaar who have low earnings... and who... says afterwards that they do not understand why they have gone there...»

Another NGO expert from Bishkek analyzes opinions about OBON members and comments that there is «a certain stigma that these are some unsettled women, unemployed, without family, relationships, and support. [The opinion about them] is negative, they are criticized. I have not heard anything about respecting them...»

I have 6 children. By profession I am a nurse, but now I do not work. Sometimes irregular jobs at home, doing shots, intravenous injections for neighbors. My husband does not work either. During the last elections we were working for [name of a party], they promised to help larger families. All large families in our new settlement are very poor, for example, we have only one room in our house. Mothers with many children decided to get together and go to the Government, to the President to ask zero-interest loans and new apartments. We are several women here.

*Current member of OBON*

These opinions of the FGD respondents and expert interviews about regular OBON members are also confirmed by interviews with leaders and members of OBON groups.

### **OBON members about regular fighters**

Mostly, OBON members are women, 45 years and older, who are experiencing financial difficulties in the family, they do not work...

Many of these women do not have a diploma [of higher or special education]...

Women are active, unemployed, poor and not young...

People become active for a cause. Hardships force them [to go to OBON]...

In general, poor and unemployed women, i.e. women who are experiencing financial difficulties at home, sometimes these are relatives of a political leader ...

Women with problems ...

Women, mostly [middle-]aged, they cannot solve their fundamental problems, they are trying just to make money ...

There are many like these women in Kyrgyzstan, there are women who come from villages to make money in such a way

They are the ones who cannot write their names, they go to meetings, they make money on this. They attend meeting like as if they were going to an employment office...

Poor, needy families might have to take such a step. They ask «How much do they give?» I do not consider them active, and [they] don't think what they scream about...

Basically, in Bishkek this is a commercial thing, these are people from the employment office. They better earn here [with OBON], than stand there [at the employment office]. And we [in the oblasts] do not have such people...

Some of them have families, and some of them have no family...

[They are] different, there are older women, with quite a lot of life experience. And there are young ones...

Mostly older women, but there are also younger ones. But among the young ones men and women are equally represented...

The fact that the regular members of OBON are mostly socially vulnerable women does not require much explanation. However, it is interesting to consider the situations of the leaders and organizers of OBON. We have conducted interviews with such respondents.

### **Leaders of OBON**

In the analysis of responses from the OBON members we drew our attention to the existence of two types of OBON leaders. They differ in the way of their entering into and further advancing in the «system» of OBON:

### 1. OBON leaders who emerged while being in the forefront of this movement

Often these are the people who have come to OBON as ordinary members, i.e. when being needy, unemployed or having low-paid jobs. Often, these are employees of schools or other public institutions. This small part of OBON leaders (according to our observations, one in 5-6 leaders) are recognized OBON figures today, but they have not improved their financial position or have improved it insignificantly. One of them commented on her arrival to OBON and her current situation:

My social situation pushed me... not enough money to feed the family ... I was unemployed and heard from friends about people rallying around the administration of [the oblast center] ... I am currently homeless. Sometimes I want to die because of a material need...

*OBON leader*

In one of the northern oblasts, of the four (4) interviewed OBON leaders two (2) live in a new settlements. Besides, one has a business in the city and another one «has her own NGO.» The other two, according to their own statements and interviewers' impressions, are unemployed.

(Translated from Kyrgyz) «I went into the herdsmen not because of a good life?» (in other words «There was no other way»).

*OBON leader*

According to the information obtained in the interviews and focus group discussions, another part of the first type leaders, have increased their well-being to varying degrees – from the acquisition of jewelry, expensive clothes, and plots in new settlements to buying condo apartments and starting businesses. In addition, they promote

themselves into power structures or work to enhance their influence on these structures.

That year was the first time we went out on picket. Our goal was to get the land plot. But then it did not happen. Only in 2005, we have received it by capturing the land, we have built a house, and we live there now.

*Representative of OBON*

### **2. OBON leaders who initially approached the participation in OBON and the creation of groups as a ready leader and/or manager**

Usually the leaders of the second type were financially secure when they were starting their involvement in OBON and were having a power status and/or experience in the positions of power and/or an influence on the decision making. Some of them have a past experience in the Komsomol and Communist party's work. Today they continue being financially secure (non-small business) and having access to decision making.

Many respondents have a belief that the main purpose of these OBON leaders coming to the protest groups was to protect and expand their own businesses and/or access to decision-making in one or another form.

In the administrative center of one of the oblasts of Kyrgyzstan respondents mentioned 5-6 names of well-known OBON leaders. Most of them have businesses and/or hold positions in the government (executive and legislative branches, local government). This oblast is not an exception from a rule.

However, power ambitions of OBON leaders are not limited to the oblast level offices. The push these women to a «conquest» of national heights.

I met one woman who said so:

– I am OBON! We have cleaned up the city now and kicked out all the corrupt!

– How do you know that they are corrupt?

– And I know he [person's name] is corrupt, he takes bribes.

– And why have you come here now?

– I came to the ministry. I want to lead it [name of a public service]. She [the current head of the office] is corrupt, and I want to get this appointment!

– Did you pass the interview?

– First, he [the one who decides on the appointment] received me well, but now he does not want to meet with me. If he continues doing so, then we will discard him too!

*Expert, Bishkek*

Some of the former and current OBON leaders are today at all levels of the national and local authorities, including the Parliament, ministries, oblast governors offices, city halls, district councils, and Ayil Okmotu, as well as in the leadership of political parties.

But it would be naive to assume that the OBON leaders who have no official duties have an insufficient leadership potential. According to the answers of many respondents, they have a strong influence on oblast level authorities (which means an influence on almost any power structure within the oblast). They also receive an attention from local authorities, both in formal and informal ways (invitation to celebrations, seats of honor and «ustukans» [ ], gifts, awards, certificates; they participate in official delegations, receive vacation benefits etc.).

It is obvious that the majority of the first type leaders that come into OBON as ordinary members or independent OBON actors succeeded in gaining the status of a leader of OBON by the use of their personal virtues, i.e. business, oratorical, organizational, and

other skills. Most of the interviewed leaders of the first type have improved their financial situation to varying degrees while being in OBON.

It is very rare that OBON leaders are poor. Perhaps, this is because of the fact that they (leaders of OBON remaining poor) have only recently started receiving higher honoraria and/or their life circumstances have been preventing them from increasing their wealth status noticeably.

At the same time, we believe that the representatives of the second type may have originally possessed leverage, or a kind of order, that is, as if they were «assigned», «invited» to perform certain tasks. They have approached the organization of OBON groups as a kind of an «economic» or «career» project; they were realizing that, in addition to simple payments for participating in rallies, such projects will bring them other benefits. Also, with an experience of an organizational work they have positioned themselves as leaders and coordinators of OBON groups.

### **«Sympathetic»**

Opinions of the respondents of the study on the protest actions differ amazingly and include diverse and divergent assessments. «Sympathetic» is another group of participants of the protest meetings named by the respondents. According to the definition, the respondents included into this group the ones who come to the actions following their personal beliefs, in order to solve their own problems; the ones dissatisfied with the social situation; in order to support a relative; as well as the ones who come to the meetings with the hope of receiving some kind of payment, but do not join organized groups of OBON, or «idlers, who were just passing by» and have stopped to find out «what is happening» [ ]. An attitude to the «sympathetic» varies from a neglectful («will go anywhere for the money») and perturbed («they are being seen by the whole country») to empathic («I feel sorry for them, they have had to behave so») and supporting («OBON is an institution of the civil society»).

Poor women of Kyrgyzstan. I feel sorry for them, sometimes I'm angry with them, but because of all the conditions of life, because of the upheavals that are happening in Kyrgyzstan... Any woman who wants her children to be full and shod... The one who has a job will not go to OBON... This state is responsible even for having OBON.

...among them [OBON] there are unhappy, but they are few.

A woman pensioner went to the rally... 100-200 som... in 2005-2006, she went there with her husband. All people think that going to the rally means receiving money. Poor people think if they go to a meeting nothing will change, but they can receive some money. And they are not thinking about what will happen tomorrow. They say that the daily rate today is 500 som...

They have collected information from [dozens of] people [affected then]. She promises millions to them. She takes money from the budget of a state agency [name of the agency], invites people to courts in Bishkek. She has brought her people to a meeting in the Parliament... We also attended this meeting... and she raised the issue of corruption... [at the meeting in the Parliament] that we have initiated.

*Expert interviews, various oblasts*

### **Recruitment to OBON, the emergence of services market and technology**

Respondents have described interesting facts about the recruitment into OBON by manipulating, when the protesters are invited for one cause interesting to the people (social and economic problems) and, instead, are proposed to protest on another cause.

In 2005... There used to be ... there was a bazaar [name of the market], everything was possible... to organize quickly, so a protest was raised on economic issues. They came to the meeting with economic requests, but there were people running around and saying «You should shout and demand that such person [name of the person] goes away! For his resignation!», «Come on! First issue is to dismiss him, and then your bazaar questions will be addressed.» People came with one specific question in mind, and then they were refocused on another one...

One of my friends was also on the side of a famous OBON leader [name of the leader]. And when she realized that she was going the direction she was not intending to go... It was an elections time... this OBON leader came and said that discussed the issue with some people, she promised [my friend] a job... they went to a meeting, but the people there were not at the decision making level. In one word, all went wrong. They say one woman stood up and told the OBON leader «We are confused... You lied to us...». Then this woman walked away. Finally, the OBON leader was assigned to her wanted position anyway, she just wanted to enlist a support from the people [at this meeting]. At some point, the rally participants followed her... But even after all this she continued making [false] promises to people.

*Expert, oblast center*

Experts have suggested that perhaps the recruitment to OBON groups from rally participants is one of the typical patterns: first, participants are invited to meetings with the use of an ideological cause, and «then, a commercialization cause occurs».

Values? The appetite comes with eating, I think the first time a woman went to a meeting she was fearful. But then she saw there was no reaction [from authorities] and she continued. [It is an important factor that] OBON's actions are not punished for.

*Expert, Bishkek*

Respondents' answers and media information indicate that the phenomenon of OBON and other paid protest groups has spread very widely, and the nature of the involvement of people in these groups has changed.

At the beginning the recruitment has frequently occurred as it is described above, either through persuading individuals or with elements of blackmailing and coercion. Lately, working in OBON groups became an attractive option, with the possibility of organizing an OBON group seen by some as a rather profitable business perspective.

An emergence of multiple and independent OBON groups, an aggressive promotion of their services, price lists, as well as a relatively high level of the organizational development of these groups with elements of quality control and high-speed services are the evidence of the development of the OBON services market, business appeal, and competition among OBON representatives. The business environment is the most favorable: a high demand for services in the conditions of a permanent political crisis; virtually inexhaustible supply of its basic resource - the manpower; as well as the «protection schemes» and the inertia of the state in the market regulation and guardianship of the law and order.

Moreover, this market possesses characteristics of an emerging «perfect market» [ ]. Thus, it is attended by a considerable number of buyers and sellers, has a free entry to and exit from the market (at least for OBON members selling the services), freely set prices (agreements with buyers, customers), standard services (existence of price-lists). However, it is impossible to proclaim that there exists a pressure on other market participants.

Let's look at the «marketing mix» of the OBON services, i.e. a set of basic marketing «coordinates.» These include «4P», namely:

**1. Product:** product, service, quality, design, ergonomics, etc.

OBON services are in demand, have a variety of sub-services and their combinations, i.e. the product can be tailored to a client. For

example, one can organize shouting of slogans, provocative measures, disruption of rallies, blackmailing, more «aggressive actions such as the seizure of buildings, intimidation of opponents etc.

**2. Promotion:** sales promotion, advertising, direct marketing, etc.

OBON uses the effect of the «word of mouth» for the promotion of its services. They are not advertised in the media, but everybody knows about them. Apart from the fact that buyers look for the goods, also there are aggressive forms of marketing, for example, when OBON leaders visit politicians and officials persistently and offer their services and use blackmail methods against potential customers and «smear campaign» against competitors.

**3. Place:** From the point of view of goods' availability to a buyer, available for purchase anywhere or only at one point.

OBON services are now available everywhere, i.e. services follow the order. It is possible that there exist some limitations, such as oblast monopolies of OBON. Because of these, representatives from one oblast are unlikely to act in another one, and the range and scope of their activities in an «alien area» are likely to be limited and subject to a strong influence of local OBON groups. At the same time, there are instances an exchange of experiences between groups from different areas of the country.

**4. Price:** the cost of goods and services, competitiveness, prices.

The prices satisfy both OBON representatives and customers. Customers do not have to choose between hiring OBON and organizing an extensive media advertising campaign to achieve their goals because of low living standard (i.e. cheap labor) and competitive prices for OBON services.

With no doubt, Kyrgyzstan is a leader in the development of this kind of services involving women. This is, in part, proved by the further active development of technologies involving OBON and similar groups (for example, by bringing together women's OBON, youth and men's groups, and the so-called «white-hat sportsmen» [ ]), as well as by the development of methods of OBON work.

«Our society allows it to exist in this space – this is the main reason. Motivations are different – business, hanging out, self-realization, and ambition. The opposition uses them, others came [other groups came to power], and they [OBON] feel and understand that in any case their services are in demand. Everybody uses them, they are mercenaries... «we will dance and sing for the one who pays us.»

*(Expert interview)*

## Reasons for OBON Emergence and Existence

Among the causes of OBON there are a number of aspects of socio-economic, political, personal, situational, cultural or other nature. They should be considered in a close relationship and interdependence. Accordingly, the solution of problems related to this phenomenon must be addressed together, while taking into account all of the named aspects. Otherwise, the results can be half-hearted and the unresolved problem will be influencing the future situation in the country to a greater or lesser extent.

1. **Poverty and unemployment.** Respondents referred to socio-economic factors such as poverty and lack of employment, unresolved social problems and lack of government measures to address them as to the main factors.
2. **Corruption and poor rule of law.** In addition, a majority of respondents of focus group discussions (FGD) named, among the reasons for OBON development, «corruption, impunity, lawlessness, lack of discipline, poor legal culture.» Moreover, these terms were used with respect to both the government and its representatives, and in relation to civil society and the general population of Kyrgyzstan.

- 3. Political instability, weak government, and demand for OBON services.** Political instability in the country, revolutionary situations, struggle between clans, groups and political parties for power, as well as the struggle between representatives of business groups for influence. During these battles different levels politicians and businesses actively refer to the use of women's potential. Such decisions are primarily dictated by considerations of the risk minimization. Most of the respondents noted that a participation of women minimizes the possibility of detainments by the militia and getting physical abuses. In addition, the organizers often lean on a law banning the use of weapons and physical force against women and children during rallies and in times of emergency and war.
- 4. The political will of the leadership of the country.** An important reason for OBON's continued existence and development without hindrance, its penetration into all parts of the Kyrgyzstan's society is, according to the respondents, a lack of political will of the country's leadership to resolve this issue.
- 5. Self-realization of women and women's leadership.** Also, according to respondents, such things as the desire of women for a self-realization and leadership play not the least role. Women-leaders possess important qualities (charisma, organizational skills, personal or family connections, ability to establish necessary contacts, and experience) and often make references to national traditions and historical examples of Kyrgyz women-leaders, such as Kurmanjan Datka and Urkuya Salieva, epics and legendary heroines Kyz Saikal, Kanykei, Janyl-Myrza, with whom they often compare themselves when justifying own activities.

Below are the results of the survey conducted across all oblasts of Kyrgyzstan.

Figure 1. Causes of OBON



Respondents were asked: «In your opinion, why this phenomenon has developed?»

As one can see from the diagram, respondents believe that poverty and unemployment are the most important reason for the development of OBON: an absolute majority of the interviewed, 59.2% (465 respondents) noted the socio-economic factors as the vital ones for the eradication of the OBON phenomenon. 46.9% (368) of respondents believe that OBON arises and develops as a result of the fact that «the government/local authorities are not involved in local issues». In other words, according to the respondents, an important factor is a lack of the political will to resolve this problem. 31,2% (245) of the respondents believe that the reasons for OBON development are related to a corruption in the country. Slightly fewer respondents, 28.3% (85), noted that, in essence, the existing order/demand from «politicians, business leaders, government officials, local communities, criminal or semi-criminal gangs etc. interested in the services of OBON» is the reason for OBONs continued presence.

Thus, there is a perception in the community, that, if employment problems are more or less resolved, the standard of living increases, the political situation stabilizes, and the state starts a real (not declarative) counteraction to the corruption, the OBON phenomenon

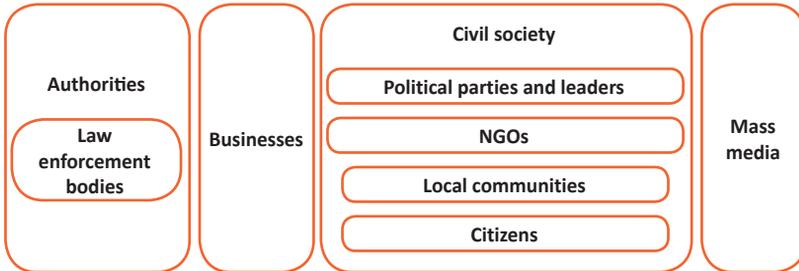
will disappear. Of course, OBON’s existence is a subject to a political will of the country leaders and effective measures to create obstacles for the customer driven demand for OBON services.

## Stakeholders

Stakeholders are influence groups operating in this field. They can directly or indirectly have an impact on the current political situation and the balance of power at different levels of the governance in the country. Based on the surveys and interviews, the report authors identify a number of interest groups. The main group of stakeholders is the power structures. Other actors in this field include:

- Law enforcement agencies,
- Business Structures,
- Political parties,
- Civil society (NGOs), and
- Media.

*Fig. 2. Groups affecting the development of the OBON phenomenon*



It should be noted that the interests of different stakeholders can and are often in conflict with each other and depend on a specific situation and a balance of forces and goals of each of the opposing sides. Stakeholders can be seen as a contradictory whole, with the resultant of the interests of its parts determining the trajectory of the evolution of the OBON phenomenon.

## Power

Many of the interviewed respondents believe that today, OBON as a phenomenon has become a state problem and requires a careful attention from both the government and the civil society. In this context, issues of power and its ability to respond to the political and social challenges become important.

The conviction of many respondents is that the government does not solve problems, it «does not respond to the problems of cities, areas or villages.» [ ]

Possibly a part of the guilt for emergence of OBON lies with the power... that you can not solve your problems if you do not cross limits? If today, the power learns to be proactive, the population will not block roads. And if not, then ALL PEOPLE will block roads. Concretely there (in a particular village) were no OBON [groups], but, in fact, the situation was the same (as if there was OBON).

*NGO expert, Bishkek*

Corruption in the country has led to an increased dissatisfaction with the general public and distrust in the decisions taken at various levels of government. In a systemic crisis situation in the country, a general weakening of the power structures, widely emerging opposition movements, the government cannot resist the protest mood of the population and is forced to go to all sorts of concessions. Respondents note that «the power is terrified by the opposition.» [ ]

The issue of cadres' compliance in the government arises here, when the placement is entirely dictated by a membership in a certain group, clan, tribal groups, political parties, and semi-criminal groups. Respondents pointed to the special importance of human resource issues and the need to consider the level of professionalism when appointing/placing personnel to the positions at all levels of governance. They stressed (as mentioned above) that «affiliation with a political party or a clan, not professionalism, became important in

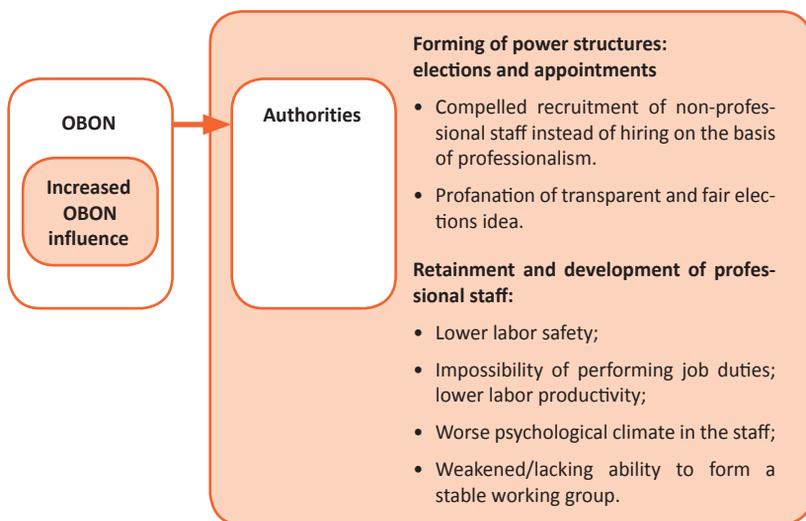
the system of staff training and advancement... All this is an uncivilized democracy.» [ ]

Many participants of the discussions find that today «the state is not fulfilling its direct duties. There is no an idea, there is no a scale of values. Our disease is a spiritual space that has been captivated by non-professionals and amateurs, they can be kind and gentle, but cannot figure out where the purpose and effects are.» [ ]

A significant role belongs to the factor of «temporary», «short-termism», when local officials come to their positions with a clear understanding that they will not work in this capacity long enough to implement any plans for the development of the local community, that they are temporary people on management positions, practically Temporary Acting (temporary on duty), and, in all likelihood, a change in the higher echelons of power will lead to their rapid displacement and an appointment of new managers. This, as mentioned above, is due to a widespread practice of an immediate replacement of the old staff and the arrangement of «own» people at all levels of power. In addition, a competition for seats at the local level and the desire to take revenge on the part of former executives also complicate the situation.

As in the revolutionary upheavals in Kyrgyzstan the change of cadres at the highest level happens often enough, while simple reshuffles happen even more frequently, this is reflected in the attitudes of the officials to their duties: the heads of field offices do not perform their work tasks properly, by the testimony of respondents, they «almost do not work, just go [here and there]» because they realize that the political situation can change at any time and such change will be followed by new appointments. So considerations of another plan come into a play: «committing feats of labor» does not make sense, and what is important is a focus on own short-term interests – to get rich quickly, getting access to new «feeders» and/or to bribes in exchange for services. A temporary stay of state servants on their positions in a combination with self-interests leads to inability of managers to act against OBON groups. [ ]

Fig. 3. Vicious circle of weakening of power institutions with the involvement of OBON



Many managers are forced to listen to the demands of groups of picketers, fearing a loss of their chairs, hoping to stay on their positions through giving concessions. Respondents believe this is due to the fact that they often have «their finger in the pie» [ ]. One of the national experts stated: «It is clear that if I am an akim with my finger in the pie, then I better negotiate and enter into an agreement. OBON will stay while the system remains as it is now. That is, if you do not break the law, you are acting within the law, then you are not afraid of OBON. Today... all are used to the fact that the power is dishonest. Therefore, one will not go against OBON, if he/she has no his/her own OBON.» [ ]

In the case of the intransigence of the head of the local self-governance, the OBON group quickly paralyzes the work of this structure, for example, through organizing pickets in front of the city halls and rayon or village administrative buildings. OBON can besiege the office of a local head during work hours over an extended

period of time and create noisy scenes there, providing a negative psychological impact and threatening the disclosure of real or unreal information on instances of the abuse of power.

In one of the local communities where OBON is particularly active and effective, focus group participants noted that «OBON is much stronger than the local government», members of the local OBON groups have a decision authority on most of the important questions about the local community life, including staffing, while the heads of the local government cannot counteract them. [ ]

According to an expert from the south of the country, it can be concluded that the representatives of OBON have also found opportunities to work directly in the local self-government: «We have OBON representatives in the mayor's office, but in what capacity – I do not know. Under what circumstances would one keep them there? So, they are associated with the authorities.» [ ] This is also confirmed by the participants of OBON groups one of which has reported that she is engaged in «human rights work at the City Hall. People turn to us to obtain land slots and benefits, and we try to solve the problems of ordinary people.» [ ] The interviewer has further stated that her interviewee «addresses many social issues and people turn namely to her. However, the woman refused to report in what way and how she solves these problems.»

It is clear that such a situation can have two-fold sources: OBON groups perform the «order» of the third parties or act on their own initiative, seeking solutions to their own interests, such as, for example, in land, apartments, business, money, positions in local government/management or in receiving any other preferences.

If I am a [simple] woman appealing to a state body, for example, they will kick me out. But if there is OBON, it does not work this way. [OBON members are not kicked out], and everyone knows who it is [i.e., whose interests are present]... In the public mind it is not regarded as an offense. Conductors are invisible to us.»

*NGO expert, Bishkek*

In essence, the OBON methods (in the broad sense) have become a common practice for staff appointments in the country, which may well be associated with the concept of the «administrative resources.» This is especially well seen during local elections, when the «decision-makers, ministers and deputies of the Parliament use similar methods» in treating local mid-level officials. The latter are faced with a choice «If you go «against» you will get punished: you can be dismissed, demoted or discriminated against. And if you go «for» – you'll get honors». [ ] Illegitimate methods of appointing to positions in the power structures are becoming widespread in the country. They come into a conflict with the existing legislation and contribute to a further weakening of the legal mechanisms. This, obviously, «leads to an anarchy» in the public administration and cannot contribute to a stabilization of the public life in the country.

All of this leads to the situation when random people coming to the power structures are unable to solve public problems at an appropriate level. This further undermines the already low credibility of the authorities and, therefore, the effectiveness of the steps undertaken. Some of the respondents (civil servants) directly pointed that there is «no confidence to the higher authorities» among the population, and the «mid-level staff suffers» [ ], while during frequent changes of higher power professionals are also forced to leave, giving way to perhaps less qualified members from opposing political groups. Therefore, the ordinary state servants who are not personally involved in the mentioned processes and simply perform their duties of middle- and lower-level managers in the government and public

administrations, in turn, do not feel safe from being attacked by political groups involving OBON. [ ]

In such cases, changes of power obviously achieve a threefold purpose: elimination of the employees – members of the former head's team, as presumably the «undesirable» ones; «seats» and jobs become vacant and available for «own» team members; and ensuring that «personally committed people» are in the new team (often countrymen and close relatives), regardless of their professional status.

Moreover, this situation is pushing the departmental heads and ordinary workers seeking to maintain their jobs to informal agreements with the new senior management and/or OBON forces. This, of course, makes the old cadres dependent on OBON, while putting their professional and moral principles at risk.

More broadly, in these conditions, a moral and psychological distortion, destruction of personal landmarks and qualities, and, consequently, of the public foundations and principles and, in practice, the moral degradation of the society take place.

As a result of the personnel reshuffles taking place in the country the system of promotion of professional growth was already disrupted at all levels of the government and authority. Further, there is a loss in the institutional memory, the rollback from the achieved milestones of development, decreased effectiveness of the governing bodies' performance and, as a consequence, an even greater deepening of the power crisis, both at the local and national levels.

Given the above, it is clear that such a political and social situation in the country made it possible for the members of different opposing groups to obtain desired positions. These groups used OBON, which played a role of «people's legitimizers», and facilitated these groups' coming to power at the rayon and oblast levels. One of the respondents stated that «As soon as the new government comes, they [new authorities] want to replace the representatives of the previous power with the new (their own) team. That is why OBON

emerges... [The situation will become different] when politicians think more about the country and not about their own interests, and when they learn to solve their problems in a civilized way... Because when a politician fails in getting results, he/she brings them [OBON]...» [ ]

Interviews with local authorities confirmed our hypothesis that the local government and central government can and indeed actively use the OBON groups for solving their own issues. Our respondent noted: «For example, there were OBON in the Tuyp village. They were organized by local authorities. Among the participants there were women, but also ex-prisoners, that is, they [authorities] used the potential [of these women]: highly marginalized, without any principles, ready to do anything for money.» [ ] Another expert informed that during the party conferences in one of the oblasts of the country, they were followed by a group of OBON women. Also, they were secretly escorted by rayon akims. In one of the rayons, during a meeting with voters, an akim was «literally standing by his car, and just shook and shook his head, and showed [the members of OBON] what to do.» [ ]

Participation of OBON in replacements and new appointments of governors, akims, heads of ayil districts, and other staff related decisions leads to a further deepening of the systemic crisis and weakens the power institutions. Respondents directly indicate that «the disruption and weakening of the state leads to the involvement of women-picketers.» [ ]

One of the experts noted that she had been approached by representatives of OBON who proposed to promote her candidacy to the post of the deputy governor of an oblast and who expected to receive either a cash reward or a positive solution to OBON members' problems: «OBON came to my office on April 28, 2005. They offered me [a position of] the Deputy Governor. Three yurts, three meals a day, and they'd stand there for a maximum of 10 days, 300 soms per day for each of them, and 500 soms per day for their managers. There will be men for protection. I answered that there was no money [to pay them] and they said they can [perform their job] in advance,

i.e., later I would have to solve some of their problems. They wrote a letter to the governor...» [ ]

The same respondent reported that in 2010, April 10-11, i.e. a few days after the coup of April 7, OBON groups came to oblast administration building. «There were only women for 3-4 days, they demanded to appoint certain people, they removed the head of the financial department, and akims of several major rayons from their offices. Practically they did not touch anyone at aiyl okmotu level.» [ ]

The resulting vicious circle (weakening of the authority - the activity of women-pickers – further deepening of the systemic crisis) allows OBON members to actively intervene the decision-making process, and to put a pressure on decision-makers, as well as to enter into power structures, receiving high positions in all branches of power, including ones in the National Parliament in addition to remuneration for their services.

Respondents noted that OBON participants, who somehow managed to reach the power positions are often well protected by the virtue of belonging to certain groups who made it possible for them to reach these seats in public authorities and become politically influential.

...The only thing that protects her [the OBON group participant] is the fact that she came to the National Parliament through a party list...

*NGO Expert, an oblast, KR*

The OBON groups are widely and often successfully used when as a result of the next «revolution» or any kind of social unrest of the oblast or rayon level there is a need for a practically illegitimate removal of the previous power representatives. These groups play a role of «representatives» of the revolutionary people» or «revolutionary committees» («revcoms»), under the mask of «fighters for justice» they implement «legitimization» of an order through methods of

their work. In such conditions persons who obtained or retained their power positions become indebted before those who have actively assisted them and have to constantly consider the demands of various «support groups»: OBON, semi-criminal gangs, loyal NGOs, which practically dictate their conditions and control the situation.

Speaking about the situation with the activities of OBON in one of the oblast centers of the Kyrgyz Republic, the respondents indicated that some picketers had a great influence, «because during the revolution of 2005, they supported the revolution and were promised positions and privileges... There were financial flows, investments, and influence. They went to the mayor at any time, demanded everything they wanted. And they also could go to the governor... They pressured the governor strongly. All (these) OBON women had been holding offices in the past, since 2005, they were at the revcoms, after that a coordinating council was established, they joined it. This meant that they were influencing the situation, politics and the public life... One of them became the chairwoman of the territorial public self-governance, another became the deputy governor, and the third one became a member of the Parliament...» [ ]

As mentioned above, there are leaders and ordinary fighters in the structure of OBON groups. Organizational development of picketers' groups results in the fact that OBON leaders get into the power («More educated ones get to the top, i.e., those who are capable to navigate themselves» [ ], and ordinary fighters remain «out of doors» and continue to perform their usual jobs as an «impact force» for different customers).

Respondents reported that the OBON leaders who are making task-oriented efforts to enter into the governmental structures may use different methods – bribery, fraud, threats, violations of the law, and intrigues. Often, it works: the power makes its surrenders/concessions, «When she [the leader of the local OBON group] was chairman of a territorial public self-governance, we were invited to the presentation of the [new] governor..., all of the attendees were shocked by her attitude, as she began reminding him how he

was working at the railroad [management unit], she poured all the negative considerations on him and walked away. And after a while, they started [working together] as a team.» [ ] Later, during the territorial public self-governance elections when she was elected, it was also a scandal, there were many violations. The procedure was contrary to the law; it was not in compliance with the regulations.» [ ]

Information of our respondents suggests that OBON leaders, attempting entering governmental structures use the same technology as the standard politicians: hand out promises to get support or neutralize potential opponents, and persuade and deceive, if the situation requires.

One of the interviewed woman working in a non-governmental organizations at an oblast center of Kyrgyzstan told that the leader of the local OBON in 2007 was campaigning for the City Council (Kenesh) and successfully used misinformation and promises. «She told me that if everything works out, she «will need an accountant in any case...» – That meant that she gave a promise. During a meeting at the City Hall I stood up and said: «You have muddled us, we were deceived.» Cheating was in what she had promised that the mayor and the members of the local council [city parliament] would attend, and I would have an opportunity to ask a question, but instead, the head of the mayor's office attended and everything went in a completely different way... But she was appointed anyway, I suppose she just wanted to enlist support of the people. It turned out that I allowed myself to be led by her at some point...» [ ]

During the change of power in 2010 revolution, some influential OBON representatives, «built into the power» in 2005, lost their positions and influence: new politicians came into the power, the ones that previously used to be in the opposition. Participants of several OBON groups thus became hostages of their own activities. As a part of the old system of ties and relationships of the former president K. Bakiev's team, OBON members had to defend their positions and, ultimately, under the new government, to withdraw from the political arena. [ ]

It is interesting to note that many picketers who have used their OBON groups as a «jumping-off place» for fairly high positions in governmental bodies, including the Parliament, later denied any connections and belonging to OBON. It is not unique for the cases related to OBON therewith, but also for the cases with other civil society organizations, such as NGOs.

It is notable that some of the OBON leaders, who have managed to obtain seats, for example, at the Kyrgyz Parliament, continue their activities in a similar way and achieve their goals in the same manner as the usual groups of picketers.

Take, for example, our Parliament. In fact, these women are not poor, but by a command or a tip-off they start to behave inadequately. Now it is possible in the Parliament. If one of the women comes out to the rostrum and starts talking nonsense, which is not confirmed in any way, and she tells it in a hit-or-miss fashion. It's shocking, when such things are pronounced suddenly to one's face and in public... K. therewith says: «I never say with no facts... myna mende document bar [Transl. from Kyrgyz language. – «Here I have the document»]. It turns out, that she publicly accuses someone before the whole country... Then, it has turned out that all that [what we have done] is legal. That is one scenario. Then they use her to attack another politician. K. again starts speaking about him at a meeting: they are guilty of such and such events... That is, she is engaged in black PR. We have addressed to her leader: «Why does «your» K. behaves in such a manner? Could you tell her to make the same statements, but in a different way?!» They answered, «We cannot handle with her by ourselves, we are suffering from this.» Men do not interfere with the OBON work in any way, they fear that they can, too, be affected. Militia, law enforcement agencies also cannot do anything because K. is a member of the Parliament and may invite any minister, and yell and scream at them. I mean, it's a different OBON level, which is far from being peaceful. [ ]

Having gotten into the power, many former members of OBON abruptly change their rhetoric. As already mentioned above,

apparently, changing public and official status in part leads to changes in their self-identification, which makes it impossible for them to officially recognize their «simple origin» and, in the case of OBON, of using special, not quite civilized and legitimate methods and tools that enabled them to make their ways to senior positions in the public system of power and control.

Moreover, not only those who «grew» from OBON, but also those who hired those groups to solve their issues, who was involved in the coordination of their actions and paid for their services, repudiate their relations with OBON. Both sides feel shameful and unworthy in terms of public morality. Although, in this case, it is clear that OBON's embeddedness in the power provides political dividends to both parties: the power gets a mechanism of control and retention of the situation at the local levels and OBON groups get «sinecures» and uses the access to decision-making processes and control over decisions. That is why the OBON groups are always under a protection of power structures. Respondents directly indicated that «OBON's authority is based on a fear, as their «umbrella» can «extend» «up to the national level, to the Kyrgyz Government, ministers, and the Parliament...» [ ]. The set of the measures used by the OBON groups makes their work effective, and includes both psychological (shouting, threats) and physical (pushing, tearing clothes, pelting with rotten eggs, scratching, fighting, etc.) interventions, and finds strong support from authorities, which actually are the most important factor that have generated OBON as a phenomenon.

### **Law enforcement structures**

When starting considering the roles of other actors, it is important to briefly note on the situation with the lawfulness, the rule of law in the country and the ability of citizens and, first and foremost, the power structures to implement them. According to the respondents, a contempt of the law by authorities at all levels, the weakness of the power, inability to control corruption and to take responsibility

for their own representatives failing to keep to the law is the basis of the systemic power crisis. The political crisis in the Kyrgyz Republic, according to our respondents' opinion is that «the laws do not work, they are not fulfilled, first of all, by the authorities themselves.»

In a legal vacuum, in a situation, when the official power cannot fulfill its duties on the law and order, everything will remain like this forever.

*Expert , national authorities, Bishkek*

Law enforcement and judicial bodies play a special role in the situation with the law. They are intended to ensure a compliance with the order, especially during mass civil actions, including those involving OBON groups, suppression and prosecution of those suspected in violating the law, and respect and protection of citizens' rights. In the opinion of the respondents, these bodies have been demoralized constantly during the last several years, especially in connection with legal proceedings on the events of April 7, 2010, when defendants are security forces themselves, and judges and lawyers are under a severe pressure including with the use of OBON methods and forces. As acknowledged by a law enforcement representative, his colleagues' are disinterested in implementing their direct functions/duties, for example, in arresting the troublemakers and filing criminal cases related to the protracted nature and uncertainty of the outcome of the political struggle, and the high probability that «tomorrow they [forces, whose supporters violate the order today] will come to power» [ ]. This respondent has no doubt that, if such scenario continues, a faithful fulfillment of professional duties by the law enforcement officers will negatively impact their career and safety.

At the same time, our experts believe that «...if the law enforcement authorities within 1-1.5 years apply administrative sanctions, where necessary, or in other situations conduct preventive work with the organizers» [ ], «punish OBON [prosecute] for personal

insults, for disorderly conduct and hooliganism,... remove them out of the crowd, what they basically do not do now», «then the problem with OBON groups can be solved.» [ ]

An important role belongs to the reform of the law enforcement bodies. One respondent notes that the militia can play an important role, but only under the conditions when strategic objectives related to the law enforcement system reform and the problems with a low level of their salaries will be resolved.

The question now is not whether to reform, but how to reform. Perhaps now some changes will start: people do not want to have marauders, as it was in 2010. Now the question is in the strength of the political will, and the fulfillment of the declared goals... It is normal, when they say, that «militia officers would not take bribes, and should have a good salary.» Earlier, the issues of social protection and salaries were not raised at all, and only the issues of technical equipment [for the law enforcement bodies] were under an attention. And now we need to talk about a radical transformation. If this happens, then OBON disappears, as militia officers are able to crack down on OBON in no time.»

*NGO expert, Bishkek*

Many respondents reasonably point out that for making many important areas fully operational, the political is in necessity and very important in today's political life.

To make the law enforcement agencies operational, they need to be cleaned out... In Georgia, it was successful because they did it once, changed, trained people within 3 months, there the political will prevailed. And here, I suppose that most likely the political will was not sufficient. After all, the militia is not allowed to go to rallies, and in our country some 300 militia officers took

part in the meetings after April (2010), so a case took place that and it became possible for the government to be led by some groups. Basically, they [the authorities] were led by [the militia], therefore the militia in the South did not react. They [the authorities] had to be tough in dismissing these 300 people, and not be led by them, because their [militia's] task was to protect the people.

*NGO expert, Bishkek*

As already mentioned, an additional factor of the law enforcement agencies not fulfilling these steps is the fact that those who take part in political activities in OBON groups and are their customers and «patrons» are protected by a ban on the use of physical force and weapons against women and children in mass actions, in times of emergency and war. Some respondents believe that the militia is not demoralized.

«I would say, as a lawyer, if you have a working law enforcement practice, the actions of these people fit into the framework of the Criminal Code and the Administrative Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, but because of politicization of law enforcement legal instruments are not always in use – i. e., there is a certain engagement of the law enforcement bodies. In this connection, in some cases the laws do not work. It is impossible to say that the cops [militia] and OBON are [directly] connected, but they are connected through political beau monde and its interests.»

*National level expert*

The law enforcement bodies, therewith, have not only failed to detain members of the OBON groups, but apparently, in some cases, on instruction of oblast, rayon, or aiyl (village) leadership in pursuit of their political goals, do not use force to protect other people from

OBON referring to the existing law and generally accepted ethical standards with regard to women. One respondent noted that «during the Soviet era, the law enforcement system worked very well. The population was accustomed to abide the law. And today, when the law enforcement bodies are corrupt and weak and courts are also corrupt, there is an «effect of impunity» and a lack of the public commitment to comply with the laws.» [ ] At the same time, the interviewed experts expressed their opinion that «the authorities using OBON at the same time use the militia as well, because the militia must also take some action, and it is not written in the law that, if a woman brawls, the law enforcement authorities should not take any measures against her. When it is necessary for the law enforcement bodies, they can easily prosecute this woman!» [ ]

Our respondents indicated that some members of OBON groups who were looking for new «jobs» and orders offered someone the post at oblast level (for example, the Deputy Governor position) on their own initiative, and therewith pointed out – «Do not worry for the militia, we have our own relations with them.» [ ]

In the study of the respondents' viewpoints regarding the role of law enforcement bodies in dealing with OBON, there were two views revealed. One of them is related to the predominant role of socio-economic reforms in the country as the key factor that is necessary for reducing the OBON problem to zero.

You can implement the reform of the Ministry of Internal Affairs thousand times, but if you do nothing regarding poverty and social protection, it all is dust – it means you've done nothing.

*NGO expert, Bishkek*

Another viewpoint assigns a crucial part to the law enforcement bodies and gives a subordinate role to the change in the social and economic conditions.

One of political party activists said: «When we were in N. town, these OBON women came up close to us, and were about to start physically abusing us. We asked the local men: «Listen, cannot you help us to stop their attacking us...?» Men just were standing, including law enforcement people; we only wanted that they would provide a protection for us against those women, but the men did not do anything in response and said, «... But they're women, what can we do...? We cannot touch them, you don't think we are gonna move them aside, do you?!» For me, it was really a shock...» [ ]

One should also take into account a third factor, i.e., the presence of a strong patronage («roof/umbrella») in the Government, Parliament or other influential politicians. This was noted by almost all respondents.

With this in mind, it is obvious that the authorities do not have the moral rights to demand their citizens to obey the law. In addition, the authorities are unable to demand this because of the incompetence of the large part of their public servants, as well as their constant involvement into «big politics» and struggle to keep or gain new positions and offices. [ ]

Thus, we can say that OBON is a reflection of the situation with the rule of law in the country. On the one hand, the authorities' failure to comply with the rule of law principles gives rise to a social injustice, and, as a result, to a growing dissatisfaction in population groups. On the other hand, the activity of OBON groups aggravates the situation of iniquity forcing the government structures at all levels to carry out the requirements put forward by OBON which, again, gives rise to even more dissatisfaction of ordinary people.

## **Business structures**

Business structures, too, are not left out from using and being exposed to activities of OBON groups. On the one hand, the OBON groups act as the executors of orders of businesses against rivals, and,

on the other hand, OBON people can be brought in for the purpose of hostile takeovers or extorting money from large businesses.

Our respondents in an oblast center reported that there are two large business enterprises in the city, namely markets (bazaars). Owners of markets are competing with each other. For example, one of them hires a group of OBON in the morning to blacken the image of the competitor «in the name of the people.» But then, in the evening, so does the other side. He/she employs the same group that is now speaking on behalf of this second person and against the one whom they played for in the morning. [ ]

There is also another side, the relationships between large businesses and government structures. According to our respondents, one of the most striking examples is the case when in one of the oblast centers of Kyrgyzstan there was a conflict between the city and the owner of a local market. The mayor's office decided to move the market to another location. Obviously, the transfer of the bazaar's location would lead to a temporary decline in yields, inconveniences and material losses. The owner of the bazaar was able to convince all of the traders at the bazaar that there was a need to preserve the market in its old location. OBON groups were also involved. They strongly influenced the outcome of the struggle.

Similar protests took place in 2011, when the campaign was launched to counter the transfer of certain parts of the Osh market in Bishkek.

Each time the struggles are resolved in different ways. But, in any case, OBON groups often play a decisive role in the results of the opposition of parties.

It is significant that the role of OBON in the actions of local residents against representatives of international businesses, such as the Kumtor Operating Company (Kumtor goldmine, Issyk-Kul Oblast), Copper Gold Company (Andash mine, Talas Oblast) always comes down to the fact that residents require ongoing financial investments in the oblast budgets, the budget of a relevant district, ayil okmotu,

and a particular village, and also in favor of some of the most active members of the local community who use OBON for their own selfish purposes and who offer their services in order to «pacify» the locals. Otherwise, if they do not receive money, they promise a new wave of violence and protests of «simple people.» Respondents reported that the Kumtor Operating Company also constantly concedes. If the requirements are not met, all of the village dwellers and their relatives protest and, thus, their goals are achieved. [ ]

## Civil society

In the conditions of the «pseudo-democracy» significant role belongs to other groups, including NGOs artificially created to serve financial and political goals. According to respondents, these structures start actively «putting pressure on the government» [ ], businesses, and other civil society organizations in order to gain personal advantage. In this sense, they are not practically being different from OBON groups. According to our respondents, the difference is only in the presence or absence of the official status of the organization.

However, as it is noted earlier in this report, there exists a certain ambiguity in this area. The ambiguity is associated with the status, activities and goals of both NGOs and OBON groups. It boils down to the fact that the OBON groups often use techniques specific to NGOs practices, while NGOs may use the OBON methods to a larger or a lesser extent.

The fact that there is a practice of creating NGOs for specific purposes, in particular, to support the activities of OBON groups, adds to the lack of clarity in distinguishing between these two forms of association. We are talking about the so-called «pseudo-NGOs»: «There are affiliated NGOs, nothing positive, a modified form of OBON.» [ ]

In addition, the OBON representatives can enroll the formal NGO sector, thus, «legalizing» own activities. For example, in one

of the rayons in the south of Kyrgyzstan, a leader of the local group has established an NGO from an OBON group. Our respondent also indicated that «OBON is built in some NGOs.» [ ] In this regard, in theory, there are two ways in which these NGOs can be involved. They can continue previous activities in line with the support of illegitimate actions of OBON groups. But they can also direct their operations in another positive channel, eliminating the part of the activities that do not fit into the legitimate field.

In this regard, the concept of «pressure on the authorities» described above can be considered in two aspects. On the one hand, such pressure may involve civil society organizations (NGOs) achieving positive changes in various sectors of society through legitimate methods. On the other hand, there exist NGOs established for specific purposes which exert pressure on different levels power structures when and where certain political forces actively using OBON groups are interested in this. In such cases, NGOs and OBON provide each other with mutual support and are not virtually different from each other.

However, the observations from our experts that «NGOs oppose themselves to OBON and see OBON as competitors because the OBON «rule», and not NGOs do so» [ ], suggests that the current situation is ambiguous and does not include only cooperation between OBON and NGOs, but also their confrontation and competition.

In this regard, there are negative consequences for NGOs (not affiliated with OBON) which also participate in the pickets in their struggle for a just solution of pressing problems. The strong existing image of OBON leads to the fact that «the people and the power view NGOs as OBON groups and do not believe in NGOs' sincerity» [ ]. A respondent from Bishkek said that «one cannot use the one-size-fits-all principle. There are ideological reasons – judicial reform, mothers of HIV infected children. They express their own position. And in other cases, for example, the Osh Bazaar, this is all a re-distribution of property.» [ ]

Given these facts, a clear definition of the boundaries between OBON and other civil society groups has become quite a challenge because of various reasons, including the following:

- A mixed nature of the participation in protests where OBON groups operate;
- Mimicry – OBON groups position themselves as the ones who express views of the masses, act similarly to NGOs (participation in rallies and protests), put forward similar demands (social justice, fair appointments);
- In addition to illegal methods (unsanctioned rallies, capturing buildings, breach of the public order) OBON groups can use legal methods to achieve their goals;
- Failure to document the facts of conducting payments to members of OBON for their activities due to the fact that the majority of the OBON members keep low profile, hide or at least do not show off such facts, but also because of the informal nature of payments;
- The negative image created by politicians and media in relation to civil society organizations and groups acting in the legitimate field, attempts to tag civil society activists and equate their actions to the OBON actions. For example, a well-known politician has used rude epithets against an activist, calling her «ajyldagan katyn» (Transl. from Kyrgyz – «hoyden woman»). In May 2012, civil society activists, protesters against the decision of the military court (on sexual abuse), were accused of being «paid for» by the relatives of the accused.

Therefore, summing up all of the above, it can be argued that the working methods of OBON are also used in the NGOs environment, especially often by pseudo-NGOs and, perhaps, by NGOs that have been built on the basis of OBON groups. But, anyway, the main criterion for distinguishing between OBON and NGOs should be the level of legitimacy of their methods and actions on promoting the interests of ordinary citizens of Kyrgyzstan.

### Political parties

OBON leaders come into leadership posts of influential political parties, similarly to the ways they come into power structures, as it has been mentioned above. Our respondents indicate that an OBON woman who has been working in the services industry not so long ago, now leads a political party and has opportunities to influence many managers of the educational sector at the oblast level. [ ] It is quite clear that regular members of OBON do not come to such positions. To get such post one has to have a sufficient managerial and leadership capacity, which is usually a case for leaders of OBON groups. Additional qualities of these women, such as the ability to promote interests through a variety of methods and tools make them a very attractive option for many politicians, not only as a temporary leverage on a specific situation, but also in terms of using these women in the role of party leaders able to achieve longer-term goals.

Respondents report that political parties also actively use OBON's capacity in achieving the goals of their electoral campaigns. As mentioned above, the trip of the leader of one of the leading parties in the North of the country has shown that competing political parties has been bringing in OBON groups through heads of rural, rayon, and oblast levels in order to discredit political rivals in the eyes of the local electorate.

In 2009, our party went to the city N. to hold party conferences. We have been followed by rayon level akims, secretly... They would bring 5-6 women from one rayon to another. At one meeting, then at another one these women would start shouting something, and then, if the people did not respond, then they attacked like this... While doing this they would make some signs to each other, and they shouted very harsh words...

*Expert, national level of power*

Our other expert also has informed us on the following: «One of the women from my homeland was working for three political parties' campaigns at the same time. She received money from one of the major parties... interfered with other parties, tore their rallies. And then began to campaign for another party.» [ ]

Overall, the study shows that political parties, as important actors in the political field of Kyrgyzstan, are also among those who use OBON groups to achieve their goals. For their part, representatives of OBON receiving their dividends in the form of monetary compensation, intangible benefits, were able to advance into the upper echelons of the power at all levels, particularly in the National Parliament and local councils.

## Monitoring of Media Covering Activities of OBON

### General Aspects

#### **The general state of journalism in Kyrgyzstan during the study period**

According to the official data, during the study period (2005-2011), there were between 800 and 1200 registered media, including more than 40 TV and radio companies, in Kyrgyzstan. Despite the repeated attempts to abolish the state publications in the country there are still three government newspapers («Kyrgyz Tuusu», «Slovo Kyrgyzstana» and «Erkin-Too»).

In addition, newspapers of oblast state administrations are published in each oblast, and there are newspaper publications of rayon and municipal administrations. In some oblasts (Chuy and Issyk-Kul), newspapers are published in Russian and Kyrgyz; in Osh oblast they are issued in Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Russian; in Jalal-Abad they are issued in the Kyrgyz and Uzbek languages.

However, this statistics does not reflect the number of active media, as the large number of the registered media, especially print media, do not appear or are published from time to time, every few months or even once a year. For example, for the presidential elections of October 30, 2011, the Central Electoral Commission has accredited 143 media, of which 103 are print media and 40 are electronic media. When one considers that about 50 media could not be accredited because of the late submission of documents to the Central Electoral Commission and assume that as many media outlets have decided not to participate in the electoral process, it turns out that the number of the mass media actively working in the country does not exceed 250.

Today, the state television channel (State TV Radio Company, later National TV Radio Company) is going through a period of transformation into the Public TV (Public TV Radio Company), but retains its pro-government standing. Former provincial departments of the National TV Radio Company are transferred to the oblast governments, but remain partially dependent on the Public TV Radio Company, as they use to its air. Also, a reverse process is taking place: the 2011 decision of the Parliament nationalized the independent «Channel which has become a parliamentary channel. However, de facto, its status remains unclear. In other cases, media are free from state structures.

Thanks to the freedom of expression and media, in the early years of former president Askar Akaev, the country has been branded as the «island of democracy» in Central Asia. However, starting the second half of 1990-s, the Kyrgyz media has sharply divided into the government media and the opposition one. This determined their editorial policy and, often, one-sided biased position in their coverage of the events in the country.

A professional incompetence of the leadership and staff, lack of autonomy, and limited financial capacity of the government publications predetermined their inability to compete against relatively free media which has heavily invested by opponents of the

authorities. For example, after the Aksy events in 2002 then-Prime Minister Nikolai Tanaev has had to admit that the government has lost the «information war» to the opposition. [ ]

Meanwhile, only a few media outlets, where the founders are represented by the editorial staff, are independent financially and, to a lesser extent, content-wise («Vecherniy Bishkek», «Delo №», «Super info» and other). The rest are dependent, both economically and politically, because they belong to the state power and, also, to individual politicians and businessmen who are pursuing their own selfish interests, using the media as a propaganda tool, a tool in the political struggle.

A special place in the information space of Kyrgyzstan belongs to online resources that can be said are not controlled by the authorities. In general, according to the source [www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com), of all the Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan has the highest percentage of Internet users (per thousand population). According to the Internet company «Asia Info», as of the beginning of 2011, there were about 5000 active domains registered in the country. [ ] While in 2005-2006 there were only a few actively working websites («AKIpress», «24.kg», «Kabar»), at the present time, there are several dozens of popular Internet resources. Almost all of the major political parties, NGOs, and leading businesses run own websites.

In addition, in the last two years, a real burst of activity through social networks is taking place. According to the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, more than 900 thousand dwellers of Kyrgyzstan, almost a fifth of the population, signed up for social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, VKontakte, Moy Mir, and Odnoklassniki. [61]

According to Bektur Iskender, the creator and editor-in-chief of the local social site Kloop.kg, Moy Mir and Odnoklassniki are popular sites among students and schoolchildren and have more than 300,000 registered users aged between 12 and 20. Twitter and Facebook are popular with the more serious and influential groups. [ ] Many MPs,

public figures, and human rights activists have their own accounts on these networks.

In fact, these networks are the centers of public opinion and act even quicker than the news agencies. They contain more rumors and speculations, and often unreasonable subjective opinions than realistic reflections of events, but they have a huge impact on the consciousness and the political and social activity of people. For example, in April 2010, a mobilization of people on anti-government protests was taking place with the help of social networks (forums). Today, a variety of events are conducted more frequently through social networks.

### **Media Regulation**

The media activities in Kyrgyzstan are regulated by the Constitution and by the following basic laws: the Law «On Mass Media»; the Law «On Television and Radio Broadcasting»; the Law «On protection of professional activities of a journalist»; the Law «On guarantees and freedom of access to information»; the Law «On access to information within the jurisdiction of public and local self-governance bodies of the Kyrgyz Republic.» In addition, various articles of the Constitutional Law on Elections, the Civil Code and other more than ten laws and regulations stipulate the rules governing the activities of the mass media.

The Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic does not ban on media censorship, but the censorship is not allowed according to the Article 1 of the Law «On mass media.» The Constitution (Article 14) guarantees the freedom of the press, communication, and dissemination of information. This general principle opens the door for an unhampered organization of newspapers and other media by any person or organization and for a dissemination of any information that does not constitute a state secret.

According to the legislation of Kyrgyzstan, online publications are not considered mass media and are not subject to legal regulation. Such a legal status, or a lack of it, makes online publications a kind of a

tool of the information warfare with impunity. This practice existed in the time of the former President Askar Akaev, particularly intensified during the regime of Bakiev, and is widely used today.

According to the observations of the report's authors, today, many media and Internet sites have become a weapon of struggle between different political forces. Internet has been actively used by political opponents in the parliamentary (2011) and presidential (2012) elections.

### **Self-regulatory Bodies of Journalistic Community**

In addition to the laws there are self-regulatory bodies of the journalistic community on protecting the interests of the media and journalists in the pretrial order. Thus, in 2004, the Institute of Media Representative has been established. The Media Representative [ ] is elected by media associations as an arbitrator in conflicts and other important issues to protect the interests of the media and journalists. The Institute of Media Representative is a non-for-profit organization, legally and organizationally independent.

In December 2007, a congress of journalists in Kyrgyzstan that adopted the Code of Ethics [ ] journalist elected the Commission [ ] for considering complaints against the media, which works on the basis of Special Provisions. The main function of the Commission is to consider complaints regarding the compliance of articles and TV programs that appeared in the media in Kyrgyzstan with ethical standards of journalism. Four members of the Commission are journalists and five are from non-governmental organizations, academia, government and judiciary.

Decisions of the Commission to deal with complaints against the media are advisory in their nature and only aim an objective and independent review of cases involving the media. There is no legal framework that ensures the process of self-regulation in Kyrgyzstan. Effectiveness of these bodies is not considered, as the Commission considers an average of 3-4 complaints annually.

According to the Code of Ethics, «the journalist cannot serve the interests of one or more groups that pursue selfish goals» and «cannot be a member of any political party». The Code has caused a mixed reaction among the journalistic community, particularly with regards to its provisions that repeat norms of the laws in the field of mass media, for example, the ban on publishing false information, violation of privacy, violation of the principle of presumption of innocence, and violation of the copyright.

As shown, for the above and other reasons, the document has not become a generally accepted standard of conduct for Kyrgyzstan's journalists.

### **Activities of Journalists Covering Political Participation of Women, in particular OBON**

According to personal observations of the author of this analysis, most of journalists' activities covering the political participation of women, particularly involved in OBON, fall into 2005-2007 and 2010-2011 periods. This is explained by a worsening political situation in the country and an increase in the activity of political forces and OBON as one of the tools in the political struggle. Unfortunately, finding newspaper archives for an earlier period, except for the newspaper «Vecherniy Bishkek» has not become possible. Moreover, while filings of most newspapers for the period of 2006-2007 were not available, the papers that became accessible to us did not contain information on the studied subject.

Internet search engines give very little information on the studied subjects for the period of 2005-2006. On the other hand, the personal observations of the author of the report who was residing in Jalal-Abad during the period of the activity of the opposition (2005-2010) against the former presidents Askar Akaev and Kurmanbek Bakiev, members of OBON were especially active in the homeland of the latter and conducted various protests in support of their countrymen. While the 2005 protests, including those involving OBON, were directed against then-President Askar Akaev, after his overthrow the

action were carried out in support of his successor Kurmanbek Bakiev and against the political opponents of the latter.

For example, a special protest of «Bakiev's OBON» in Jalal-Abad led to the creation of the United People's Front in February 2007 headed by the leader of the party «Ar-Namys» Felix Kulov. «Who does Kulov want to fight by creating the Front? If he wants to fight, let him fight against us,» – stated OBON members at a meeting with journalists in Jalal-Abad, where the author of the analysis was a participant. It must be noted that the majority of journalists from the south of the country showed some solidarity with supporters of Bakiev and did not raise the issue of OBON. The subject was basically discussed in the central media (from the editions in opposition to Bakiev) and foreign [ ] media.

Unfortunately, we were unable to find issues of domestic newspapers of that time. Internet search engines also did not give any information about this subject. This is explained by the fact that persecutions by the authorities lead to many newspapers' closing and there were new editions with the same composition of employees who were working in a closed format newspaper. On the other hand, the system of compulsory saving copies of publications in libraries and archives is not functional.

Uzbek-language editions published in the South of Kyrgyzstan were not practically covering the activities of OBON. As Muhammadsoli Ismailov, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper «Osh sadosi» (edition of the Osh oblast administration), the publication avoids the topics on OBON fearing a backlash from these women. The newspaper has a limited edition of 1500 copies twice a week and covers mainly social and economic issues. «We generally avoid conflicting topics so that we are not accused of that we interfere with someone's politics» – is the position of editor in chief.

During the study period, the newspaper «Jalolobod Tongi» (a circulation of 1500-2000 copies once a week) published just one material on OBON. [ ] The publication's management also explains

the fear of a violent response from OBON as a reaction to their publication. It was not possible to explore other publications in the Uzbek language, because they (the newspaper «Diydor», «Ahborot», «Maison») were looted during April and June events in 2010 and ceased their operations.

### **Influence of Mass Media on the Situation, the Attitude of the Public to Politically Active Women and Members of OBON**

Results of the content analysis show that publications about OBON caused mixed reactions in different parts of the country. For example, while in the north of the country OBON, mostly visitors from the southern region, were causing readers' smiles and contempt syndrome («have come here in numbers»), the population in the south of the country, the homeland of OBON that supports Bakiev, treated these publications negatively and the OBON groups with more loyalty. Members of OBON rapidly and aggressively responded to such publications during protests and transformed their aggression against journalists in general. [ ]

Since these media materials revealed a pronounced negative attitude to the OBON phenomenon they created additional tension on the ground. For example, in March 2005 in Jalal-Abad, the author of the analysis observed women, members of protests against then-President Askar Akaev, including women which were outraged by the storylines of the first state TV channel.

According to the newspaper «Moskovskiy Komsomolets», after the March 2005 events, «having brought «their man» to the power, women of «special purpose» stayed out of work for a while.» But then, «the leaders of various kinds, after having realized that through «peaceful rally of disadvantaged mothers» at a cost of 50-60 thousand som they can achieve personal goals, started actively engaging women to various protest actions. One and the same person could be seen during the seizure of homes of the businessman Batyrov, in courts, and where there were processes on tortures by militia and other events.» [ ]

In April 2010, after the seizure of the Government House, then-President Kurmanbek Bakiev arrived to Jalal-Abad, where his supporters were holding active protests. In those days, the author of the analysis witnessed that the negative information against Bakiev and his supporters, including OBON, was seen in the southern region through the prism of the «North-South confrontation». I have personally seen in the first days after the April coup, the women in the crowd in the main square of the city of Jalal-Abad, shouting, «our people are beaten in Bishkek», «all southerners are removed from offices», «our taxi drivers were beaten out to death» etc.

Recently, according to human rights activists, OBON distinguished itself most strikingly in the south of Kyrgyzstan, after the tragic events in Osh and Jalal-Abad. Aggressive-minded women have been beating lawyers and civil society representatives. And not just anywhere in the backstreets, but directly in courts. [ ]

As a result of negative publications, the community began to criticize social and political participation of women. Right during the protests one could hear angry shouts, such as: «What are these women doing here? They should sit at home and look after their children.» The media began to publish materials against the ideas of gender equality and equal rights of women and men. For example, the author Baratbay Arakeev claims that, as a result of the false policy of gender equality, the country has the women who participate in «ultimate fighting», rapists, and OBON-women. [ ] According to Arakeev, this policy causes unprecedented natural disasters leading to the end of the world, and that is why the gender equality policy should be conducted somehow, that is pro forma. [ ]

In recent years, a negative view on OBON has begun prevailing in the south of the country. Requirements to take action against OBON have taken place. According to the site of the newspaper «Vecherniy Bishkek», local dwellers have had a meeting with the head of the city militia department of the city of Osh Suyun Omurzakov on February 9, 2012 and complained about frequent actions of OBON taking place in the Amir Timur area of the city of Osh and asked for militia chief to

prohibit OBON's activities. In response Omurzakov have stated that «women of OBON do not have political principles in life, they are specially hired people who organize rallies and picket» and instructed his subordinates to «suppress actions of these women.» [ ]

The press keeps publishing articles sharply condemning the actions of OBON. «After all, the women's OBON group of Sydykov has managed to discredit all the mothers and all the Kyrgyz women», writes the newspaper «Asmanpress». [ ]

As a result of negative attitudes towards OBON (in particular because of the publications of a negative character), calls to punish members of OBON at the official level have started taking place. The first such initiative was raised by members of the National Parliament Ravshan Sabirov and Asia Sasykbaeva. In particular, Sasykbaeva, a former activist of the civil society, has named these women «provocateurs» and said that action against them should be taken. «They turn peaceful demonstrations into chaos and tolerate wrongdoings. Now men are being recruited into OBON. Therefore, we must adopt rules prohibiting the activity of OBON, as of a destructive force», she said. [ ]

The idea was supported by the deputy Erkin Alymbekov that offered to prosecute OBON under the administrative or criminal law.» [ ] On this occasion, the newspaper «Achyk Sayasat plus» has written that the deputy Sasykbaeva has feared that «women of OBON will dismiss the parliament.» [ ]

### **The Professional Level of Journalistic Materials and Compliance with the Rules of Journalistic Ethics**

The abbreviation «OBON» and other epithets («brutalized women» [ ], «the defender of reckless» national «interests» [ ] «ramshackle huts» [ ] and other) used by journalists with regards to the members of women's groups are already talking about sharply negative perception of the phenomenon by journalists. According to the author of this analysis, in particular, an aggressiveness of women in relation to journalists contributed to such perception.

Women-journalists are not an exclusion from this rule. For example, the author of the publication «Reflections on the OBON, or what we, gender specialists, say about it?» writes: «There is no sense to hide that with their boorishness, runaway behavior, hooliganism, shouting, angry blackmail, and noses flushed from drinking vodka members of OBON bring harm to all women, their honor and dignity. An opinion is becoming spread among the public: «Women are good for nothing; they are only capable of such actions; this is the only thing they can do.» [ ]

It is difficult to evaluate the professional level of local journalists covering the events related to the activities of OBON, since most of the materials under the study can hardly be referred to as to journalistic materials. Firstly, very often they lack the facts and analysis and rather contain prevailing opinions of the authors. [ ]

For example, in its article «Parliament and OBON», the newspaper «Alibi» (#89 dd. December 28, 2010) compares women MPs from the faction «Ata-Jurt» and the leader of the faction Kamchybek Tashiyev – for excessive activity and rudeness in parliament – with members of OBON groups that were created by Usen Sydykov.» [ ]

Secondly, local journalist materials, with a few exceptions [ ], contain almost no impartial analytical articles on this phenomenon. OBON is mentioned mainly in short materials which report about a scandal involving these women or is briefly referenced to in some of the articles [ ]. This article describes how Bakiev’s supporters going on a clash with supporters of the Provisional Government have put forward women of OBON. That is, the women there were used as human shields, and they ran away when the first shots were fired. In the author’s analysis, in this case these women were not acting just for the money, but also for the idea, in support of their fellow countryman, who was, in their opinion, ganged up on by the northern clans. But the media kept silence on this side of the story.

Thirdly, as we have said, the quality of journalistic materials is affected by the concrete mass media the author is working for and by

where the article is published. For example, in the same newspaper «Alibi» in the article «Where's your shame, OBON-woman?» The author writes: «Women of OBON» of Usen ake disgraced, dishonored all Kyrgyz women...» [ ] The paper does not give a single argument in favor of this statement. Next, the material talks about the rumors that OBON is preparing for presidential elections and the need to be alert about these women. And then the material contains an open call to deal with these women: «...So if we do not make a «Kaputt» to this group [i.e. destruct this group], the Kyrgyz people will be in difficulty.» [ ]

That is, depending on the side of the barricades, a journalist determines his/her attitude to the events, including the actions of OBON. Hence, we have the neglect of the rules of the modern journalism standards and ethics, for example, the lack of a balance of opinions, the analysis of the phenomenon, the use of the same photographs [ ] in various publications and materials without reference to the authors, and other. Some journalists from foreign media made attempts to investigate the nature and causes of OBON. [ ] We have not found such materials in local publications.

## Analysis of Publications and Online Resources

### Media and Internet Resources, the Activities of Which are Investigated

We have selected 12 newspapers as objects of monitoring, including four government and eight private newspapers. This includes seven papers in the Kyrgyz language [ ], three in Russian, and two in Uzbek.

Newspapers in the Kyrgyz language are «Kyrgyz Tuusu» (government), «Agym» (private), «Kyrgyz ruhu» (private), «Alibi» (private), «Fabula» (private), «Forum» (private), and «Achyk Sayasat plus» (private).

Newspapers in Russian are «Slovo Kyrgyzstana» (government), «Vecherniy Bishkek» (private), and «Delo №» (private).

Uzbek-language newspapers are «Osh sadosi» (state) and «Jalolobod Tongi» (state).

The following online editions are selected: Fergana ([www.fergananews.com](http://www.fergananews.com)), information Agency «24.kg» ([www.24.kg](http://www.24.kg)), K-News ([www.knews.kg](http://www.knews.kg)), AKIpress ([www.akipress.kg](http://www.akipress.kg)), Neweurasia ([www.neweurasia.net](http://www.neweurasia.net)), Site of the Radio «Free Europe»/Radio «Liberty» ([www.azattyk.org](http://www.azattyk.org)), Centrazia.Ru ([www.centrazia.ru](http://www.centrazia.ru)), IWPR ([www.iwpr.net](http://www.iwpr.net)). We also used materials from internet sites of Russian newspaper «Komsomolskaya Pravda» ([www.kp.ru](http://www.kp.ru)), «Rossiyskaya Gazeta» ([www.rg.ru](http://www.rg.ru)), «Nezavisimaya Gazeta» ([www.ng.ru](http://www.ng.ru)), «Kommersant» ([www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru)).

In selecting an object for monitoring we have taken into account the impact of the publication on readers, its circulation and territorial coverage. All of the selected newspapers have a circulation of at least 5000 copies and a country-wide distribution. Circulation of the newspaper «Vecherniy Bishkek» is about 50,000 copies. A polling by the author of the analysis of the newsstands shows that these newspapers are the most readable. During the elections, their circulation increased to 100,000 copies. The author of the analysis observed this fact during the parliamentary elections in 2010, while being a member of the Central Electoral Commission, and during the presidential election, while working as an independent observer. Almost all of these papers, but «Kyrgyz ruhu» and «Delo №», are published twice a week.

Publications in the Uzbek language have small circulations (1,500-2,000 copies), but they are interesting to the analysis because they have an audience with a specific mentality, a relatively passive political stance, and a differing attitude towards women.

When choosing an online media, we accounted for their popularity by comparing their citation by other media. In addition, for the most complete description of the situation, we add to this analysis some

assessment of the work of the television channels and journalists and other media not covered by the monitoring.

### **Threats and Obstructing the Work of Journalists by OBON**

According to the Public Association «Journalists», there were 14 cases of attacks on journalists and their families in 2005 and 8 such cases in 2004. In 2006, there were 12 cases of attacks on representatives of the media sphere. 2007 was the most difficult year. During it there were 19 cases of attacks on journalists and one murder of the founder of the newspaper «Siesat» Alisher Saipov. In 2007, there were also 6 documented cases of threats against journalists. This data is confirmed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kyrgyzstan. [ ]

In 2008, there were five cases of attacks and one threat committed against journalists. A correspondent of the newspaper «Reporter Bishkek» Syrgak Abdyltaev was beaten with cruelty in 2009. Attacks on journalists continued in 2010-2011. For example, there were seven attacks on media representatives in the first half of 2011. [ ] According to the author's analysis the statistics of attacks on journalists by OBON is lacking, since the cases of attacks have not been investigated in this aspect.

### **Impartiality and Accuracy of Information**

As mentioned above, the journalists' attitude to representatives of OBON is often dependent on the media they work for. For example, until March 24, 2005, fully taking the stand of the government, the State Television and Radio Company was in every possible way depicting the opposition and its supporters in a negative manner. When opposition supporters took over the building of the Jalal-Abad oblast administration, journalists of the main TV channel and officials in the capital called these people «bums» and «bandits», and women – «drunks» and «idlers», «who cannot stay at home like normal women.» The author of the analysis observed during these

days correspondents of a TV channel in Jalal-Abad working under a pressure from protesters, including from members of OBON.

During these days, the author of the analysis and other journalists also had to steer away from the protesters and try not to pose as the crowd was behaving aggressively, not understanding what journalists, where they work, and how they highlights the events. To appear before the protesters with a video or digital camera was especially risky. Later, the protesters were treating representatives of the foreign media with more loyalty because they were not reading or seeing their stories and making the assumption that foreign media covers events neutrally. They took everyone who had a European appearance for foreign journalists.

A relatively neutral position in relation to the OBON can be seen in the Russian-language press of the country, for example, in the «Vecherniy Bishkek.» For example, in the article «Here you are, the torch of freedom!» the journalist told about the seizure of the building of the Supreme Court in May 2005 by unknown men who demanded the resignation of the Chief Justice. The doers were women. The journalist does not call them OBON, but just neutrally and impartially tells about their behavior and cites their words. [ ]

Another article «No way to walk, no way to drive» refers to the people who seizure land on the outskirts of Bishkek. Without naming them OBON or otherwise, the journalist made an impartial journalist reporting with a good photograph. Two groups – men and women – sat down on the ground, blocking the road, and required other people's land for own housing. I must say that this has been a time when so-called OBON has been behaving actively and forced the society to speak of them as of a new phenomenon. [ ]

Often, journalists limit their information to brief reports about the behavior of OBON members and attach negative shades. [ ] Sometimes, a journalist uses stereotypes completely out of place. For example, in October 2011, a forum establishing the Association of women militia officers with the participation of the President Roza

Otunbayeva took place in Bishkek. The reporter used the word OBON in the title of the article, although nothing was said about OBON. [ ]

An example of a loyal and even sympathetic attitude of the journalists of the southern region to the members OBON is an article in the newspaper «Arena.kg». Responding a reporter's question about the events of April 2010 in the town of Jalal-Abad, the former head of the Jalal-Abad Broadcasting Company, a former correspondent of the state Radio and Television Company in the region Baktykan Ajymamatova says: «On April 8, temporarily elected governor [Bektour Assanov] was speaking at the racetrack. Suddenly, they started saying: «Kadyrjan aka is arriving. Free up the road!» Batyrov went up to the presidium and was going to speak, but about ten women considered OBON did not allow him to speak. Batyrov was to enter the Jalal-Abad White House, but he was not allowed by women: «If you are so brave, try to get in, you will get it.» In short, what men did not dare to do, the women did, and they did not let Batyrov's dream to become the governor to come true. Thanks to the courage of the women the South did not become an autonomy of Uzbeks.» [ ]

However, during a personal meeting in the course of this study, Baktykan Ajymamatova stated that all that was written in the newspaper on her behalf is a lie. «I wrote nothing like this, the paper's journalists have distorted what I said, so I'm going to seek refutation,» – she said.

### **OBON Phenomenon: Nature, Cause, and Motives of Women**

As a rule, local journalists do not bother to attempt to analyze the nature and causes of and reasons for the participation of women in OBON.

Such materials, with a few exceptions, began to appear in the press in recent years. For example, an article on the website of the radio «Liberty» titled «Kyrgyz OBON: Biography and Destiny» [ ] says that the first person to use the word «OBON» is the late member

of Parliament and film director Dooronbek Sadyrbaev, while the very origins of the phenomenon connect with the name of a politician Usen Sydykov. But Sydykov denies such fact in the same article. The material is an attempt to create a social portrait of a member of OBON.

Regarding the motives of women in OBON, the article quoted a former mayor of the city of Naryn Almaz Kulmatov who was subjected to a pressure from the OBON. «If yesterday they were in Jumgal, today are already in Bishkek. Ask them «Why do out on the street?», and they do not know [the answer]. It turns out that they just shout and take money for this. After all, they say it in the media with no fear»-says Kulmatov in the article. According to the civil activist Gulzhamal Sultanalieva, sometimes the service fee to OBON women comes to one thousand dollars. [ ]

As usually, the materials of journalists say about the corruption and aggression of OBON women [ ]. Some publications mention that they were created by the supporters of Kurmanbek Bakiev and his brother Janysh Bakiev. [ ] The main motives for women to serve in OBON are basically service fees. Different amounts are mentioned: from 500 to 2,000 som per day. [ ]

Other journalists attribute the development of OBON with the name of a prominent public figure Usen Sydykov. For example, when describing the situation from the beginning of the collection of signatures against the party «Ata-Jurt», which won parliamentary elections in 2010, an author writes: «Feeling the danger, Ata-Jurt people began different tricks to protect their party. For example, they have switched to the use of the method created by an old wolf Usen Sydykov, namely OBON (special purpose women's detachment). It is unknown how much money is paid by the party to women from OBON, but they began their performance since yesterday. They are ready for anything to keep their mandates. They should worry their fingers are not worked to bone. [ ]

According to the Institute of War and Peace Reporting, «The Private «Channel 5» in Kyrgyzstan has reported last year that the non-official payment for such activities varies from 500 to 1,000 soms (USD 11-22) a day for taking part in demonstrations and is 2,000 soms (USD 44) per day for the recruitment and management of ten other demonstrators. This amount rises to USD 500 for hiring 1,000 people and is 1,000-1,500 soms (USD 22-33) per day for plying the candidate with uncomfortable prickly questions and up to 3,000 soms (USD 66) for creating more serious provocations. A payment for a hunger strike is discussed separately. According to experts interviewed by IWPR, these approximate rates still apply. [ ]

There were no publications on the subject in the studied materials that were based on the analysis, research, and public surveys. The materials do not even contain evaluations by experts in the area of gender, psychology, or sociology. Most often, journalists express their own opinions and share own vision of situations and events, and almost always have a negative bias. [ ]

An article published in the newspaper «Kerege» says: «Over the past 5 years, the phenomenon of OBON have emerged and developed here, in this diverse and beautiful Kyrgyz society... Recently, OBON have drawn an attention, becoming a subject for games of certain political forces. They [OBON] are active, fearless, strong, and fairly numerous: they can show all they are capable of when defending the interests of someone else; do not back down from plans and conscientiously fulfill the requirements of their customer. Of course, they have no principles, they only work for money, and they can dictate their terms to customers for some other interests. Unless the agreed amount is not paid, or the customer fails to meet their requirements, they go to another customer in no time. They solve material and other problems of their families. They are relentless electioneers capable to scream themselves hoarse at rallies. If necessary, they are ready to throw someone out of his/her chair and put their customer in this seat. In other words, this is a special group, always ready to fulfill any order of the haves.» [ ]

### **Presence of Regionalism, Nationalism, and Gender Discrimination**

Journalists often mention that OBON was created by a prominent party leader and statesman Usen Sydykov. There are allusions about the «southern» origin of the phenomenon. [ ] In our view, these are the reasons why some women-members of the Parliament from the southern region of Kyrgyzstan are called OBON [ ], especially among journalists. It can also be observed on Internet. For example, one of the users of the popular Internet forum «Diesel» calls one of the women-deputies «the highest modification of Bakiev-Usenov's OBON.» [ ]

Cases of nationalism in the materials of journalists and media on OBON are not observed.

An example of regionalism can be seen in the article of «Komsomolskaya Pravda.» There, the author writes: «When do we see OBON women for the first time? Perhaps in the early 2000-s. But they have become particularly noticeable after the first, March Revolution. They were not its participants, in principle. But, after the President Akaev fled the republic, and a wild redistribution of property began, practically not a single rally or demonstration took place without these battle-women! Especially when there were land seizures around Bishkek. By the summer of 2005, several hundred of hectares of fertile land, mostly in the northern part of the capital, have been illegally built up by ramshackle huts. Thousands of people, most of them immigrants from the south, promised mountains of gold by Bakiev, were dividing between a former farmlands with impunity.» [ ]

### **Slander and Insult by Media and Journalists**

It is hard to say unequivocally that media and journalists allowed slander or insults towards OBON members. But there are materials where there are elements of abuse. For example: «»There is no sense to hide that with their boorishness, runaway behavior, hooliganism, shouting, angry blackmail, and noses flushed from drinking vodka members of OBON bring harm to all women, their honor and dignity.

An opinion is becoming spread among the public: «Women are good for nothing; they are only capable of such actions; this is the only thing they can do.» [ ]

An abusive attitude is even reflected in the term «OBON» – at first it stood for «Brutal women of special purpose.» This particular Russian word which is used in the term «OBON», namely the word «baba» can already be seen as an insult to women who have been expressing their views on various issues in social and political life of society in such an unfortunate way.

When covering activities of OBON journalists often neglected the principles of objectivity and impartiality and almost gave no opportunity to OBON representatives to speak. They presented lopsided materials accusing OBON of violating the peace of people and used insults against OBON. However, there were no cases of women referring to courts on this subject. In our view, this is partly explained by the fact that these women do not want to reveal themselves as OBON. Before and nowadays, even the most active participants of OBON that went to protests on squares for the money do not want to call themselves members of OBON.

### **Attempts of Journalists to Contact Members of OBON and Cover their Position**

Various protests, including those involving OBON, were covered mostly by news journalists for whom it was important to promptly inform the reader about what was happening on the scene. Based on the studied materials, journalists generally did not try to communicate with the members of OBON to give them an opportunity to express their views and positions that could have been of different polarities. Apart from a lack of journalists' interest to analyze the situation and the actions of the protesters, this could also be explained by the fact that possible contacts with aggressive participants of protests often would threaten the safety of the journalists.

In the article «Kyrgyz OBON: Biography and Destiny» [ ] the author contacted with the former OBON woman Asyl Jamanova. The woman told the reporter that she left OBON, not wanting to be an instrument in the hands of politicians. During the events of March 2005, she was on the side of the pro-government Communist Party, while during the events of April 2010 she was already with the opposition party «Ata Meken.»

Foreign publications employing journalists from Kyrgyzstan are rare exceptions. For example, the material of the Institute of War and Peace Reporting «Law enforcement bodies and politicians in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are hiring women for election campaigning or for a willful disturbance of the peace» the author directly communicated both with members of OBON and law enforcement officials. [ ]

The article states «Salkynay, a 40-year-old divorced mother of two from Karabalta, told IWPR, how she happened to be a part of the campaign of a party before parliamentary elections in 2010.» Her neighbor offered her a job, to distribute leaflets and recruit new distributors from among her friends and circles. Then Salkynay was given a new assignment: to attend public meetings held by candidates-rivals and make attempts to disrupt the meetings, assailing the candidates with questions.

«I received 500 soms [about USD 11] for bombarding him with prickly questions» – she said, confessing that during the first meeting she was reading questions from a piece of paper, while her more experienced fellows shouted questions without prompts.» [ ]

Also, this article contains a reference to an employee of the National Security Service of Uzbekistan. He gave quite a detailed account on the work methods of intelligence (how these women are hired, how they work, and other) with OBON groups since Soviet times. [ ] It is hard to believe in the reality of this conversation as, under the current regime, not a single local militia man, not to mention the intelligence personnel, would talk to a reporter so openly. However, the story is so close to a truth that for disseminating such information in Uzbekistan

one could go to jail for many years for revealing state secrets.

After the Aksy events (March 2002), the March 2005 coup, and the events of April 2010, when representatives of the government and especially the law enforcement officials were brutally attacked by the protesters, they were not particularly trying to somehow influence the actions of the crowd. Specifically, they were trying to keep distance from the members of OBON. Therefore, in the opinion of the author of the analysis, there are very few materials containing information on the actions of law enforcement against OBON. In the same way, the cases of their contacts with members of these informal groups are also very rare.

The example of Hulkar Isamova, correspondent of Reuters, the city of Osh shows that concerns of journalists about aggressiveness of OBON against them are valid. She has a sharply negative attitude to the members of OBON, and not just because they have attacked her. «If something goes wrong in a person's life and he/she lives badly, it does not mean that he/she can go and decide the fate of another person for a thousand of soms, – she believes – No matter what a woman should always remain a mother, a keeper of the hearth, a woman.»

According to her, the activities of OBON in the country came to «insanity». She recalled that in May 2005, she made a story about the work of some «Revolutionary Committee» which was organizing rallies. The head of the organization Toko ake (she did not remember his full name) then stated that the main task of the organization was to help oppressed people. As a way of such help the organization was offering assistance in organizing protests and OBON services which were presented as the members of the organization.

Then the journalist was shown official registration papers of the organization and the price list for services. According to the document, at that time services of women with oratorical skills were worth 200 soms, these of «just screamers» were 100 soms, and a simple participation in the crowd had a price of 50 soms per day.

«It was during the height of seizures of state buildings, in order to expel incumbent officials and put new people in different positions, and these people were in demand. – remembered Islamova. – I would not want to deal with them, because I did not understand these women. On the other hand, think about your own security...» However, she made one reportage where she referred to the activities of OBON, and her fears were justified.

In those years, for some reason, women were picketing the Office of the National Security Service of the Osh oblast. During the preparation of the story Islamova saw an elderly woman about 80 years old. When Islamova asked what she was doing there, the woman replied that she had been brought from a distant village and she was told that somewhere in the city they give pilaf. Hulkar Islamova incorporated this episode into her material which was shown on local television «MezonTV.» After the show, the some women came to the TV office and made a scene because they were shows in such way.

### **Attitude of Authorities and Law Enforcement Agencies to OBON Members**

After the events of June 2010, there were many publications in the press about the attacks against the lawyers of the accused in cases of «Osh events» and against human rights activists advocating for the interests of the accused. For example, lawyers Tatiana Tomina [ ], Nazgul Suyunbaeva [ ], human rights activists Aziza Abdirasulova [ ], and others were subjected to the attacks of unknown women in 2011. Guardians of the law did not obstruct the actions of OBON women in these cases [ ].

No actions against violators of the trial processes were taken later as well. As the news agency «24.kg» reported, «the country authorities have assured that they will not allow such incidents, but the latter continue on a regular basis. None of the attackers on the lawyers and trial participants have received any punishment.» [ ]

The news agency «24.kg» wrote on this occasion: «The Prosecutor's office of Kyrgyzstan is not investigating the facts of attacks on lawyers in cases related to the June events» – this is the conclusion made by human rights defenders in the result of monitoring of litigation on the tragic events in the south of the country in June 2010. Human rights activists previously stated that, of the 76 court sessions, in 9 cases there are documented violations of the rule of law, threats against defendants and their lawyers... The authorities of the Kyrgyz Republic do not give any response to such messages, and the Prosecutor-General's Office regularly informs that after examining these facts the elements of crime are not revealed.» [ ]

OBON was actively used against members of the current government in 2010. As noted in the article «Even OBON [riot militia] is powerless against OBON!» «similar women groups hired by supporters of the fugitive Kurmanbek Bakiev have repeatedly been employed against members of the Provisional Government, especially in the first months after the April Revolution of the last year, when they tore meetings of the country authorities with the citizens.» [ ]

The attitude of the militia to OBON is a subject of the discussion in the article on the website of «Komsomolskaya Pravda». The author writes that «...By the summer of 2005, several hundred of hectares of fertile land, mostly in the northern part of the capital, have been illegally built up by ramshackle huts. Law enforcement officers could not help it. The very same OBON was in front of the developers. To deal with them would be more trouble than it is worth!» [ ]

Another article «No way to walk, no way to drive» in the paper «Vecherniy Bishkek» refers to the occupants of lands on the outskirts of Bishkek. In this article, the journalist also accuses the militia of inaction – militia «arrived on the scene, and took no action». [ ]

One of the exceptions is a brutal beating of protesters against the government of Askar Akaev, including of women from OBON during night from March 20 to 21, 2005. That night, riot militia brutally beat up dozens of people who seized the building of Jalal-Abad oblast

administration. Then, the authorities forcibly took them outside the city of Jalal-Abad. This served as the final signal for mass protests, which resulted in the fall of Akaev's regime. The beating of protesters in Jalal-Abad was widely reported in the opposition papers. They were distributed free of charge among the protesters, who again stormed and seized the oblast administration building. However, we could not find copies of these papers. After the coup on March 24, the State Television and Radio Company was showing several times a day the scenes of brutal beating of protesters, including women who were already presented as «heroes of the revolution».

According to our observations, media and society talk more about punishing or neutralizing members of OBON, but never about studying the phenomenon and resolving the associated problems. The journalist of the site of the paper «Komsomolskaya Pravda writes: «No universal means of neutralizing OBON have been invented, alas! You can, of course, register these women [in law enforcement departments]. Or fine them for taking part in unsanctioned rallies. And what will be the point? They will still get more than they are fined for...» [ ]

The editorial in the same article states: «It is believed that this phenomenon comes from the neighboring country, where security forces have long and successful history of using «women's division» against disloyal social activists, human rights defenders, and journalists. But while OBON is drawn there for stamping out dissent, the mission of the «fighters» in skirts in Kyrgyzstan is different. It is in the psychological pressure. After all, men involved in the actions or the militia will not raise hand to women that are old enough to be their mothers, moreover, they will not shoot them. Because - and this is the Asian mentality – a conflict with women can have a serious impact on their reputation». [ ]

Militia was inactive in June 2011, when during a rally in the support of the leader of the party «Ata-Jurt» held in Osh, an attack against the production team of the NTS channel was undertaken. According to the correspondent of the channel Chinara Sydykova [ ], but two of

the protesters who were trying to push back the attackers, no one, including law enforcement officers, was helping the correspondents. In turn, the press service of the Interior Ministry denied the information about the beating of journalists, calling the incident «a verbal altercation» [ ]. In the author's analysis, the militia did it to cover up their inaction.

Yet, in recent years, the authorities are trying to somehow react to OBON. At the same time they are approaching the problem in an accusatory manner and using the conventional method of prohibitions. For example, at the beginning of February 2012, the head of the Osh City Department of Internal Affairs Suyun Omurzakov instructed local militia departments to «halt the action of so-called OBON». As the Internet portal «KGINform» informs, referring to the press service of the Internal Affairs of Osh city, «the decision was made at the request of the citizens expressed at the meetings in micro-districts.» In this case the militia chief stated that these groups of women «have no political principles in life, they are specially hired people who organize rallies and pickets.» [ ]

The attitude of the authorities to OBON is illustrated by the statements of the deputy governor of Jalal-Abad oblast Jumagul Egemberdieva. In an interview to the local «Jalolobod Tongi» Jumagul Egemberdieva strongly condemns OBON members. [ ]

Answering the question «What pleases and what upsets you?» Egemberdieva touched the theme of OBON and said: «These women, who work for money, played a major role in both revolutions. Maybe somewhere they have helped the triumph of justice, but in most cases they have caused pains and grief of many honest people.»

According to the Deputy Governor, their work strengthened the view of people that the state can be controlled in conditions of lawlessness. «Frankly, I'm ashamed of the fact that these women are by our side,» – said Egemberdieva, which believes that jealousy, saving money by all means, hijacking honestly earned property has become the motto of the parasites, and the law has turned the blind eye to it all.

«Hence, as you can see, OBON has emerged,» Egemberdieva said in an interview. «For them it is just to have money. Today they serve the authorities, and tomorrow they may expel the same power for the sake of big money. I think it's time to use the full power of the law against these people.»

### **OBON's Influence on Socio-Political Situation and Violence**

Recently, the press began publication that express concern about the negative impact of OBON the socio-political situation in the country. For example, the newspaper «Kerege» writes: «They have formed in the society into a separate force. They know well who needs them, they are united, you find one... and others will be here in a moment. They have widely opened their branches and deeply put their roots, they have their representatives and leaders in each village of Kyrgyzstan. Stretched out on the scale and the numbers, they have no equal.» [ ]

According to the author, OBON is dangerous for the society also because it is harmful to the peaceful well-being and stability. «Each action by such women is accompanied by violent unrest leading to scandals» – the journalist writes. – In many cases, the opposing side «loses» only because of the reluctance to contact these women. It is not known how long the men remain reluctant.» [ ]

In the above article, the author rightly, in our view, points out that «the activity of the OBON movement harms women's organizations and movements that are engaged in productive activity within the law.» «Especially to those women leaders who are trying for 20 years to solve gender issues and advance the rights of women – the newspaper writes. – they address women scientists and politicians with disdain and negatively. OBON has no relation to gender movement fighting for equal rights for women and men and for providing them with equal opportunities.» [ ]

According to the author of the article, the society cares about OBON as one of the proofs of gender inequality and as an emerged

problem because the rich men use women's poverty, lack of education, and despair and force them to defend men's interests and do what every these men want with the use of deceit turned into a blind weapon of men and poses new challenges to women's issues. [ ]

As mentioned above, after the brutal beating of protesters in Jalal-Abad, in the night of March 21, 2005, the state first channel was repeatedly showing these scenes and commenting that the building of Jalal-Abad Oblast Administration was freed from drunks and homeless. This caused an unprecedented discontent among local residents who were supporting the battered people.

Such a bias coupled with the brutal beating of protesters has become a detonator of the crucial explosion in Jalal-Abad. The administration building was taken again, the militia and intelligent services, including the Head of Oblast department of the security services, have been severely beaten. Soldiers and militia fled having left behind their shields and taking off their uniforms. For about two weeks, after March 24, one could not see men in uniform in the city.

Shairgul Bagysheva is a correspondent of the Uzbek language «Jalolobod Tongi» (publication of the oblast administration), the city of Jalal-Abad, and has been witness to many political events in Jalal-Abad in March 2005 and from April to June 2010. She calls OBON «acid», «parasites» of the society and she calls the participating women «idiots». The newspaper where she works did not cover this topic because the staff and editors were afraid of a possible aggressive reaction from OBON.

«Yes, these women can just kill for a criticism, they can catch your any word, and you cannot get off the hook. Many of them were nothing when they first appeared in the city, and after the meetings they have become wealthy, they started buying expensive things, some of them got land about the city and sales outlets at the city market». According to Bagisheva, in 2010, a group of OBON women long tried to dismiss the former mayor of Jalal-Abad, Maksat Jenbekov, who spoke about this during an interview in the spring of 2011. The mayor was angry

with these women who were constantly visiting him and demanding money «for achievements during the revolution». Having received a refuse, they created a scandal and complained to various authorities and wrote complains against the mayor.

It turned out that, before Jenbekov, these women were constantly taking money from the former mayor, and they even took money from Akhmat Bakiev, a brother of the former President. At that time, these women were toys in the hands of authorities», Bagisheva says. Because of a potential scandal, the published interview did not contain the words concerning OBON.

According to the former head of Jalal-Abad Oblast TV and radio company Baktykan Ajymamatova, different forces, have been actively using OBON in 2005, after March events, when removing Akaev's people from offices and replacing them with the new people. Later, she also had problems on these grounds.

In 2008 (February 21), she returned to the position of the Jalal-Abad Oblast TV and radio company where she was fired from in 2004. As soon as she started she received a call from then deputy Governor Kamila Talieva, who presented her to the colleagues and told her that OBON women were heading to her and asked her be careful.

Two women visited her and started clarifying «how comes that you have been assigned to the position without us?» She did not succumb to the pressure and explained that she was appointed to this position by the Governor's order upon a consultation with the Head of the State TV and Radio Company. Vowing to find out and come back, the women were gone. The next day, at precisely promised time, 09:00 a.m., about 15 women headed by Totu Karmyshakova, visited her. [ ] Ex-Head of the Company, Ryspek Jumabekov, entered the office together with them.

The women were scandalling again: «What for did we make a revolution? To let Akaev's tails to come to the power again? Come on, get up of the chair!»

– «Don't you dare to touch me, you are used to organize coups! I'll get off when you bring me an order about my dismissal from the Governor» she replied.

After some heated argument, the women threatened that she would not work here for a long time anyway and left. In one year time, Ajymamatova met Totu Karmyshakova at the city square and told her: «Totu eje, you said I would not work there for a long time. Here I am! I am working for a year.» The reply was: «Well, such is the politics!»

According to Ajymamatova, Karmyshakova was among those seizing the property of then member of the Parliament Batyrov in 2005: an apartment house, land, and business. The invaders, mostly women, explained their actions by saying that Batyrov bought the people's wealth for nothing, he was raising an interethnic issue and speaking out against Bakiev, and other things. Then, Karmyshakova took over three apartments of Batyrov and even managed to renovate and furnish them.

Ajymamatova saw Karmyshakova on the city square on the eve of March 8 of this year. «She came to find out if the authorities prepared gifts for us for the holidays...» – she said.

Our interviewee could not share videomaterials because all of them were taken into archives and she did not keep a copy.

### **Reaction of Members of OBON for Publication in Media**

As mentioned above, the statistics on attacks on journalists and/or threats related to the publications on the subject is missing. Also, very little material, almost no articles containing the analysis of aggression against journalists by OBON groups exists in the press. But the study's author witnessed several OBON attacks on journalists in Jalal-Abad. On the eve before the March 2005 coup protesting women seized the equipment of foreign journalists, thinking that the foreign media was showing them in a negative way. After the intervention of local residents and friends of the journalists, the women returned the equipment.

Baktykan Ajymamatova, a teacher of the Jalal-Abad State University was intermittently working as the head of the Jalal-Abad Oblast TV and Radio Company and a correspondent of the State TV and Radio Corporation in the Oblast.

During the events of March 2005 she was working as a reporter of the State TV and Radio Company and, together with a cameraman, was shooting the entire event at the main square of the city of Jalal-Abad [protests there began on March 4 and ended on March 24 with the expulsion of the President Askar Akaev].

«I was filming for three hours a day and sending the materials to Bishkek,» Ajymamatova says. «But the management did not let these stories out. I was told that then State Secretary was personally at the production and was deciding what to show and what not to show. I was ashamed before the people that I had filmed, and it was difficult to explain why they were not shown on TV.»

Then people started suspecting her in «spying» once she prepared a story telling about a rally at the main square held by some people and ordinary people continuing to work in the fields. After that an attitude to her became negative. That was why she was almost not allowed to that people's kurultay (congress)», which took place on the square on March 15, 2005. And she finally got the permission from the organizers and came to the square, a group of women attacked her cameraman and broke their expensive camera. It became possible to save the cameraman from the crowd of women thanks to her acquaintances, while the militia was staring blankly at what was happening. The cameraman Mamatkadyr Mamataliev had to see a doctor with complaints about headaches and pains in the body side. The militia filed a complaint, took the camera as material evidence, but did nothing to apprehend the culprits. Without getting any results, they had to take the camera from the militia after two months.

«In those days, the Kyrgyz TV and Radio was showing stories about protesters in Jalal-Abad and called them, including women, «drug addicts, drunk and idlers», Ajymamatova said.

This is confirmed by Jalil Saparov, the head of the Oblast Association of Journalists, the city of Jalal-Abad. In his opinion, «during the years of exaltation of women», meaning Akaev's and later period, with declared year of women and other programs», the Kyrgyz journalism did not make a step forward. Meanwhile, the fate of women was becoming worse and worse, but journalists were not covering it properly.

As Saparov said in an interview with the author of the analysis, the State TV and Radio Company and Jalal-Abad TV and Radio as its local branch were «an instrument of the state ideology and propaganda» and were covering events with a bias. That is why their employees were attacked. He described a case in 2005, when a group of women took hostage a correspondent of Jalal-Abad TV and Radio Alymbek Azimkanov (about 55 years old) at the main square of Jalal-Abad. The women surrounded him and forced him to sit with them for about three hours. When Jalil Saparov tried to rescue him, one of the women pulled Saparov aside and told that they just wanted to intimidate him a little so that other journalists of the channel would learn from this case.

However, Saparov called OBON a «hernia» on the body of society, and blamed «the society, but not women who go there».

An independent journalist, Anarhan Janybaeva, wrote articles critical of then President Kurmanbek Bakiev. A group of protest women from OBON that were considering her as a supporter of the Provisional Government (she was an active member of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan) attacked her on April 8, 2010, at the central square of Jalal-Abad. Only thanks to the intervention of other people there, she had avoided serious beating.

However four days later, on April 12, 2010, Anarhan Janybaeva, together with a group of journalists, was invited by Kurmanbek Bakiev to his parents' house. There was the second attack witnessed by the author of the analysis. After talking to Kurmanbek Bakiev journalists started leaving and again the same women attacked Janybaeva

accusing her of a betrayal and espionage in favor of the Provisional Government. The women were stopped by the order of Bakiev brothers, who had no interest in having a journalist beaten in their house. However, the women managed to beat Janybaeva. Thanks to the intervention of others she had no serious injuries.

In May 2011, in Osh, two unidentified women threatened to journalist Hulkar Isamova, working for Reuters during last several years. Previously she was working for Meson TV. The leader of the channel was sentenced to a long prison term on charges of tragic events in the South of the country in June 2010. Women accused Isamova of involvement in these events, and «threatened her with violence, said that they had her car's plate number and knew where she lived». [ ]

«I got out of the car and saw two women directly heading to me. They started screaming that I was involved in the conflict and I was its organizer. They told me all sorts of unpleasant things. I was standing there and justifying myself that I did not commit it. It was unpleasant, I did not know what to expect from them,» says Hulkar Isamova. [ ]

In June 2011, during a rally in support of the leader of the party «Ata-Jurt» held in Osh, a film crew of the NTS channel was attacked. Correspondent of NTS, Chinara Sydykova informed K-NEWS [ ] that «the protesters attacked the journalists on the tip of provocateurs who were in the crowd.»

«For about half an hour our camera crew was kept by these people, and our cameraman was attacked, but we managed to fight back, and to receive no serious injuries. People in the crowd forced us to show what we had filmed. There were a lot of provocateurs in the crowd. They were spreading the information that we came specially to give biased information», – said Chinara Sydykova. [ ]

However, in an interview to K-NEWS, the representative of the press service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Bakyt Seitov denied the information about beating the journalists of the NTS channel. According to him, there was only a verbal altercation between the protesters and the journalists. [ ] According to the author's analysis,

the militia denied the information about the attack on the journalists to cover up their inaction and not to irritate the protesters accused of the attack on journalists.

### **Prospects of OBON Phenomenon**

Based on individual journalistic materials, OBON is in demand today and has a «rejuvenation» tendency. For example, the author of the article «Even OMON is powerless against OBON!» wrote: «Until recently, the classical» OBON women «were considered, so to speak, wise life activists, but now the role of crazy defenders of «people's» interests is taken by girls as well!» [ ]

The author continues the theme referring to the National Security Committee employee, who wished to remain anonymous: «Previously, mostly these were women aged 45 to 60 years, with no education. Mostly from rural areas or new settlements. They have families, husbands. But I must say that in recent years the organizers started recruiting the generation next. Moreover, they try to present their actions as if all the young people are dissatisfied with the current situation!» [ ]

The newspaper «Kerege», too, expresses concern about involving young people into OBON. OBON harms the formation of young people's views on the political fight and the development of the culture of political dissent among youth,» the author writes. On the contrary, they can engender frivolous views on the ways a victory can be obtained. Today, members of the OBON age from 45 to 60 years, and tomorrow we can see 25-year-old, one cannot deny that.» [ ]

The article «Kyrgyz OBON: biography and destiny» [ ], referring to Omurbek Tekebayev, the leader of a parliamentarian faction, says that over time, the demand for OBON services in the country will decrease.

«We thought that after a year or two [after the April 2010 coup, the activity of the OBON phenomenon] will go on decline. It did not happen. But, in a year or two, still under the influence of the society, including journalists, it will reduce,» says Tekebaev. [ ]

## CONCLUSIONS

Our research has shown that the emergence of OBON technology in Kyrgyzstan is not accidental. Methods of engaging different groups, especially vulnerable, such as women, youth, and the poor, have been known since ancient times, and now they have found a new development in different societies, in particular in conflict, high-risk of conflict or post-conflict countries. This is shown by the experience of the Third World in the last few years.

In Kyrgyzstan, the protests have become widespread and are one of the trademarks of the country. A special group, which we consider in this report, constitutes the so-called OBON women (Otryad Bab Osobogo Naznacheniya, translated literally as Special Purpose Women's Detachment). The word «baba» (transcription: [baba]) is used in a neglectful and insulting way in this phrase. [ ] Their actions range from regular participation in rallies and speeches to capturing buildings and removal and appointment of officials, and beating and taking hostages.

OBON are established informal groups of civilians, consisting mostly of women, intentionally formed and working for the purposes of third parties, or customers (power and other political structures, business, semi-criminal elements). OBON regularly use aggressive, violent, emotional, illegitimate methods. OBON does not belong to true civic groups, as it represents neither own interests nor the interests of vulnerable groups.

Our data show that more than a half of the survey respondents believe OBON is «an instrument for achieving the goals of others.» As we expected, of the 49 interviewed women – members of OBON units only a few openly declare their profession, while others hide their affiliation to these groups, or recognize that are experiencing shame for their actions. The society mostly has a negative attitude to this phenomenon. Such attitude is replicated by media. Today, OBON is associated with unacceptable behaviors, a departure from the

existing ethical norms («lack of principles, corruption», and others), as well as with violating the law and violent extreme methods of exerting pressure.

However, one-third of the respondents believe that OBON «contributes to the solution of social problems.»

The distribution of roles among members of OBON groups: leaders, including hidden «ideological leaders», «fighters», speakers, and provocateurs. A part of the leaders of OBON come from the regular fighters. Another part of the leaders was from the very beginning approached their participation in OBON and the formation of protest groups as a business project. Most of the leaders are undergoing a transformation of its financial situation. Most of the «regular fighters» of OBON are poor woman of middle age, who have come to OBON because of the needy situation in the past, or are currently self-employed or have low-paid jobs.

While at the beginning of this movement the recruitment took place through a personal persuasion, or with elements of blackmail, deception, and/or coercion, recently a participation in OBON is becoming an attractive option, and the possibility of an OBON group is seen by some as a fairly lucrative business prospect.

The emergence of independent and multiple OBON groups, their aggressive behavior to promote their services, the emergence of price lists, as well as a high level of the organizational development of these groups with elements of quality control, high-speed services are the evidence of the development of the OBON market, the appeal of this type of business, and development of the competition among its representatives. Conditions for the development of such business is most favorable: high demand for services in the conditions of a permanent political crisis; virtually inexhaustible supply of basic resource, the manpower; as well as the «protection schemes» and the inertia of the state as the market regulator and the guardian of law and order.

At that, this market characteristics corresponds to the characteristics of an emerging «perfect market.» Thus, it is attended by a considerable number of buyers and sellers, it has free entry to and exit from the market (at least for the members of OBON selling their services), freely set prices (agreements with buyers – customers), the standard services (as shown by the existence of the price-lists). However, it is impossible to assert that there exists pressure of market participants on each other.

Respondents consider the following reasons for the emergence and existence OBON:

**1. Poverty and unemployment;**

**2. Corruption and lawlessness;**

**3. Political instability, weak government, and demand for services.** Political instability in the country, revolutionary situations, struggle between clans, groups and political parties for power, as well as the struggle between representatives of business groups for influence. During these battles different levels politicians and businesses actively refer to use of women's potential. Such decisions are primarily dictated by considerations of risk minimizing. Most of the respondents noted that participation of women minimizes the possibility of participants' being detained by the militia and getting physically abused. In addition, the organizers often lean on the law banning the use of weapons and physical force against women and children during rallies and in times of emergency and war.

**4. The lack of political will of the leaders of the country;**

**5. Self-realization of women and women's leadership.**

Many of the interviewed respondents believe that OBON as a phenomenon has become a state issue and requires a careful attention of both the government and the civil society. The majority of respondents believed that «some of the responsibility for the emergence of OBON is with the government,» since the latter does not solve the problems and does not respond to the demands expressed in a legitimate manner. Corruption increases the resentment and

distrust of the general public in decisions at different levels of the state governance. The implementation of personnel policies complicates the situation with appointments of non-professional staff (because of their affiliation with specific political parties, clans, and other forces). This creates an additional factor of «short-termness», when the representatives of the local authorities or public service, understand the brevity of their tenures and are not interested in forming and implementing medium-and long-term community development plans, and are more concerned with efforts to keep their positions and obtain personal benefits. This creates a favorable environment for activitization of groups capable to quickly and effectively facilitate in obtaining an office or a seat, keeping these, discrediting competitors and so on. Such a situation involving OBON in the dismissals of officials and new appointments leads to a further deepening of the systemic power crisis and weakens power institutions, while the «disruption and weakening of the state leads to the involvement of picketers.»

Strengthening of the institutions of power is a necessary condition for reducing the effectiveness of non-legal methods used by OBON and, therefore, the subsequent fading away of the phenomenon. In this regard, it should be understood that OBON is a reflection of the state of the society, its symptom, which talks, on the one hand, about the ill state of this society, and, on the other hand, in the absence of a reasonable response, the OBON phenomenon can spread wider, take on new forms, and result in uncontrolled processes.

In addition, the goals of the OBON leaders are not limited by promoting others. The power ambitions of the leaders go further; today, some of the former and current OBON leaders are at all levels of the state and local governments, including the Parliament, ministries, oblast level governor offices, city halls, and rayon keneshes and ayil okmotus, as well as in the leadership of political parties.

Having gotten into the power, many former members of OBON dramatically change their rhetoric, refuse connections with OBON, and begin sharply condemning the action of these groups.

The study shows that the political parties, as important actors in the political field of Kyrgyzstan, were also among those who use OBON groups to achieve their goals. For their part, representatives of OBON receive their dividends in the form of monetary compensation other financial benefits, and opportunities for advancement into the upper echelons of governance at all levels, particularly in the National Parliament and local keneshes.

Respondents believe that the basis of the systemic power crisis is in a disrespect of the law by the authorities at all levels, weakness of power, inability to control corruption and to take responsibility for own representatives failing to implement the law. In this, a special role belongs to law enforcement agencies, which, according to the majority of respondents, are «demoralized», also in connection with the court trials on events of April 2010, as well as in the uncertainty about short term political prospects.

Some business structures, similarly to the power, are forced to play by the rules of OBON. Namely, to have to turn to OBON services and, moreover, to cultivate groups for defending and promoting their own interests.

Based on the results of media monitoring, it can be concluded that journalists in Kyrgyzstan could not impartially evaluate and investigate the OBON phenomenon. With a few exceptions, there were no attempts to analyze the causes of these groups' emergence and the nature of the phenomenon. Despite individual episodes and photographs by foreign colleagues, local journalists were not able to create a social portrait of the members of OBON. This can be explained with an insufficient level of professionalism among journalists, their engagement, and possible risks associated with working on the issue.

In general, the relations between media and OBON groups can hardly be called peaceful. This is seen especially, when media often provide a biased coverage of the activities of OBON groups. Such publications have caused aggression and attacks on journalists performed by women-pickers.

The study showed that publications on the subject caused mixed reactions in different regions of the country: in the North, information on OBON generated a contemptuous attitude towards groups of picketers, whereas in the South, which was considered the birthplace of the phenomenon, the attitude to the activities of OBON was more loyal.

The materials of journalists lack sufficient evidence and analysis: they are replaced by the expressing emotions and deeply personal opinions of the authors. Most publications are biased, in some cases they are quite offensive, they contain direct appeals to punishing members of OBON groups. Lack of the analysis of the nature and causes of OBON leads to another drawback, a lack of proposals to address this issue.

Based on the analysis, we can conclude that the mass media in Kyrgyzstan is not ready for an impartial and competent coverage of OBON activities. This has led to the fact that the publication in the media not only cause irritation and indignation of ordinary readers at picketers activities, including of those who have to take actions to address this issue, but these materials do not contribute to the understanding of the origins and nature of the phenomenon, and the conditions and the prospects for its transformation or extinction.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### To bodies of state power

1. Acknowledge the existence of a problem with protest groups at the state level. The country's leadership is to articulate the political will to address the problem and to create conditions under which OBON cease to exist.

The expression of the political will does not mean that bullying, harassment, and persecution will be organized against OBON women. On the contrary, the capacity of OBON members needs to be explored more fully and used for peaceful, constructive purposes.

### To Jogorku Kenesh (Parliament)

3. Consider the appropriateness of the measures to strengthen the responsibility of violators of public order, including:
  - during protest actions,
  - for obstructing the work of journalists.
3. Consider the issue of OBON activities, the causes and consequences of this phenomenon, develop a set of measures to combat its negative aspects, and conduct a regular monitoring of the implementation of these measures.

### To the Government

4. Strengthen the implementation of national and international commitments in the field of human rights through the formulation and implementation of gender equality policy, gender mainstreaming into programs of social and economic development of communities, which will allow a more focused work with women, in general, and, in particular, with vulnerable and marginalized, including recruited into OBON women, which will allow channeling their activities into a positive direction.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

5. Ensure the implementation by the law enforcement agencies of their functions in maintaining public order and protecting the rights of citizens, including in preventing abuses by members of OBON groups.
6. Ensure a proper and timely execution of plans and strategies on gender development, increase the responsibility of all power structure for their implementation.

### **To law enforcement authorities in Kyrgyzstan**

7. Identify and bring to an administrative and criminal liability those involved in the organization of orders, on the principles similar to the ones used with the organizers of the crime groups.
8. Undertake as widely as possible preventive and educational activities among local communities, through clarifications of legal provisions, consequences and risks associated with OBON activities for OBON women themselves, communities, and the country as a whole.
9. Timely respond to incidents of attacks by OBON, including when journalists are performing their professional duties.
10. Perform preventive explanatory work so that the protesters understand the work of journalists and media and solve disputes in courts in cases when journalists misrepresent facts or insult.
11. Be polite, act within the law when dealing with protesters (OBON) and journalists, including during protests.

### **To Local Self-Governance**

12. Include (potential) members of OBON into target groups in local development plans.

### **To Civil Society and Organizations of Women's Movement**

13. Include members of protest groups in awareness and advocacy programs.

14. Develop methods of civic education, training to reduce conflicts with the participation of representatives of state and local authorities, civil society, and members of protest groups.

#### **For Journalists and Media**

15. Remain neutral and impartial, when covering such events;
16. Study deeper the nature of any event, find and describe its causal relationships in a particular historical and local context;
17. Do not avoid personal contacts with the people who are under a focus in a future publication, especially if the article contains criticism against them;
18. Always be guided by the principle of the presumption of innocence, as the preliminary information and conclusions about the OBON members do not always correspond to the reality;
19. Do not neglect personal safety issues, when covering conflict situations, when people are excited and aggressive;
20. Remember that there is a person behind each publication and photograph;
21. When analyzing any phenomena and events, always use the help of experts from the relevant field.

#### **For Self-regulatory Bodies of Journalists**

22. Respond more actively in your work to any violations of laws and ethics by journalists;
23. Popularize the Code of Ethics of journalists in the country; initiate a discussion of the document for the purpose of its improvements; ensure that a majority of journalists in Kyrgyzstan are guided by it in their work.

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### Methodology

#### **Hypotheses:**

- OBON is used by groups of political (seizure of administrative buildings, removal of officials from offices and «appointments at people's will», disruption of rallies) and economic interests (seizure of private property, appointments in economic sectors).
- OBON is a business (making money) for OBON group members. Participation in OBON is justified by economic interests of women.
- A part of OBON members have political ambitions and wish to be promoted as formal leaders in a legal way.
- OBON is used at various levels, from local communities to regional and national levels.
- OBON members use short-term strategies to get immediate benefits, but are aware that their actions could have devastating consequences for a social stability and integrity of the state.
- Despite the criticism from experts and civil society organizations, the overall attitude of the society to OBON is tolerant, «with understanding», perhaps, as to the only available forms of advocacy against legal, but ineffective methods (for example, the arguments like «OBON, similar to the seizure of supreme power in 2010, is developing due to the fact that nothing is possible to achieve by using legitimate methods» or «the counterparty uses OBON, we have to respond»).

#### **To achieve the objectives of the study we prepared the following tasks:**

- Study the opinion of wide civil society (power, politicians, civil society organizations, local communities, the media, experts,

- women leaders) about the phenomenon of OBON, the place of OBON groups, and their role in the political life of society;
- Study the characteristics of members of OBON groups, including in relation to their social, economic and political status;
  - Study the positive and negative aspects of OBON activities and facilitate a public debate in order to develop approaches to respond to the phenomenon of OBON.

### **Object and Subject of the Study:**

The research is aimed at residents of urban and rural areas of all regions of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek and Osh cities, civil society representatives, representatives of power, and experts, as well as at representatives of OBON groups.

The subject of this study is:

- Knowledge, experience, attitude, perceptions, and opinion of the target groups about the activities of OBON.

For the primary sociological data for this study we were using methods of focus group discussions (FGD), expert survey, in-depth interviews with members of OBON, and questionnaire survey. For this we developed special tools: questionnaires.

In addition, we conducted a content analysis of media, including electronic ones, on the subject of covering the topic of the study.

All respondents were explained a brief context and purpose of the study, and, as far as it was possible and ethical, were requested their agreement to participate in the study on the condition of anonymity of the information source, and, where appropriate, confidentiality of information received (forms of informed consent signed by respondents).

### **Geography and Sample**

A total of 894 respondents took part in the study. Of these, 63 are national and regional experts (expert interview).

Data were collected in all regions of Kyrgyzstan, including the provincial capitals (except Tokmok) and in the city of Bishkek. The selection of regional centers and Bishkek city was based on the fact that these are traditionally the areas of activities of OBON groups. Furthermore, we have identified and examined a rayon with OBON intense presence in each oblast. Thus, the study covered urban and rural areas.

*Table. Characteristics of the study sample: distribution of respondents by sex and data collection methods*

<b>(Number of respondents)</b>					
<b>Sex of respondents</b>	<b>Methods of data collection</b>				
	<b>Focus group discussions</b>	<b>Interviews with OBON activists</b>	<b>Interviews with experts</b>	<b>Mass survey</b>	<b>Total</b>
Women	149	49	39		
Men	25	-	26		
Total	174	49	65	792	1080

### **Expert Survey**

The largest group of respondents is interviewed experts (65 respondents, 39 women, 26 men, 18 national, 47 regional ones). Among them there are experts in gender and human rights in Bishkek and the regions, managers and employees of NGOs and other civil society activists, as well as representatives of the state authorities and local self-governance, including National parliament deputies and local councilors, employees, governments at national and local levels and representatives of law enforcement agencies.

### In-depth Interviews

For in-depth interviews, in each oblast and Bishkek, we interviewed women, known as active organizers or OBON leaders in the present or the past. In total we interviewed 49 women, whose age ranged from 25 to 65 years old and above.

### Focus Group Discussions (FGD)

We held 16 focus group discussions with a total of 174 respondents. Mostly, these were women, their age was ranging from 35 to 55 years. At the stage of the development of our tools, we supposed to conduct focus group discussions among OBON members. However, several attempts to gather groups consisting only of OBON members failed. Therefore, on the pretest stage, it was decided to change the composition of FGDs. As a result, the majority of FGD was attended by civil society activists. Only in one of the regions we held one group discussion with representatives of OBON. In another region, we carried out one more discussion with activists of Uzbek ethnic origin.

### Mass Survey

The mass survey involved 792 people. During the processing of questionnaires, 7 questionnaires were rejected as blank, so only 785 questionnaires were analyzed. We selected those who were not in leadership positions and were not decision-makers as survey respondents.

More women than men participated in the survey:

*Table. Distribution of respondents by sex*

	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Women	453	57.7%
Men	332	42.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>785</b>	<b>100%</b>

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The survey was conducted in all seven oblasts of the country and in the city of Bishkek. The largest number of respondents was in the Jalal-Abad oblast (115) and the lowest was in Batken oblast (86).

*Table. Distribution of respondents by oblasts*

	Oblast	Number of respondents	(%)	Rayon
1	Issyk-Kul	90	11.5	Town Karakol, Ton rayon
2	Talas	100	12.7	Town Talas, Kara-Buura rayon
3	Naryn	94	12.0	Town Naryn
4	Chuy	102	13.0	Towns Kant and Kemin, v. Ivanovka, v. Voенno-Antonovka and TownShopokov of Sokuluk rayon
5	Osh	99	12.6	City of Osh, Kara-Kuldja, Aravan, Uzgen, and Kara-Suu rayons
6	Batken	86	11.0	Town Batken, Batken rayon, v. Samarkandek, town Sulyukta
7	City of Bishkek	99	12.6	Incl. Settlement areas Ak-Ordo and Ak-Orgo
	<b>Total</b>	<b>785</b>	<b>100</b>	

508 respondents (64.7%) were from urban areas (cities of Bishkek, Batken, Jalal-Abad, Kant, Karakol, Naryn, Osh, Sulukta, Talas), and the rest were from rural areas.

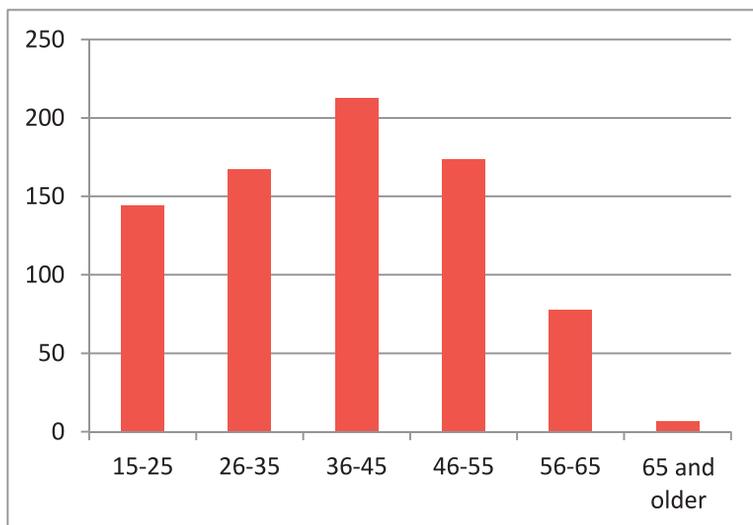
*Diagram. Distribution of survey respondents by area of residence (rural/urban)*



### **Age of mass survey respondents**

The survey involved people aged 15 to 65 years old and above. About 50% of the respondents were between 36 and 55 years old (Table 2).

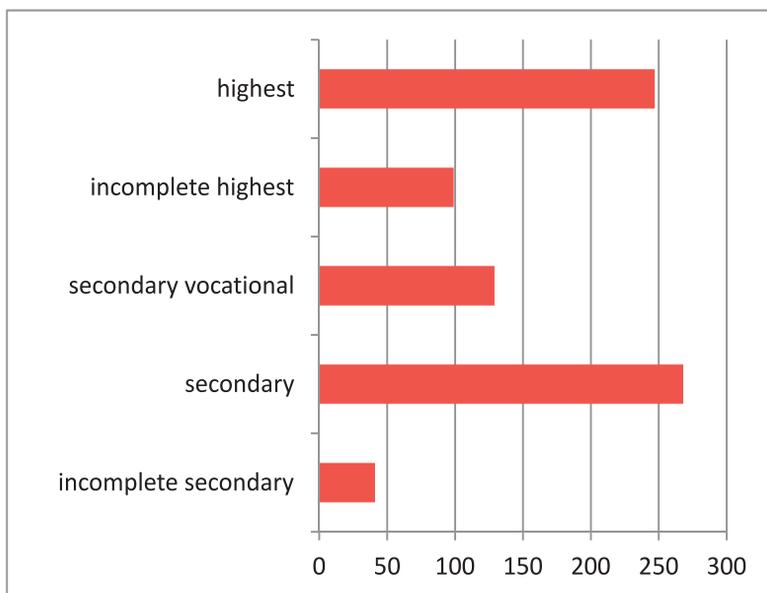
*Diagram. Distribution of survey respondents by age*



### Education level of Respondents of the Mass Survey

Distribution of respondents by their level of education was as follows: 33.5% had a university degree, 32.7% had a secondary education, and 16.6% secondary vocational education (Table 3).

*Diagram: Distribution of survey respondents by education level*



### Social Status of Respondents

About 30% of respondents reported themselves as unemployed. The responses of those who reported themselves as employed (68% of total respondents), are distributed as shown in Table 4.

Those who reported «Other» work as salespeople, businessmen, civil servants, employees of non-governmental sector, educators, in the media and service sector, are retirees or students etc. Some of the respondents marking the option «other» did not specify the type of their activity.

*Table. Employment of respondents*

<b>Sphere of Employment</b>	<b>Frequency of answers</b>	<b>(%)</b>
In social sector	153	28.6
In production sector	54	10.1
In agriculture	99	18.5
In processing industry	18	3.4
Other	211	39.4
Total	535	100.0

### Members of OBON from the Point of View of Interviewers

The woman, in my opinion, was not always sincere, and is currently a member of a Revolutionary Committee, and seems to promote the interests of the political party ta member of which she is. And she goes to the rallies and pickets depending on the interests of her political party. Also, the current government invites her to all the meetings and conferences as a member of a Revolutionary Committee.

The woman is determined, confident, knows that the authorities do need her and this is what she abuses with. She can start a serious conflict, to make credit companies to meet the needs of her, working against the rules, «put pressure» on local authorities and get land plot. Ready to work only for money. She is used by different state authorities.

Woman answered all questions calmly, with no any nervousness. She is likely to be the group leader. The current local government seems to be afraid of and consider her. In her speech, she noted that they were not satisfied with the current government, noted that like in this area, the revolution was made only to make it possible for [ full name of a person] to get a chair/ seat. Apparently she has her own resentments that they were used during the revolution, and then stopeed to consider her. During the interview, she was called by telephone and, apparently, through her friends tried to call her for calm, so that she would not organize women. (She came to the election meeting of an akim). She answered the calls calmly, boldly, and defiantly. When the recorder was turned off, she noted that she wants the authorities to be nervous having learnt about their [OBON's ] presence.

The woman, when she began to respond to the first question: what was the most important thing, she indicated her family, and

her eyes filled with tears because of the excitement. And when it was necessary to answer the questions whether they violated the laws, she began to respond as if she would be justifying that it was the local executive branch of government who made them to do that, who infringed their land and benefits rights, etc. She noted that they have started to consider her and satisfied all her legal rights, only after she has become an OBON member.

She is engaged in business, positioning herself as an activist, which is attracted to the women's situation. She is mainly campaigning for trade facilitation, and for child allowances. She affirms that there is not OBON, and has no information about such groups, that she works alone, though she believes that it is high time to create her own group, because in this case her work will become more effective. At the same time, she says that she has people who can follow her, and she can collect over 20 people... In my opinion, though, she used to be in an OBON group and participated in mass actions, perhaps, she is unwilling to position herself like this, as now she is in power. I think she has a good support among the people like her.

An active woman, who is non-indifferent to social problems and aspirations of ordinary people. Participated only once in an rally, staying for 10 days in the regional center . This time was enough to analyze the situation and figure out how they were used by influential and wealthy people. Intelligent and sober-minded, she did not refuse of activism and continues to work on the public works and in projects. She enhances her skills and education, working with the public raising their consciousness. She was highly praised by the local NGO representative talking about her achievements in social work ...

The woman replied sincerely, quietly, it is clear that she is disillusioned about pickets, as the main purpose of her participation was to get help for starting a business with friends, to improve the financial situation of their families. From her

replies it can be concluded that the candidates for elective seats have not financially supported her, moreover, they have not even thanked her for the work she has done. She was an active member of pickets against local state administration (2005) in one of the regional centers...

The woman is very energetic, her appearance shows that she has gone through a lot in life; her answers prove that she has become a member of OBON because of the difficult circumstances and persecution from local authorities since 2001. Apparently, all these life difficulties have forced her to leave her village and move to Bishkek and to live a disastrous period. Recently, she has been re-established at her previous position in the village. Perhaps, if she were receiving a sort of support in the past, she would have become a good specialist. She has been frequently using the words «kyjrdanuunu jaratty» and «karapayym elderdin koygoyloru» [Trans. from Kyrgyz – «embittered me» and «the problems of ordinary people»]. Now she has somehow taken heart and believes that she is helping ordinary people, and she feels people's necessity in her activities. In my opinion, she has her own truth, in which she is convinced, so some questions are answered with her own prepared phrases.

A quiet woman who has been working as an activist for more than 10 years . Because of protests against the authorities, she lost her job, and very sorry about this, and would like to get a job to retire. On the one hand, she belongs to OBON, because participates in a variety of rallies, protests and is ready to continue this activity. But on the other hand, she is also a member of NGO dealing with human rights, according to her information. Therefore, in her interview, there is a mixing her social activities and activism at the rallies and pickets ... She affirms that she does not take money, engaged in the OBON activities on a voluntary basis, and trying to help people. Perhaps she is working in an NGO as a volunteer. However, I suppose that participation in OBON

actions, nevertheless, brings her material income, but she is silent about that. She is an informal leader, there is a whole network of women who can be mobilized (300 pers.). They are far from the [political] parties; it can be seen that many of them, just like her, have disappointed in their belonging to one of the parties in the past. She does not exclude a chance of joining any political party in the future. It is evident that participation in social work brings her moral satisfaction and a possibility of self-realization...

At an interview with a female participant of the events of 2005, one can feel nostalgia for the old days when they were "coddled" by all authorities and all the doors were open to them. They were invited to cafes «to have plov [ ]» monthly, received gifts, awards, and certificates; had vacations at Issyk-Kul lake resorts and care in Bishkek hospitals. They were feeling their importance and respect. There is a visible resentment that now they are not wanted and continue their existence by doing a heavy, low-paid work...

Also I could sense that she was having fears about being interviewed, and she asked again and again about her safety. The woman wrote down the phone numbers of researchers, the name and contacts of our organization. Apparently this is due to the fact that in the past she was persecuted by the authorities... The woman was disappointed she could not showcase her awards and a photograph with [former] president Bakiev, because during a search she had to burn it all...

A woman firmly believed that the revolution in 2005, as compared to the one in 2010, was a truly people's revolution, and that they were fighting for a justice, lost health, and now, when they are ill (with disabilities), they are not wanted. She and her fellow members believe they were true revolutionaries, while women participating in the events of 2010 were OBON. Very colorfully and enthusiastically, as if it happened yesterday, she was describing the events of 2005 in the regional center in detail. She admitted that only after all these years she realized that she

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risked her life and all she had for the sake of higher goals. According to her, both men and women – participants in the events of 2005 – keep connections between themselves, which, unfortunately, weaken from year to year. Overall, the interview was held in a friendly atmosphere, the woman was direct, open, but speaking cautiously...

## About the authors of the report

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The Executive Director of Women Support Center for 2001-2013. She has participated in a number of national companies to protect the women rights, conducted research and developed national strategic papers (on gender development and reproductive health).

Since 2006, advised international donor organizations working in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, North Caucasus (Russia) and in Tajikistan. She has a medical degree (Kyrgyz State Medical Academy), an international master's degree in Business Administration (Academy of Management under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic), and a Master's degree in Economics (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA). Aigul has two children.

### **Djamila Aitmatova**

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Currently she works at ADB, EBRD, and the World Bank projects and conducts research as an environmental safeguard expert, and is involved into the study of social and socio-political problems of Kyrgyzstan, including women's leadership.

Director General of the Public Fund «AMAZonA.KG», which deals with the implementation of projects in environmental geology, social ecology, economics, and education. Djamila has three children.

### **Abdumomun Mamaraimov**

A journalist, an expert on media and electoral processes issues, a graduate of the Department of History of the Tashkent State University (Uzbekistan). He has been working in journalism since 1999 as a correspondent, executive secretary, editor and chief editor of various media outlets.

Since 2008, he has been working as the head of the Public Fund «Voice of Freedom», editor in chief of the human rights portal [www.vof.kg](http://www.vof.kg) and the newspaper «Voice of Freedom.» From April 2010 to July 2011, he used to be a member of the Central Commission for Elections and Referendums of the Kyrgyz Republic. He had an internship in journalism in the United States (2003), Sweden (2003), and Russia (2005). He held dozens of workshops and training courses in journalism, and TOT. Since 2007, he has been conducting seminars and workshops on journalism and master-classes for students. Abdumomun is married and has three children.

## About the Women Support Center

**Women Support Center**  
Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

*Promoting a democratic and humanistic society through understanding the role and capacities of each individual*

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*The NGO «Women Support Center» (WSC) was officially registered on April 6, 1996 at the initiative of women-academics and activists of women's organizations. WSC helps women to adapt to new economic conditions and encourages their participation in the construction of both a healthy economy and a democratic society.*

### **PRIORITY AREAS**

- Promotion of the UN CEDAW Convention and its Optional Protocol;
- Preparation of Alternative reports to the CEDAW Committee;
- Gender training in the Kyrgyz and Russian languages;
- Political and economic empowerment of women;
- Countering girls abduction and other forms of violence;
- Promoting the development of civil society;
- Research;
- Publications.

### **MISSION**

Promotion of gender equality in Kyrgyzstan through the improvement of human rights and active participation in democratic reforms.

### **TARGET GROUPS**

- women's NGOs, organizations working in the field of human

- rights;
- women activists;
- state structures;
- rural communities;
- victims of violence and other forms of discrimination;
- media.

### NATIONAL INITIATIVES

- Advocacy campaign for quotas for women;
- Campaigning to keep the term «secularism» in the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic;
- Advocacy campaign against criminalization of abortion;
- Advocacy campaign to tighten punishment for bride kidnapping in the Criminal Code – «Article 155» movement;
- Part of international movement «16-days campaign against violence against women».

### ACTIVITIES

#### TRAINING PROGRAM

THE WSC prepares and conducts quality training programs through **Gender Schools** and seminars. The topics of training include the following: Democracy and Civil Society, Introduction to gender, CEDAW, women's political rights, Leadership, Elections, Rural women and access to land, Trafficking in women, Countering violence against women, Reproductive rights and HIV/AIDS, Gender aspects of education; National and international legislation on women's rights, Gender justice, as well as other subjects. The WSC has a number of publications, including guides to conducting training, which describe methods of teaching, and other information on gender issues.

**Gender Schools** are a unique product of the WSC. It was created based on the international experiences, national and international law, research, and own observations.

The goal is increasing gender sensitivity in representatives of NGO, political parties, and state service and local self-governance.

## NETWORKS

**KIWRRAW Network** – Kyrgyz initiative for monitoring women’s rights – has emerged as a result of the development of women’s organizations and with the support from the project of Fund for Gender Equality «Promotion of political and economic rights of women in the new context of Kyrgyzstan» and UN Women.

### **Members of KIWRRAW are 32 NGOs from all (7) areas of Kyrgyzstan:**

- PA «Women Support Center»
- Association for the support of women-entrepreneurs (WESA)
- PA «Our century»
- PA «Reproductive health alliance»
- PA «Youth Peer Education Network Y-Peer»
- PF «DIA – Delilgeluu Ishker Ayaldar»
- Association of legal entities «Association of women organizations»
- PF «Kovcheg»
- PF «Human Rights and Democracy Center»
- PF «Omur Bulagy», CC «Janyl-Myrza»
- Batken regional representation of PA «Coalition for democracy and civil society»
- PA «Leylek Ayalzaty»
- Jalal-Abad Center for training of adults
- PA «Admzat den soolugu»
- PA «Ventus»
- PA Center of civic initiatives «Lider»
- PA «Door-Eli»

- PA «Pir Salamon»
- PF «Ayalzat», Crisis center «Maana»
- PF «Lady Shirin»
- PA «Umay Ene»
- PA of rural women «Alga»
- Chuy women's center
- PA of single mothers «Ken duyno»
- PA «Chuy regional center of development and training»
- PA «Ordoluu Myrzake»
- PF «Bakyt Astanasy»
- PA «Erayim»
- PA «Center for development of civic initiatives Aikol»
- PA «Eletayim»
- PA «Kasiet Bulagy»
- Association of women-leaders of Jalal-Abad

### RESEARCH

- Research on political activities (1996-1997);
- Poverty profile study (2001-2002);
- Gender and behavior factors of vulnerability of women and girls to HIV/AIDS, including discrimination against them, at local communities level (2003);
- Participation of men in reproductive health care (2003);
- Influence of microcredits on reproductive health of women (2003);
- Gender stereotypes on women's and men's participation in elections (2004);
- Gender analysis of activities of the State service agency of the Kyrgyz Republic (2006);

- Influence of financial and food crisis on sustainable livelihoods in Kyrgyzstan, with a focus on women and children (2009);
- OBON «as a mirror...» (development of political activism or the use of women's resource for purposes of interest groups?) (2011-2012);
- Study on violations of political rights of women during elections to local councils in the Kyrgyz Republic (2012).

## **PUBLICATIONS**

### **1. Research and reports:**

- Gender stereotypes about men and women participation in elections;
- Participation of men in reproductive health care;
- Gender mainstreaming: social and economic costs and benefits.

### **2. Methodology materials and training manuals:**

- Gender School in Kyrgyzstan;
- Gender and Elections;
- Countering human trafficking;
- Gender legal guide;
- Gender Herald;
- Handbook for the Study of CEDAW;
- CEDAW in questions and answers;
- Optional Protocol to CEDAW;
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women;
- On alternative reports to the CEDAW Committee;
- Handbook on studying CEDAW for civil servants (in Kyrgyz and Russian languages).

### **PARTICIPATION IN NETWORKS**

#### **WSC is a member of national networks:**

- KIWRRAW (Kyrgyz initiative for monitoring women's rights, Kyrgyzstan);
- AWLI (Alliance of Women's legislative Initiatives, Kyrgyzstan);
- Council of NGOs (Kyrgyzstan);
- NGO Working Group against kidnapping of girls;
- Campaign «UNiTE to End Violence against Women and Girls».

#### **WSC is a member of international networks:**

- KARAT Coalition (East Europe and Central Asia);
- AWID (Association of Women in Development);
- International Women's Rights Action Watch – Asia Pacific (IWRRAW-AP);
- Women in Development Europe (WIDE).

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