

Citizens' Attitudes in the Lead-up to the 2011 Kyrgyzstan Presidential Elections

**Findings from focus groups with men and women in Kyrgyzstan
July 27 – August 3, 2011**

**Prepared by the National Democratic Institute
Based on research by M-Vector**

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Executive Summary

Preface

The goal of this qualitative research project was to understand the opinions of people from different regions of Kyrgyzstan about the overall direction in which Kyrgyzstan is moving. Another purpose was to identify the participants' views on the most urgent problems for the country and its economy, participants' prognoses for Kyrgyzstan's development in the short-term, and gain a deeper understanding of electoral behavior in the lead-up to the October 2011 presidential elections.

From July 27 to August 3, 2011, M-Vector conducted ten focus groups in all seven oblasts of Kyrgyzstan and the two major cities, Bishkek and Osh, for the National Democratic Institute (NDI), with funding provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development. In each focus group, the demographic division of age, gender, profession and ethnicity reflected the demographics of the population as a whole. Further details about methodology can be found in the appendix.

In August 2010, NDI supported similar research with participants nationwide. The analysis offered in this report compares the results from 2010 and 2011, in order to track continuity and changes in public opinion.

Key Findings

- **Respondents are generally more optimistic about the future of Kyrgyzstan**, although they noted that not much could change within one year as the country has too many important problems that will require long-term solutions. Overall, more focus group participants were optimistic regarding the country's future as compared to 2010.
- Overall, in the 2011 focus groups, **respondents from the south gave a more positive evaluation of the government and of the changes that have taken place during the past year**. Almost all of the respondents believe that much of the country's development is dependent on the results of the October 2011 presidential election.
- **Citizens are starting to hold themselves accountable** for improving their own lives and the state of Kyrgyzstan, rather than looking only to the government for solutions.
- **While respondents still had concerns about the economy, many respondents praised the coalition government for increased wages for doctors, teachers, and other civil service employees; increased retirement pensions; decreased electricity rates; and support for the agricultural sector**, including low-interest loans for farmers and upgrades in agricultural equipment.
- At present, respondents from different regions of Kyrgyzstan are worried primarily about the following four problem areas: unemployment, corruption, delivery of municipal utility services, and increased prices for basic goods. Last year, nationalism and instability shared third place. Thus, **the focus has shifted from political or security concerns to economic concerns**.
- With regard to corruption, respondents in the 2010 and 2011 focus groups had almost identical opinions. **Respondents in 2011 were certain that it will take a long time to eradicate corruption in Kyrgyzstan**, with some suggesting it would be impossible, believing corruption to be pervasive.
- **Participants believe that the problem of interethnic relations is less acute in 2011**, although they did acknowledge that poor relations between ethnicities do still exist. Bishkek-based

participants, in particular, were generally of the opinion that some political forces in Kyrgyzstan are purposefully trying to set minorities against the ethnic majority by using the principle of “divide and conquer.”

- **In assessing the causes of the June 2010 violence in Osh and Jalalabad, ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz respondents in the latest focus groups remained divided.** Ethnic Kyrgyz participants believed that the International Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission’s report was biased and subjective, and that the conclusions were incorrect. None of the ethnic Kyrgyz respondents believed that the Kyrgyz combatants had committed any crimes against humanity. In contrast, ethnic Uzbek participants were satisfied with both the international and national inquiry reports overall, but thought the commission’s conclusions were too severe.
- **Southern respondents**, both Kyrgyz and Uzbek, were glad that the situation in the south was **becoming more stable and that interethnic relationships are returning to normal.** Many of the participants were grateful to the government for taking successful steps to eradicate the consequences of the June 2010 events through several efforts, including:
 - Fast-paced reconstruction of damaged buildings and property;
 - Humanitarian and financial assistance for victims;
 - Government efforts to rebuild relationships between the ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbek populations, such as the public information campaign being conducted among the population and new city blocks that are being built so that both ethnic groups may reside in mixed communities.
- **While respondents generally cited the conduct of the government as “satisfactory,” an overwhelming majority said that parliament is ineffective.** Parliament’s work is not visible, respondents said. In evaluating the government, respondents noted the professionalism and achievements of the Prime Minister, Almazbek Atambaev. Participants viewed the parliament and political parties as interconnected, and therefore evaluated the major parties’ performance as unsatisfactory.
- **Nearly all of the respondents said that they expected the presidential election to be relatively calm and that no major unrest would occur.** Almost all respondents said they planned to vote because they believed that their vote would be significant for the future of Kyrgyzstan, in comparison to elections in the past. So far, only participants of the Bishkek, Karabalta, Uzgen, and Batken focus groups were aware of the changes in voting rules and procedures, suggesting a widespread voter education effort will be necessary to keep potential voters informed.
- The participants viewed the following to be **priorities for the future president**:
 - Building interethnic relationships;
 - Reform of law-enforcement institutions;
 - Revival of manufacturing industry;
 - Resolution of border issues [with Tajikistan in particular];
 - Rule of law;
 - Growth of the economy;
 - Decrease of food and fuel prices;
 - Creation of jobs;
 - Increase of wages; and
 - Support for the agricultural sector

Findings

1. The Direction of Kyrgyzstan's Development

1.1 Positive and Negative Trends Overall

Similar to last year, participants in each of the 2011 focus groups were asked to describe the overall direction in which Kyrgyzstan is moving. The goal was to understand the opinions of people from different regions of Kyrgyzstan regarding the current course of events. Another purpose was to identify the participants' views on the most urgent problems for the country and its economy, as well as their prognoses for Kyrgyzstan's short-term development.

Summary

The August 2011 respondents assessed the current situation with more confidence than they had the year before. Participants of focus groups in the south, overall, gave a more positive evaluation of the country's direction and the changes that have taken place during the past year, relative to the groups in the north. They also showed more optimism regarding the near future of the country than their northern counterparts.

Virtually all of the participants nationwide believed that much of the country's economic and political development would depend on the outcome of the October presidential election. Similar to last year's results, respondents expressed the view that Kyrgyzstan needs a strong leader in order to develop. Moreover, respondents in 2011 mentioned more frequently than in 2010 that the leader, however strong, will need a robust team in order to see results. In this context, the participants of all the northern focus groups, as well as the Uzgen and Batken focus groups, mentioned Almazbek Atambaev as a leader who stands out as individually strong, who also needs to put in place an equally powerful team to be effective.

Northern Participants: Generally Neutral or Negative Opinions

The opinions of the participants of the focus groups held in the northern oblasts of Talas, Chui, Naryn and Issyk-Kul were split. Some believed that the situation has gotten worse since 2010. The Bishkek focus group participants were the most skeptical about the country's future development. Others believed that the situation in the country has remained virtually unchanged or has improved slightly in the past year. More than half of the respondents from the northern regions noted that it is too early yet to expect significant results from government policies. The same respondents thought that, overall, the new government is working harder than previous administrations, but facing grave challenges.

Southern Participants: Generally Positive Opinions

Southern focus group respondents were more positive and demonstrated more consensus in their assessments. Many southern respondents believed that, overall, Kyrgyzstan is moving in the right direction, and that the situation in the country has improved and stabilized both in economic and social terms since 2010. It is noteworthy that ethnic Uzbek groups in the city of Osh and ethnically mixed groups in Batken and Uzben offered the most positive assessments of the course of development and current situation.

Parliamentary vs. Presidential System

Many respondents in 2011, as in 2010, expressed skepticism about the overall appropriateness of a parliamentary system for Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, they appreciated the following advantages of this form of government:

- More accountability amongst governing structures (the parliament and the president),
- More accountability amongst parliamentarians (some participants noted approvingly that opposing parties in parliament hold each other accountable).

The largest drawback of the parliamentary system of government, in the respondents' opinion, is the inability of deputies to agree and cooperate with one another. In this regard, almost every focus group included several mentions of I. A. Krylov's prominent fable, "The Swan, the Crawfish, and the Jackfish," as a metaphor for what is currently going on in the parliament.

"These deputies, what are they doing? What they show on TV, you know, it's a howling shame. They fight and yell, and use profane language, and then immediately make peace and dress each other up in kalpaks (traditional Kyrgyz hat). And, so what has changed if they put on a kalpak? Nothing. They don't even think about the people." (Female pensioner, Karakol)

Achievements of the Government

Most respondents, regardless of regional or ethnic affiliation, emphasized the following achievements of the new government:

- Increased wages for doctors, teachers, and other civil service employees;
- Increased retirement pensions;
- Decreased electricity rates;
- Fewer revolutions;¹
- Support for private entrepreneurs and farmers (for example, participants approved of the low-interest loans that are being provided to farmers);
- Reconstruction of damaged roads;
- Nationalization of enterprises, such as cell phone operator MegaCom;
- Strengthened relationships with neighboring countries; and
- Revival of national consciousness, culture, and traditions.

Positive Trends in Rebuilding the South

In addition to the above priorities, participants in focus groups held in the south often cited the successful work of the government in ameliorating the effects of the June 2010 Osh events, by the following actions:

- Fast-paced reconstruction of damaged property;
- Provision of humanitarian and financial assistance to victims;
- Efforts to rebuild interethnic relations between the ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations, such as public information campaigns for the population, and new city blocks that are being built so that both ethnic groups can live in harmony. Representatives from both major ethnic groups shared this opinion.

Participants in each of the southern focus groups expressed optimism and gratitude that order, serenity, and harmony are coming to the region.

Nationwide Negative Trends

Overall, participants noted more negative trends than positive, including:

- Inflation. Prices of food and other basic goods and services are rising faster than wages and pensions.
- The dearth of decent paying jobs that suit one's field of specialty.

¹ However, a small number of participants in various focus groups looked favorably on the country's revolutions since independence. These respondents said that the number of riots and revolutions that have taken place demonstrate a turning point in the people's consciousness and their desire to be proactive in changing their country.

- The increase in labor migration as a result of unemployment. Parents are leaving their children for prolonged periods to earn a living in other countries. The number of young people leaving for Russia and Kazakhstan has increased. This problem is especially acute in the south.
- Corruption and clan- and personality-based power struggles are still endemic and prolific, and these are fed by lawlessness and impunity.
- The cadre system that defines government. Officials appoint their kin and cronies at all levels of governance. Many officials from the administrations of Presidents Askar Akaev and Kurmanbek Bakiyev have returned to power.

“As the saying goes, everything got mixed up. All the same people who were in power previously have occupied the “chairs” again. The authorities almost haven’t changed, people only swapped places.” (Female, occupation not specified, Naryn)

- The dependence of Kyrgyzstan’s state budget on credit and funds allocated by friendly foreign states.

“Why do[es the government] keep taking loans? During Bakiyev’s rule, there was 12 billion in the state budget. The people of Kyrgyzstan could live for four months on this money. Why aren’t they spending this money but keep taking loans?” (Male, Assistant Investigator, 24, Osh)

- The frequency of changes to the Constitution. Each new regime changes it to fit its own needs.
- The prevalence of foreign businesses investing in local enterprises and mineral extraction.

“A lot of [state] property is being given away to foreign enterprises. This may have a temporary positive impact on the economy, but in reality we are in for a great loss. It will have a negative effect on our future. It harms our water and ecological resources. These contracts hurt our national health. This is not being said openly, but everybody knows it. It is especially evident in Naryn. Here, a lot has been given away to the Chinese. Some research activities have already commenced. After this, production activities are inevitable. This could create conflict.” (Male, NGO employee, 38, Naryn)

- A lack of accountability and communication between state authorities and citizens. Participants believe it is necessary for a special government agency to audit the use of finances by all government institutions and provide reports to the public. Some participants would also welcome reports on how these institutions spend money to be available government web-sites.

“For instance, in Russia, I completely support their [government’s] position. Every time I watch the news, [President Dmitry] Medvedev has actually fired many ministers for corruption and talks to the people directly and personally on live television. Here, it has never happened in our history. For example, I don’t even know the names of our own ministers and their assistants: who works where, where do they sit? And if you look at Russia, it’s such a big state, big nation, but there even I, for instance, still know who does what.” (Female, housewife, 36, Karakol)

- Among southern participants: a decrease in the level of education and culture among the population.
- Among Russian-speaking respondents: more problems for non-Kyrgyz ethnic groups, such as difficulties when trying to get a job or get admitted to a university.

Who is to Blame for Negative Trends?

Virtually all focus group participants in the north said that citizens as well as the state are responsible for Kyrgyzstan's current problems. This is significant, because in 2010, only participants from Naryn held this view. The change suggests that more citizens are starting to hold themselves accountable for improving their own lives and the state of Kyrgyzstan, rather than looking only to the government for solutions.

Elections

According to participants in northern focus groups, most people sell their votes at elections for insignificant sums of money or gifts, not realizing the gravity of their actions. As a consequence, corrupt politicians come to power and then embezzle the country's money. The same respondents see the population's precarious economic situation, especially in the south, as the root cause of this problem.

"The regular folks are at fault, too. When I was a first-year student, I worked as an observer from an NGO. We wanted to conduct work among the population, but they did not want to hear us. They immediately start off asking how much money they will get. They say, 'we will vote for whoever gives us more money.' That just shows our level. It is because the people live poorly, and the candidates abuse that fact. The regular people do not look at who works how. They look at who pays them more."
(Female student, 22, Naryn)

International Relations

The participants from the southern focus groups, particularly those from Osh and Batken, expressed the opinion that Kyrgyzstan should be more independent in its decisions, not looking to direction from neighboring countries. Some of these respondents expressed special concern that Kyrgyzstan caters too much to Russia. Several of the Batken focus group participants believe that Kyrgyzstan is threatened by all the neighboring countries: Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and even China. They assumed that none of these states are providing Kyrgyzstan with assistance and support selflessly, and that each has its own agenda in Kyrgyzstan.

Language

The participants of focus groups in the southern regions raised the issue of the underdevelopment of the state language. In their opinion, the Kyrgyz language is still not given sufficient attention by decision makers and too many mass media outlets are using Russian.

1.2. Positive and Negative Trends in the Economy

Similar to last year, the 2011 participants believed that the country's economy is still in a state of collapse. However, this year many of the focus group respondents felt that there were some positive trends in the economy, as evidenced by the following:

- Increased wages in the state budget organizations;
- Increased size of retirement pensions;
- Decreased electricity rates;
- Fast-paced development of the sewing/textile industry;
- Support for the agricultural sector (farmers have been provided loans at low interest rates);
- Nationalization of businesses owned by Bakiev's family and circles, including cell phone operator Megacom;
- Financial and humanitarian aid for the victims of the Osh events of June 2010.

In virtually every focus group, similar to last year, the first issues discussed by participants were unemployment, low wages, and migration among the country's population. Emigration from the south to work abroad was one of the most acute problems noted by southern-based participants, who said that a majority of young people in the south leave villages in order to earn a living in Russia and Kazakhstan.

On the topic of nationalization of enterprises, a 54-year-old male respondent from Uzgen expressed the opinion that the country should have more state-owned enterprises, which would guarantee faster development of the country. He explained:

"It is correct that we started having free market prices. But we must look around at the developed countries. There, they have state-owned economies and organizations. They work well and profitably. Here, everything has been virtually destroyed and privatized through criminal means. Even in the United States, there are 35 percent state-owned enterprises. There they are funded and receive subsidies. And here, it is the opposite, they are skinning us alive." (Male, occupation not specified, 54, Uzgen)

While in 2010, respondents frequently raised concerns about foreign donors and investors, this year the issue was raised only in Naryn, where participants said foreign control of key enterprises and natural resources may negatively impact the country's economy and environment in the long run.

Concerns about the agricultural sector were also raised with less frequency and in less detail in 2011 than in 2010. Some southern participants, especially in Batken, noted a lack of organized sales markets and low prices for crops as problems. For example, many representatives of the Batken focus group resented that they are unable to sell all of their apricots within Kyrgyzstan and must instead sell them abroad.

"In Batken, there are a lot of apricots growing. A plant could have been built here. We could make stewed fruit here, make jams. People would buy them. Instead, now we sell our crops to the Uzbeks and Tajiks." (Female, housewife, 26 Batken)

Some issues that were considered urgent in 2010 did not come up at all this year. These include lack of state control and material support to the farming households as well as the lack of irrigation water. Moreover, several of the 2011 focus groups voiced approval for state agricultural policies. Respondents primarily talked about the fact that the state has started providing farmers with assistance in the form of lower taxes (the land tax was mentioned) and low-interest loans. Some respondents noted that a gradual upgrading of agricultural equipment is underway.

Several respondents noted that the recent spate of elections and public unrest has put the country in a state of uncertainty and hesitation. There is a sense that the country is holding its breath and not working during this time, which undoubtedly hinders Kyrgyzstan's economy.

1.3. Priority Issues

The spectrum of the problems mentioned by participants as requiring the most immediate response and attention on the part of the State is broad. Below is a comparative table of the three most urgent problems identified by each focus group:

Table 1. Summary of Priority Issues Nationwide

Location	Priority issues		
	Top Priority	Second Priority	Third Priority
Bishkek	Unemployment	Corruption and, as a consequence; lack of trust for the authorities	Non-implementation of the laws; impunity
Osh (Uzbek F/G)	Unemployment	Inefficiency of utilities services (interruptions of the flow of electricity, of water supply; dirty streets)	Run-down roads
Osh (Kyrgyz F/G)	Unemployment	High cost of prime necessity food items	Inefficiency of utilities services (interruptions of the flow of electricity, of water supply; dirty streets)
Jalalabad	Corruption	High cost of prime necessity food items	Ineffective government personnel policy, including kinship and cronyism
Batken	Problems with drinking water	Unemployment and, as a consequence, out-migration	Border problems (the road through Sokh (Uzbekistan) has not been completed; demarcation of the border)
Uzgen	Unemployment	Corruption	High cost of prime necessity food items
Naryn	Problems with drinking water	Inefficiency of utilities services (streets have no lighting; a lot of litter; no green plantations (trees and shrubs) in the streets)	Run-down roads
Karabalta	Nationalism	Corruption	Unemployment
Talas	Run-down roads	The environment (garbage is not taken out of the city; very few trashcans; mining companies also pollute the region)	Shortage of agricultural equipment
Karakol	Unemployment	Low wages	Corruption

Overall, participants are most concerned by the following four problems: unemployment, corruption, delivery of municipal utilities services, and increases in food prices. The latter two problems share the third place on the list of priorities according to responses from the focus groups.

Last year, the number one problem was corruption, followed by unemployment and interethnic conflicts.

This year, the problem of nationalism was discussed, especially by the participants of the Karabalta focus group and less actively by the participants of the Bishkek group, but it was not a top issue for most groups.

"Of course, if even the Kyrgyz are divided, what can be said about representatives of other nationalities? I used to work as a seller in a market, and once I saw such a situation: a Kyrgyz man was driving, a Russian old woman let him pass, but he did swear dirtily at her: "You, Siberian, go back to your tundra. You know where you sit, what land you trample down." (Female, 35, housewife, Karabalta)

In all of the southern focus groups, the respondents identified problems in the healthcare sector (high cost of medical services, lack of specialists in the field and shortage of medical equipment). Although this problem is not mentioned as leading priority, it was mentioned regularly.

"High prices. Public Health Service. They won't even look at you till you give them money. I've recently learned it. It is especially difficult for pensioners." (Female, 56, retired, Jalal-Abad)

"There is too much corruption in hospitals. It is necessary to increase salaries not for doctors, but for nurses and hospital attendants. They are looking after patients; they are at their post day and night. And doctors can earn 100,000 monthly for operations." (Male, self-employed, Jalal-Abad)

Many of the focus group participants were unable to say who should bear responsibility for this problem. Those that did respond said it is the responsibility of the state, the municipal services (most often, the city mayor's administration was mentioned), and the population itself.

1.4. Corruption

The focus groups suggested that tackling corruption is still a top priority. For the majority of the respondents corruption is primarily associated with bribery.

As in the past, participants were unanimous in thinking that addressing corruption is urgent for Kyrgyzstan. Virtually all of the respondents stated that the level of corruption in the country remains very high. Many people said that during the past year the problem of corruption has increased. Bribes have become more costly and they are demanded more frequently. Many of the participants were able to cite personal examples of having to deal with corrupt authorities.

Participants believed that corruption is rooted deeply within the people's consciousness and is thriving in all areas of daily life.

"When we were little, our grandfather used to say to us that before the coming of the End of the World, all people will be stealing from one another. Now it's hard to tell whether the corrupt person is a militia official or someone else. Now everyone is trying to deceive one another. I won't say that only certain individuals take bribes; I think everybody is involved in it." (Female, teacher, 53, Osh)

According to the respondents, corruption is most prevalent among state agencies, especially among the institutions in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, such as the systems of healthcare and education (starting from kindergarten).

The majority of the participants think that the underlying reasons for corruption are: 1) the economic situation (e.g. low wages in state-funded organizations, for doctors, teachers, and childcare providers); 2) the people's mentality; and 3) the example that the upper echelons and elite set for others. Virtually all respondents agreed that corrupt governance contributes to corruption throughout society. People are confident that if state officials would start observing the law, then corruption could be reduced or even eradicated in other areas of society.

Participants discussed experiences in other countries—such as, China, Uzbekistan and Japan—where anti-corruption laws are especially severe. In virtually all the focus groups, Georgia was mentioned as a country that has made significant progress in eradicating corruption in a short time. However, some respondents believed that even introducing the Georgian system for eradicating corruption would not help Kyrgyzstan, as corruption is so pervasive. The view is that neither the people nor the government can imagine how to operate without taking part in corrupt practices.

Most of the participants expressed the opinion that corruption will continue to exist in Kyrgyzstan for a very long time. Some respondents are confident that corruption is impossible to overcome.

“It is impossible to eradicate corruption. If I occupy some important position and someone comes to me and says, here’s 10,000 dollars for you, give my son a job. Of course, I will take it. Who can spare 10,000 dollars? It is part of every human being. They just say that they will not take it, but even if you give an imam 100 dollars, he will happily take it.” (Male, private entrepreneur, Talas)

“I think that it is impossible to eradicate corruption because it works at all levels. Everybody accepts bribes. Even if one person doesn’t, he/she cannot break the cycle [of corruption].” (Male, salesperson, Bishkek)

Regardless, respondents believed it is necessary to fight corruption. They noted that it will require the following:

- boost the country’s economy;
- increase wages;
- develop social consciousness - one needs to alter his or her own mentality in regards to corruption, and practice self-discipline;
- prohibit parties and politicians that offer bribes to voters from taking part in elections;
- strictly enforce laws against bribery and severely punish violations; and
- eliminate bureaucratic obstacles to processing documents such as registrations and contracts.

“You see, our corruption takes its beginning from the fact that our methods for problem solving take too much time. For example, in order to get some sort of a certificate for a house or something else, we first have to run around to the State Registry, then to a notary, then somewhere else. It is simply necessary to shorten that route, and that will put an end to corruption. It is easier for us to take the corrupt way. For instance, in order to get a certificate, I won’t have to wait from morning till evening, I will just pay 200 Som, skip the queue, get the certificate, and go home.” (Male, student, Bishkek)

1.5. Interethnic Relations

Overall, the issue of interethnic relations was raised less frequently in focus groups, in both the south and the north, compared with the last year, when participants saw this as one of the most acute problems and a major source of concern.

The representatives of the Naryn, Talas, and Karakol focus groups are confident that interethnic tension is no longer a problem in their respective regions. According to them, they all know each other in their small provincial towns and villages, live amicably, and try to help one another.

The participants of the Bishkek group thought that interethnic tension does still play a part in society, but in general they themselves rarely experience the consequences.

“I believe that, seriously, the Kyrgyz deserve some credit—they are very tolerant people. In order to shake them up, some people do everything to instigate their hating of their neighbors; that is very difficult, I think. But those who try, who do that, are trying very hard....” (Male, entrepreneur, 65, Bishkek)

Bishkek respondents expressed the opinion that political forces in the country are purposely setting the representatives of different ethnicities against one another, using the principle of “divide and conquer.” In other words, the Bishkek inhabitants see the majority of the incidents covered in the mass media as provocations.

In Karabalta, ethnic minority discussants believe that interethnic discrimination has started to be more evident within society. Mostly, they spoke about how it is increasingly difficult to gain admission to the country’s higher educational institutions and pass through selection processes, especially in state institutions due to their ethnic status.

Participants from the southern regions stated that the relationships between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations are slowly returning to normal, and that relations between ethnic groups is no longer confrontational, as representatives from ethnic groups no longer make threatening comments towards other ethnic groups.

“The relationships between regular folk are good. I noticed at a bazaar a Kyrgyz woman sitting next to an Uzbek and helping him sell apples. First I didn’t understand, but my daughter explained that the Uzbek man’s hands cannot move. It was a very pleasant situation for me to observe.” (Female, 55, Osh, Uzbek group)

Only some of the representatives of the Kyrgyz group in the city of Osh noted that they still feel some tension. Some noted that children of the Uzbek and Kyrgyz ethnicities are not willing to play together, despite living in the same neighborhood.

Questions about the June 2010 ethnic violence caused a much more impassioned reaction. An especially emotional reaction came from both of the Osh focus groups, unsurprising given the town’s central position during the violence.

While the women participants of the Uzbek focus group were emotional when recalling the past events, the participants of the Kyrgyz focus group were angered and irritated by the moderator’s request to recall those events. An Uzbek-speaking teacher that participated in the Osh City focus group stated:

By ethnicity I am considered Kyrgyz, but my mother is Uzbek and my husband is Tajik. People keep asking me if I was expecting this. I never even had thoughts about something like this. I lived my own life. When there was war, I didn’t understand

anything. All ethnicities are good. After this war, I got ill because I saw it all. I sat at home and cried. All "mixed" people cried. I got ill. It's all the consequences of the war. [crying] (Female, teacher, 53, Osh, Uzbek group)

According to some participants, the population has a role to play in ameliorating the situation. Suggested ways in which citizens could help:

- Foster a spirit of tolerance and amicability from early childhood by building kindergartens and schools for the representatives of different ethnicities to attend together, building children's playgrounds for multi-ethnic games, and avoiding discussion of other people's ethnic affiliations with their children;
- Encourage more frequent mixed settlements;
- Revive peoples' spirituality;
- Focus more attention to the good deeds being done across ethnic lines; and
- Encourage interethnic marriages.

"The world is held together by good deeds and good people. My relatives live in one household; 12 people; all Uzbeks. Their neighbor is a militia man, a Kyrgyz. Before the events, the Kyrgyz neighbor came by and said, 'I will transport you temporarily to a different place.' He took them away and fed them for 5-6 days for free. On the road they were stopped and asked where they were going. He protected them. You see, what kind of good people are among the Kyrgyz? The same kinds of people were among the Turks and Uzbeks. The world is held together by such people. We need to implement an ideological education among people." (Female school worker, 69, Osh)

A participant from Jalalabad City offers his suggestions and hopes:

"We need to start from kindergarten. I have lived in Kyrgyzstan for 64 years now. I am Uzbek, but Kyrgyzstan is my motherland. I was born in Uzgen, my predecessors were also born here. Only the authorities started dividing us up into ethnicities. The regular folks are busy with land cultivation and work. My Godmother is Kyrgyz. Whenever I come to visit her, she hugs me and calls me her son. That is how we must bring up our children as well. They must grow up together, just as it always was. We can do it." (Male, pensioner, Jalalabad)

In regards to the causes of the clashes in Osh and Jalalabad, the Kyrgyz participants stated that the Uzbek leaders wanted too much autonomy and power. The Uzbek participants believed that conflict benefitted certain external forces, who had their own interests in Kyrgyzstan. Participants on both sides unanimously believed that this conflict was unequivocally started by someone outside their own ethnic groups.

A minority of the respondents had read some of the reports devoted to the investigation for the June events. Many more followed the course of the investigation on television. Two reports were regularly mentioned: the Report by the International Commission and the Report by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic.

As with the causes, the respondents' opinions of the reports differed among the two ethnic groups. The Kyrgyz-speaking respondents believe that the reports covered the pertinent events in a one-sided, biased way, and that the wrong conclusions had been drawn, especially in the International Commission's Report. Virtually none of the respondents of the Kyrgyz ethnicity expressed that the Kyrgyz committed crimes against humanity. According to most of them, it was the Uzbeks who had started the conflict, and the Kyrgyz were simply forced to defend themselves.

Moreover, Kyrgyz focus groups respondents would not state that the Uzbek population suffered more from this conflict. Instead, they suggested that the Uzbek population had been better prepared beforehand to win the information war.

The Uzbek-speaking respondents, overall, liked both the reports. They saw them as objective enough, although they think that the International Commission, perhaps, reached too harsh a conclusion.

Generally, discussants from the southern focus groups felt that such violence should never happen again, and believe it was necessary to live in peace. According to focus group participants, overall the relationships between the people of different ethnicities have improved in the past year and will continue to improve moving forward.

“Gradually, the people will come together on their own. Now there are a lot of interethnic weddings taking place. Perhaps, it will draw the people closer together. Eventually, everything will return to normal.” (Female housewife, 33, Jalalabad)

1.6. Prospects for Kyrgyzstan’s Future Development

Despite the concerns discussed above, most participants in the study, just as a year ago, harbor hope for a better life and for Kyrgyzstan’s future prosperity.

With that said, most of the participants believe that one year is too brief a period of time for any positive changes and trends to be truly visible. In a year, according to them, nothing will change significantly. Many of them believe that it would be good enough if the situation does not worsen within the year.

Independent of their respective regions, respondents believe that Kyrgyzstan’s near future will depend, to a major extent, on the outcome of the upcoming presidential elections. According to the responses received, the future president ought to be, first of all, a strong and honest person. Russia’s Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was mentioned numerous times as a model leader. Some participants believe it necessary for the president to be religious as that would guarantee that he/she would take care of the people.

Despite their optimistic attitude, the representatives of various focus groups have also expressed their fears regarding the near future.

The majority of the focus group respondents, independent of their regional affiliation and demographics, are prone to similar fears and apprehensions:

- Revolutions
- Riots and unrest during and after the Presidential Elections
- Increasing emigration (especially of the Russian-speaking population)
- Interethnic conflicts

Interethnic conflict was the primary concern in Osh. The phrase “The most important thing is that we have peace” was often heard in different variations.

2. Political Concerns and Opinions

2.1. On the work of the *Jogorku Kenesh* (Parliament) and the Government

When discussing the work of the current parliament, focus group participants were unanimous across the country. Participants overwhelmingly evaluated the Jogorku Kenesh (JK) as doing a poor job, believing that their achievements were not visible. One focus group participant, a private entrepreneur in the city of Talas, said:

“If they get together for a session, one [MP] can’t care less, another one is sleeping. After that, how can one trust them?” (Male, private entrepreneur, Talas)

Participants described citizens and the parliament as separate bodies, both fending for themselves. They also stated that campaign promises have not been fulfilled.

“If they were representing the interests of the people, prices would be lower.” (Kyrgyz Female, 62, pensioner, Osh)

Many respondents stated that MPs work exclusively to pursue their own interests and those of their families, and not for the people. While some parliamentarians advocate for the common good, they have little support. Other respondents found fault with MPs misbehaving, quarreling, and fighting in the parliamentary chamber. Some respondents reported that they felt embarrassed when they watched deputies on television.

In general, participants evaluated the work of the government as satisfactory, especially relative to parliament. The president strives to make the right decisions and to consider the people’s point of view. The prime minister works professionally and in good faith. Respondents can see the results of the government’s work, even though the government is new.

Only participants of the Bishkek focus group and the Kyrgyz-speaking focus group in Osh evaluated the work of the government as unsatisfactory. These participants stated that the government is too dependent and weak. Respondents thought that it lacks its own clearly formulated positions and that it places too much importance on the opinions of its allies such as Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkey. These critics regard Kyrgyzstan as an independent state, and believe that as long as the government does not develop its own clear political agenda, neighbors will not respect it.

“Our government listens even to salespeople from the Osh bazaar. When they wanted to reconstruct it, this mob, the saleswomen, ran to the White House, and they immediately changed the plans. What do you call this? Since they had made the decision, they should have implemented it, and not hem and haw” (Female, salesperson, Bishkek)

Most participants did not differentiate much between parliament and political parties, which may explain why parties were also seen to be self-interested. In their opinion, there are too many parties in the country and each is pursuing its own interests. The participants stated that the parties spend more time fighting than working and place little importance on reaching agreement and or cooperating. In general, respondents could not pinpoint a party that is working on behalf of citizens. Rather, it is possible to identify individuals within the parties who are trying to work on behalf of the common good.

Most respondents thought that the majority of the parties are only interested in the presidential election, and consequently, all their efforts are directed toward winning the election.

2.2. Opinion on the Upcoming Presidential Election

Questions related to the security of the upcoming presidential election were posed only to focus groups in the south, except when the issue was spontaneously raised by participants from the north in regards to threats related to organizing and partaking in the presidential election. A few of the participants from the Batken and Uzgen focus groups stated that a small threat always exists and that some rallies will perhaps take place after the election, but generally the election period will be calm and take place without any serious violence. Representatives of the other groups in the south thought that the elections will pass peacefully.

Participants stated that the presidential election will have an impact on the political situation in the country as the choice of the president will influence the country's future in a major way (the example of Vladimir Putin's presidency was often cited). However, respondents could not state with confidence that the political situation will necessarily improve. The next president will determine the political situation and the country's foreign and domestic politics.

Most participants in all of the studied regions stated that they planned to vote in the upcoming elections. Many believe that this election will be fair and transparent, and hope that their vote will make a difference for the future of Kyrgyzstan. A few participants do not plan to vote, believing it to be pointless since the results will be falsified.

Focus group participants listed the following characteristics by which they will judge presidential candidates (in order of decreasing significance):

- previous experience (previous job; accomplishments; what he or she has done for the country);
- program;
- image/authority among the country's and region's population;
- personality, personal qualities;
- level of literacy;
- level of patriotism;
- regional affiliation;
- age; and
- spirituality and piety.

Apart from the Kyrgyz-speaking group in Osh, a majority of respondents reported that they were following candidates through the media and will watch the presidential debates on television. Respondents from the Kyrgyz-language group in Osh stated that the debates would not yield any results as politicians are simply performing during these types of television programs.

Other participants believed that the debates are necessary to assess how articulate a candidate is, how adequately he answers the opponent's questions, and other capabilities. Debates also allow voters to get to know the candidate on a more personal level in addition to better understanding his political platform.

Participants from the Naryn focus group however, stated that candidate debates are certainly needed, but in order to hold them, many of the candidates first need to learn how to comport themselves and speak in public. Some of these participants reported that they responded negatively to the behavior of several prominent politicians during the debates.

Most participants supported the idea of parties and candidates signing a pledge to commit to ethical conduct during the election campaign. Discussants recognized that in addition to signing the code, candidates must implement it.

Participants of the Uzbek-speaking group in Osh and several representatives of the Batken group stated that such an agreement on campaign conduct is unnecessary. The Osh group relayed an opinion that qualified candidates should not need a formal code, but should independently realize the benefits and consequences of their own actions. The Batken participants argued that an agreement would only mean something on paper, but not in practice.

Many of the respondents stated that when choosing the next president, the candidates' regional affiliation would not be a factor. When listing important characteristics in selecting a candidate however, regional affiliation was often mentioned.

But here, you know, this is again the Kyrgyz mentality. If an Osh person is appointed, he will still be rooting for Osh all the time, if it's a guy from Issyk-Kul—will be for Issyk-Kul, a Talas person—for Talas... That's why it's necessary to choose someone from the center, who grew up there, who doesn't have any relatives, no one. (Male, private entrepreneur, Karakol)

A presidential candidate's party affiliation was only discussed as significant by the participants of focus groups in Bishkek, Karabalta, and Batken.

Many of the study's participants expressed confidence in the future president's ability to be authoritative and solve many of Kyrgyzstan's urgent problems. Respondents stated that the future president would only be able to improve all areas of life if he has the desire and political will to do so, while also staying away from corrupt practices. Even with the best president, corruption, according to respondents, would not be eradicated.

Overall, the participants would like to see the new president address the following issues:

- Improve interethnic relationships
- Push for reforms within the Ministry of the Interior (MI) and other structures
- Revive moribund industries
- Resolve border issues
- Support policies that might stimulate economic growth
- Lower the cost of food and fuel
- Support policies that would create more jobs
- Increase wages
- Lend support to the agricultural sector

2.3 Opinion on the Electoral Process

In general, the respondents stated that the parties' election campaigns and programs were very similar to one another, making it difficult for discussants to identify distinct qualities of individual parties.

A significant number of respondents stated that the Respublika Party presented the most memorable program, offered specific programs for entrepreneurs and farmers. The remaining parties' programs were unclear and did not contain specifics, according to the groups. Respondents noted that many parties put more effort into organizing entertainment events with famous attendees than on providing details of their platforms.

Representatives of the Kyrgyz focus group in Osh provided negative feedback regarding the parties' election campaigns since lofty promises that were made during campaigns were not kept.

Respondents stated that they closely followed the parties' election campaigns on television, while younger respondents preferred to receive information on the course of the pre-election process from the Internet. Most respondents stated that the mass media had covered the 2010 parliamentary elections more effectively than for any previous election.

Most respondents said they voted in the 2010 parliamentary elections. However, they reported that the parties' campaigns did not influence their choice, preferring to base their choice on their prior knowledge of party leaders.

Nevertheless, all respondents agreed with the statement that parties need to be active prior to elections as it allows voters to learn more about the party members and their programs.

Virtually all of the participants confirmed that they are registered on the voters' lists. However, only some were aware of changes in the voting rules and procedures.

3. Citizens' Messages to Presidential Candidates

During the focus groups, participants were asked to imagine that they could pose any question, comment, or concern to the presidential candidates. Respondents relayed the following sentiments:

- Work for the people, come to your senses, we do not need any more wars, and let's live in peace.
- Never forget that the events that took place [the April 2010 uprising and the ethnic violence between north and south in June 2010] have actually happened.
- Take into consideration ordinary people's wishes. The people will no longer remain quiet.
- We would like to see you raise the country's prestige and living standards.
- May you be more humane in all the senses of this word. May the president be closer to the people, so that he would never forget that people have chosen him.
- Work honestly and in good faith. If the president works honestly, changes will be visible immediately.
- Do not divide the people after coming to power.
- Provide peace and friendship of different ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan after you come to power.
- May law and order reign in the country.
- It is necessary to resolve the border issues and to strengthen the army.
- Do not abolish Russian language's status as an official language.
- Losing candidates should accept their defeat with dignity and not organize riots and provoke the people.
- More attention needs to be given to education.
- We would like for you to deliver on the promises that you have made to the people.
- Do not change the Constitution.
- We love and respect you, and you, too, please love and respect us. The people of Kyrgyzstan are very friendly and patient. We have lived through so much already. And we are still being patient.

Appendix

Notes on Methodology

The Goal of the Research: To understand the population's opinions on the most important socio-economic and political issues, including an understanding of electoral behavior in the lead up to the presidential election.

The Objectives of the Research:

- Identify the most pressing problems of the electorate on the national, regional, and local level;
 - The perception of the population of the economic and political situation in the country and the regions;
 - The specifics of the socio-political and socio-economic situation in the country/region;
- Identify the reasons behind public perception of the political processes currently taking place in the country/cities;
- Determine the public perception of the candidates and parties; and
- Analyze factors influencing the voters

The Subject of the Research: The population from 18 through 65 years of age.

Methodology

The research was conducted from July 27 through August 3, 2011.

The focus group guide and the screener for the participants were developed by NDI and adapted by M-Vector in cooperation with NDI; subsequently, the guide was translated into Kyrgyz by an experienced translator from the M-Vector Consulting Agency. The focus group discussions were conducted by a professional moderator from M-Vector.

Focus groups were held in specially equipped facilities that allowed for audio- and video-recording of the entire process. In the course of the discussion, the participants and observers were provided with non-alcoholic beverages and cold snacks (tea, water, candy, cookies, etc.).

Subsequently, the audio-recordings were transcribed (transferred into text format), translated into Russian and analyzed.

Participant Selection

Focus groups were conducted in each of the seven regional centers of the country, as well as major cities—the capital Bishkek and the city of Osh—in order to ensure the best reflection of the opinions of the population in all the regions of the country.

Each focus group was formed based on age quotas and in equal proportions in terms of the sex of the participants to represent the demographics of the country. Overall, participants in four age groups were recruited:

- From 18 through 25 years of age,
- From 26 through 35 years of age,
- From 36 through 45 years of age,
- From 46 through 65 years of age.

Each focus group was made up of 10 people, with the quotas listed below

Table 1: Focus Groups Demographics Per Group

Age category	Sex		Ethnicity		Education			Area of activity				
	Women	Men	Kyrgyz	Other	Secondary	Secondary specialized	Higher	Employed	NGOs	Unemployed	Students	Retired pensioners
18-25 years of age	1	1	1	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	2	-
26-35 years of age	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	-	-
36-45 years of age	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	-	-
46-65 years of age	1	1	1	1	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	2
TOTAL	5	5	6	4	4	3	3	2	2	2	2	2

The model of sampling in the geographical and quantitative breakdown, presented in Table 2, allowed for the collection of reliable qualitative data.

Table 2: Geographic Distribution of Focus Groups

Populated areas	Number of focus groups (10 people each)
city of Bishkek	1
city of Osh	2
city of Batken	1
city of Jalalabad	1
city of Karabalta	1
city of Karakol	1
city of Naryn	1
city of Talas	1
city of Uzgen	1
Total size of the sampling (discussants)	100 people

Recruiting Participants

For the purposes of participation in the research, ten respondents were recruited (as well as two reserves) for each group. Every focus group participant was paid for their participation (for the time and effort spent).

The search for respondents to take part in the research was conducted using random selection in places where people gather (streets, trade zones, business-centers, places of leisure, etc.). For the purposes of selection of respondents, a specially developed survey was used containing selection criteria, such as sex, age, social status and profession.