



State of Youth Civic Engagement in Kyrgyzstan's Shrinking Civic Space

Report

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Public Union "Novi Ritm" is a youth-led organization based in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. It aims to promote meaningful youth participation, civic engagement, gender equality, peacebuilding, and inclusive community development. The organization helps young people strengthen their leadership skills, develop civic competencies, and engage in initiatives that foster more just and inclusive communities.



Feminist Action Hub (FemActHub) is a feminist initiative based in Kyrgyzstan and working across Central Asia. The initiative supports grassroots initiatives, civil society organizations (CSOs), and individual activists working on gender equality, human rights, and social justice by providing research, capacity strengthening, strategic resource mobilization, and organizational accompaniment. The initiative believes that local actors are best positioned to respond to the needs of their communities and that strengthening their capacities, sustainability, and collaboration contributes to stronger and more resilient civic spaces.



Public Foundation "Positive Youth" is dedicated to empowering young people through civic education, leadership development, volunteerism, social innovation, and community engagement. The foundation works to create opportunities for young people to participate in public life and contribute to positive social change.

This research was conducted as part of a joint initiative supported by Resilient Societies, which brings together the complementary expertise of the three organizations in youth participation, feminist organizing, civic engagement, human rights, and community-based research. By combining their experiences and perspectives, this partnership aims to strengthen evidence generation and contribute to more informed policies and programs for young people in Kyrgyzstan.

Disclaimer

This publication was prepared as part of a project supported by Resilient Societies.

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Executive summary

The following research examines how young people in Kyrgyzstan understand and engage in civic participation amid shrinking civic space, growing uncertainty, unequal opportunities, and changing forms of participation. Drawing on desk research, a survey of young people aged 18-35, focus group discussions (FGD) across the country, and in-depth interviews with youth leaders, the study explores how young people engage with their communities, what motivates participation, and what barriers shape their involvement.

The findings challenge the perception that young people are uninterested and passive; instead, they indicate that youth civic engagement is transforming. The youth are actively participating through volunteering, educational initiatives, online platforms, community support, fundraising, environmental action, informal networks, and local problem-solving, though their participation is influenced by concerns about safety and visibility.

Self-censorship and adaptive participation have become the norm, with many distinguishing between “safe” and “risky” forms of engagement in response to perceived risks. While online spaces, volunteering, and education are crucial avenues for participation, significant inequalities persist. Young women, rural youth, people with disabilities, queer youth, ethnic minorities, and low-income individuals often encounter additional barriers to meaningful participation, and access to opportunities is uneven, particularly in urban areas.

Despite challenges, many young people are eager to contribute to their communities and drive social change. However, while they believe in local impact, they are less confident about enacting broader political change. Overall, understanding youth civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan today requires recognizing the many diverse and often subtle ways young people exercise their agency and their ability to make a difference.

1.1. Key findings

- Youth civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan has not disappeared; it has become more adaptive, and less visible.
- Young people participate in civic engagement through volunteering, online engagement, educational initiatives, community support, mutual aid, and local action.
- Self-censorship, caution, and risk assessment have become common features of how many young people navigate public civic participation.
- Online spaces play an increasingly important role in informing, connecting, and mobilizing young people, alongside other resources.
- Participation is shaped by significant inequalities related to gender, geography, socio-economic status, disability, and social identity. Rural youth often face fewer opportunities and limited access to civic infrastructure, yet they remain active within their communities.
- Economic pressures, employment, and migration goals strongly influence participation.
- Young people continue to value community-level engagement while expressing skepticism about the prospects for broader structural and systemic change.

Introduction:

Why does this research matter?

2.1. Background

Youth civic engagement has historically played an important role in Kyrgyzstan's social, political, and community life. At various points in the country's history, youth have often been seen as drivers of political and social change, particularly during periods of political transformation and public mobilization (Doolotkeldieva 2009). Young people have participated in political mobilization, volunteer initiatives, peacebuilding processes, feminist, environmental movements, campaigns, educational and cultural initiatives, informal community support networks, and other forms of public activism.

At the same time, youth participation in Kyrgyzstan has never been consistent or equally accessible. Existing research demonstrates that opportunities for civic engagement have long been shaped by structural inequalities tied to geography, gender, socio-economic status, access to education, infrastructure, language, and proximity to civic networks and institutions. Participation has often remained concentrated in larger cities, while many young people in rural and marginalized communities have engaged through less visible, informal, or community-based forms. Also, younger people are considered unqualified to participate in important dialogues and propose changes. It is especially true for young women and ethnic minorities who are silenced and ignored by the authorities. The political field has developed obstacles that isolate young people from engaging in politics (Safeworld 2019).

Over recent years, however, the broader environment surrounding civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan has changed extensively. A series of legislative and political developments have contributed to growing concerns about shrinking civic space and the conditions under which civil society organizations, independent media, and civic actors operate. The adoption of the Law on Foreign Representatives in 2024, together with broader restrictions affecting freedoms of association, expression, and peaceful assembly, has created a more challenging environment for public participation and increased concerns regarding the visibility and safety of civic engagement (ICNL 2025; CIVICUS 2024).

Public debates surrounding activism, feminism, human rights, and civic initiatives have also become increasingly polarized. Alongside legislative restrictions, civil society organizations, independent media, and human rights defenders have been exposed to growing public criticism and stigmatizing narratives portraying their work as serving foreign interests (CIVICUS 2024). These narratives have been particularly visible in discussions surrounding gender equality and women's rights, where feminist agendas are frequently framed as incompatible with national identity or "traditional" values, contributing to a more challenging environment for visible civic participation (Müller 2022).

At the same time, existing literature and emerging research increasingly challenge simplistic assumptions that young people are becoming politically disengaged or passive. Rather than disappearing, participation itself appears to be transforming (Kydyrova 2024). Young people continue to engage socially and civically through adaptive, selective, digital, informal, safe and less visible forms of participation that often remain overlooked within traditional understandings of activism and civic participation/engagement.

This research emerges within this broader context of political uncertainty, changing forms of participation and practices, uneven civic ecosystems, and growing questions about what youth civic engagement looks like under increasingly restrictive conditions.

2.2. Key problem statement

Public and political discussions about youth participation in Kyrgyzstan often frame young people in binary narratives: either as politically passive and disengaged, or as visible activists participating through formal civic and political structures. However, such approaches often fail to capture the more complex, adaptive, and less visible ways young people navigate participation today.

Existing discussions around youth civic engagement often focus primarily on visible forms of activism, such as

protests, NGO participation, elections, and formal advocacy. At the same time, unfortunately, less attention is paid to quieter and emerging forms of participation, including digital activism, mutual aid mobilization, informal community organizing, creative expression, localized initiatives, selective participation, and forms of engagement shaped by safety and security concerns, self-censorship, and political uncertainty.

In contexts where visible activism may increasingly carry social, political, emotional, or professional risks, understanding participation only through highly visible forms creates an incomplete picture of youth civic life. Such approaches may overlook how young people adapt their participation under pressure, how inequalities shape participation opportunities, and how civic engagement itself transforms amid shrinking civic space.

This research, therefore, seeks to move beyond binary understandings of “active” versus “passive” youth and instead explores how young people in Kyrgyzstan experience, understand, communicate, and practice civic engagement within the contemporary political and social landscape. Rather than asking whether young people participate, it examines how participation is reshaped, negotiated, and sustained under changing social and political conditions.

2.3. Research objective and research questions

The overall objective of this research is to explore how young people in Kyrgyzstan understand, experience, and practice civic engagement within the context of shrinking civic space, social pressure, and evolving participation environments.

The research specifically aims to:

- explore how young people define and understand civic engagement and activism;
- examine where and how youth civic participation currently takes place;
- analyze how political conditions, social norms, gender, inequalities, and perceptions of safety shape participation;
- understand and practice adaptive, low-visibility, and informal forms of engagement;
- examine urban-rural differences and uneven participation ecosystems;
- and explore how young people perceive the impact and limitations of civic participation today.

The research is guided by the following questions:

- How do young people in Kyrgyzstan understand civic engagement and activism today?
- Where and in what forms does youth civic participation currently take place?
- How do shrinking civic space, social norms, and perceptions of risk shape participation?
- How do young people adapt and practice participation under conditions of uncertainty, fear, or self-censorship?
- How do inequalities such as gender, geography, socio-economic status, and access to opportunities shape participation?
- How do young people perceive the possibilities and limitations of civic engagement and social change in Kyrgyzstan today?

Conceptual Framework:

Rethinking youth civic engagement under repression/restrictions

This research treats youth civic engagement not as a fixed or institutionalized concept but as a dynamic, evolving process shaped by political conditions, social norms, inequalities, and perceptions of safety. In contexts where civic space becomes more restrictive, participation does not simply disappear. Instead, it becomes more negotiated, selective, adaptive, and often less visible.

Traditional understandings of civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan have often focused on visible, formal participation: protests, elections, political parties, NGOs, public advocacy, and direct engagement with state institutions. However, this desk research demonstrates that youth participation has always been broader and more complex (Kydyrova 2024). Historically, young people in Kyrgyzstan participated through peacebuilding initiatives, volunteerism, student clubs and movements, community organizing, cultural and creative spaces, environmental initiatives, informal solidarity networks (Doolotkeldieva 2009), and, later (during COVID-19), through digital activism and online mobilization (Kydyrova 2024).

At the policy level, youth in Kyrgyzstan are often framed as an important resource for national development, modernization, and socio-political stability. Existing youth policy documents emphasize civic responsibility, leadership, patriotism, and participation in social and political processes (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2020). At the same time, the desk research highlights a growing gap between institutional understandings of participation and the real experiences of young people. While official frameworks primarily focus on formal participation, such as youth councils, elections, state-supported initiatives, and institutional engagement, many young people increasingly participate through informal, localized, digital, and less visible forms that emerge outside institutional structures (Kydyrova 2024).

This tension is especially important in contexts where visible activism may be associated with political sensitivity, risk, insecurity, or unwanted attention. Under such conditions, participation cannot be understood solely through state-recognized or highly visible forms of engagement.

At the same time, the desk research also demonstrates that youth participation has never existed outside of power relations and structural inequalities. Even during periods when civic space was relatively more open, participation remained uneven and was shaped by urban concentration, access to networks, socio-economic conditions, political instrumentalization, and social hierarchies. Youth activism often remained concentrated in larger cities (mainly Bishkek and Osh), while many young people, particularly from rural areas, participated through less formalized, community-based forms of collective solidarity and action (Doolotkeldieva 2009).

The shrinking of civic space and mounting pressure on civil society, independent media, and public expression have further transformed the conditions under which young people participate. In such contexts, visible activism may increasingly be associated with risk, surveillance, reputational damage, or uncertainty. As a result, participation itself becomes more strategic. Young people may continue engaging with social and political issues, but through forms that feel safer, more flexible, indirect, and less confrontational.

This transformation is especially evident in research on digital activism in Kyrgyzstan. Existing studies challenge the dominant narrative that youth are politically passive or disengaged. Instead, they demonstrate that young people actively used digital spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic, elections, political crises, and social campaigns to mobilize support, raise awareness, organize collective action, disseminate information, and express political and social perspectives and positions (Kydyrova 2024).

Digital activism became particularly important because it lowered barriers to participation and created alternative spaces for expression, especially for those excluded from traditional political processes. Online participation should not be treated as less “real” than offline activism. Existing research shows that digital and offline participation are deeply interconnected. Online spaces often serve as entry points for political socialization, community-building, mobilization, and collective action (Kydyrova 2024). At the same time, digital participation reflects broader transformations in how young people navigate risk, visibility, and public expression under increasingly restrictive conditions.

This conceptual framework therefore moves beyond binary understandings of “active” versus “passive” youth. Instead, it understands civic engagement as spanning multiple overlapping forms: 1. formal and informal; 2. online and offline; 3. public/visible and low-visibility; 4. individual and collective; 5. institutional and community-based; 6. political, social, cultural, and creative.

Such an approach is especially important because many forms of youth participation remain invisible and unrecognized within traditional understandings of civic engagement. Existing literature demonstrates that young people often engage through volunteering, mutual aid, environmental initiatives, religious and community spaces, art, music, blogging, digital storytelling, peer networks, and localized problem-solving. These forms may not always look like “traditional activism,” but they still reflect efforts to influence society, support communities, respond to injustice, or create lasting social change (Doolotkeldieva 2009; DVV International 2019; Kydyrova 2024).

The desk research also highlights that participation is deeply shaped by inequalities and social norms. Gender norms, socio-economic conditions, regional disparities, ethnicity, language, and access to education or networks influence who is able to participate, how safely they can participate, and which forms of engagement are considered socially acceptable. Young women, rural youth, ethnic minorities, and economically marginalized young people may face additional barriers to visible participation while developing alternative, less visible forms of engagement in parallel.

Finally, this framework recognizes that youth civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan is not ideologically uniform. Existing research demonstrates that young people engage through diverse value systems and trajectories, including democratic and human rights activism, local community initiatives, nationalism, religious engagement, environmental activism, creative expression, and issue-based mobilization. This complexity reflects the broader reality of how young people navigate belonging, identity, responsibility, and participation within rapidly changing social and political conditions.

Overall, this research understands youth civic engagement under restrictions and shrinking civic space as adaptive, uneven, and deeply context-dependent. The key question is therefore not whether young people participate, but rather:

how participation changes under pressure;

which forms become safer or riskier;

whose participation becomes visible or invisible;

and how young people continue to navigate civic and social life within increasingly constrained environments.

Context overview of civic space and youth in Kyrgyzstan

4.1. Political and legal context (laws, restrictions, and key risks)

Over the past several years, civic space in Kyrgyzstan has become increasingly restrictive and politically sensitive. While the country has historically been perceived as more open than many other states in Central Asia, recent developments demonstrate growing pressure on civil society organizations, independent media, activists, journalists, bloggers, and public expression more broadly. Existing desk research highlights growing concerns around shrinking civic space, surveillance, legal uncertainty, and rising pressure toward public criticism and dissent.

Public debates around NGOs, human rights organizations, feminist initiatives, independent journalists, and civic activists increasingly feature narratives that frame certain forms of activism as “foreign,” “Western,” destabilizing, or disconnected from so-called “traditional values.” These narratives contribute to delegitimizing critical voices and narrowing the boundaries of what is considered acceptable participation.

At the same time, existing research demonstrates that restrictions are not felt only through formal laws or direct repression. Many young people increasingly view visible participation and political expression as risky, unpredictable, or emotionally exhausting. As a result, participation itself often becomes more cautious, indirect, and adaptive.

One research participant reflected: “если раньше мы через митинги выражали мысли уже сейчас другой подход.” (“If earlier we expressed our thoughts through protests, now there is a different approach.”)



Another participant described how young people are increasingly thinking strategically about communication and visibility: “мы сейчас учимся как преподнести чтобы от власти не получить что то.” (“Now we are learning how to present things so we do not face consequences from the authorities.”)



At the same time, despite growing restrictions and fears around visibility, existing research and field findings alike demonstrate that young people continue to engage with social and political issues through alternative forms of participation, including digital activism, volunteering, environmental initiatives, community organizing, mutual aid, and creative expression.

4.2. Social norms, delegitimization, and gender (activism as being viewed “dangerous,” “Western,” or politically risky; as well as gender norms and unequal participation; along with generational perceptions of activism)

Youth civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan is shaped not only by political conditions but also by social norms, generational expectations, and broader perceptions of activism and public participation. Existing research demonstrates that visible activism, especially in areas such as political criticism, feminism, human rights, or social justice, may be perceived as controversial, risky, morally suspect, or influenced by “Western” values. These narratives create additional social pressure to participate, particularly in conservative environments.

At the same time, perceptions of activism differ significantly across generations. Older understandings of activism are often associated with sacrifice, confrontation, visible public struggle, and political mobilization. Younger participants, however, increasingly describe participation in terms of safety, sustainability, flexibility, and emotional well-being. This reflects broader shifts in how young people navigate participation amid uncertainty and shrinking civic space.

Gender norms continue to shape participation unevenly. Field findings demonstrate that young women often face additional barriers tied to domestic responsibilities, social expectations, mobility restrictions, and marriage-related pressure. At the same time, discussions repeatedly highlighted that women and girls remain highly active in volunteering, education, community initiatives, and civic organizing despite these structural barriers.

One participant reflected on unequal opportunities: “Разница в возможностях молодых девушек и юношей огромна.” (“The difference in opportunities for young women and young men is enormous.”)



At the same time, participants described gradual shifts in attitudes toward women’s education, leadership, and public participation, especially among younger generations and in urban areas. Overall, these dynamics demonstrate that youth participation in Kyrgyzstan continues to be socially negotiated through broader debates about morality, legitimacy, patriotism, gender roles, and belonging.

4.3. Uneven youth ecosystems and participation landscapes (urban vs. rural dynamics; access to opportunities and infrastructure; centralization of civic spaces and resources)

The research demonstrates that opportunities for youth civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan remain highly uneven across regions, cities, villages, and social groups. Access to participation is shaped not only by motivation but also by geography, infrastructure, internet access, transportation, educational opportunities, institutional support, and proximity to civic networks and resources.

Existing research highlights the strong concentration of civic opportunities, NGOs, educational programs, donor-funded initiatives, and youth infrastructure in larger cities, particularly Bishkek. Participants repeatedly described urban areas as offering greater access to training sessions, organizations, seminars, youth centers, and professional networks.

As one participant explained: “В городе для молодежи больше возможностей.” (“In the city, there are more opportunities for youth.”)



At the same time, participants emphasized that rural participation often takes different forms. While villages may have fewer formal civic opportunities, participation is frequently expressed through collective support, mutual aid, local solidarity, *ashar*, sports, and community-based problem-solving.

However, rural youth also face more pronounced structural barriers related to internet access, infrastructure, transportation, educational opportunities, and social pressure. Several participants noted that young people in villages may have less freedom to express opinions publicly or to participate independently.

The findings also demonstrate that digital spaces increasingly reshape the participation landscapes by creating alternative opportunities for networking, learning, mobilization, and self-expression beyond geographical limitations. Nevertheless, unequal access to digital infrastructure continues to reproduce broader inequalities between urban and rural youth.

Overall, the findings of this research suggest that youth civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan unfolds within deeply uneven participation ecosystems, where geography, infrastructure, socio-economic conditions, and access to networks significantly shape who can participate, how participation occurs, and which voices become visible or marginalized.

Methodology

5.1. Research design

This research used a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to better understand how young people in Kyrgyzstan experience, interpret, and navigate civic engagement under changing political and social conditions.

The research was designed as an exploratory and interpretive study focused not only on visible forms of participation but also on adaptive, informal, digital, and low-visibility forms of civic engagement that may be overlooked within traditional understandings of activism and participation.

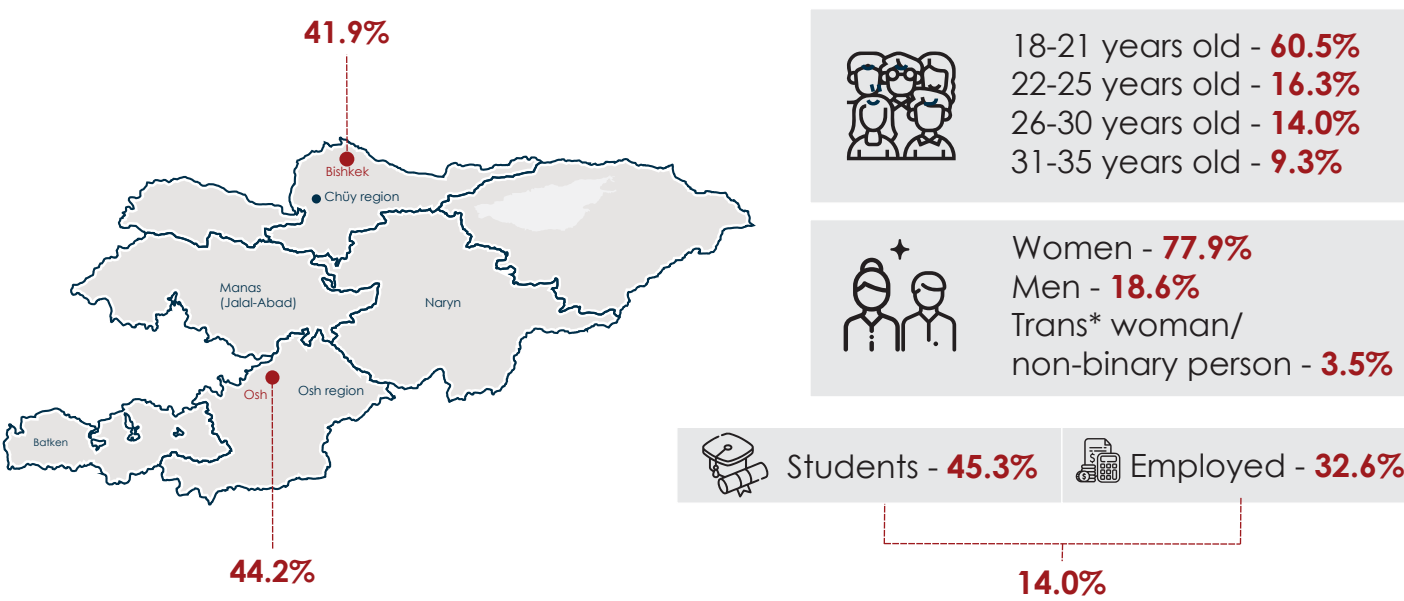
The study combined desk research, an online survey in two languages, focus group discussions (FGDs), and in-depth interviews.

Qualitative methods formed the core analytical foundation of the research, while the survey was used to identify broader participation trends, perceptions of safety, inequalities, and emerging patterns among young people.

The desk research component included a review of existing literature, analytical reports, youth-related studies, civil society reports, media materials, and research on civic space, youth participation, digital activism, inequalities, gender norms, and shrinking civic space in Kyrgyzstan. The desk review demonstrated that youth participation in Kyrgyzstan is increasingly shaped by political uncertainty, social pressure, uneven participation ecosystems, and a growing shift toward adaptive and less visible forms of engagement.

5.2. Sample (youth aged 18-35 years old + urban and rural youth, gender etc.)

The research focused on young people aged 18-35 from across regions of Kyrgyzstan, including both urban and rural areas.



The online survey received 86 responses from young people ages 18-35. The sample was heavily skewed toward younger respondents: 60.5% were aged 18-21, followed by 22-25 (16.3%), 26-30 (14.0%), and 31-35 (9.3%).

The sample was also gender-skewed: 77.9% of respondents identified as women, 18.6% as men, and 3.5% identified as a trans woman, non-binary person, or preferred not to indicate gender.

Geographically, most survey respondents were based in Osh city (44.2%) and Bishkek city (41.9%). Smaller numbers of respondents came from Jalal-Abad, Chüy, Osh oblast, Batken, and Naryn. As a result, the survey reflects primarily urban and youth-connected perspectives, while rural voices remain underrepresented.

Most survey respondents were students (45.3%), employed young people (32.6%), or both studying and working (14.0%). This is important for interpreting the findings, as the survey largely captures perspectives of youth already connected to educational, professional, or civic spaces.

In addition to the survey, the qualitative component included:

6 focus group discussions (FGDs)

and 3 in-depth interviews

FGDs were conducted in Issyk-Kul, Talas, Bishkek (Chüy), Osh, Batken, and Manas city (Jalal-Abad).

The FGDs included 60 young people aged 18-35 who were engaged in both formal and informal forms of civic engagement and activism. Participants included students from local universities, volunteers and staff members of youth organizations, members of youth initiatives, and socially active young people involved in community-based, educational, environmental, digital, and volunteer initiatives.

In several locations, the majority of FGD participants were young women and girls, who also influenced the discussions on gender, safety, participation, and unequal opportunities.

Additionally, three in-depth interviews were conducted with youth leaders affiliated with governmental or institutional structures to better understand institutional perspectives on youth participation, civic engagement, and current youth-related dynamics in Kyrgyzstan.

5.3. Data collection and analysis

The research combined qualitative and quantitative data collection methods conducted between February and the end of April 2026.

The online survey was distributed digitally and included questions on:

- forms of participation;
- perceptions of safety;
- barriers and motivations;
- inequalities;
- adaptive participation;
- and perceptions of civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan.

The survey data was used primarily to identify broader trends and to reinforce qualitative findings, rather than to draw statistically representative conclusions.

The qualitative component consisted of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. FGDs enabled participants to collectively reflect on experiences, perceptions, social norms, participation practices, inequalities, and changes in civic engagement environments. In-depth interviews provided additional insight into institutional and leadership perspectives.

Discussions and interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and later transcribed and analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis. The coding process focused on identifying recurring themes, contradictions, emotional dynamics, adaptive strategies, inequalities, perceptions of safety, and evolving forms of participation.

Particular analytical attention was paid to:

silent and adaptive participation;	self-censorship;	visibility and safety;
urban-rural differences;	gender dynamics;	informal civic engagement;
and perceptions of impact and structural change.		

The research intentionally combined desk research, survey data, and qualitative findings to triangulate patterns and better capture both broader trends and lived experiences.

5.4. Research limitations

This research has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the survey sample was relatively small and not nationally representative. The survey was also strongly urban-centered and gender-skewed, with a large proportion of respondents being students and youth already connected to educational or civic spaces. As a result, the findings should be understood as indicative rather than representative of all youth in Kyrgyzstan.

Second, due to the sensitive nature of civic engagement and shrinking civic space, some participants may have practiced self-censorship or avoided discussing certain experiences openly, particularly those involving political participation, safety concerns, or criticism of authorities.

Third, although the research aimed to include participants from multiple regions and backgrounds, access to some groups and regions remained limited due to logistical, time, language, and accessibility constraints.

Despite these limitations, the combination of regional FGDs, interviews, survey findings, and desk research enabled the study to capture key patterns, lived experiences, and emerging dynamics surrounding youth civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan.

5.5. Ethical standards, associated risks, and their management or mitigation strategies.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, particular attention was paid to ethics, participant safety, transparency, and informed consent throughout the research process.

Consent forms were prepared in Kyrgyz and Russian. Before each FGD and interview, participants received the following information:

- the research objectives;
- the organizations and researchers involved;
- the expected use of the findings;
- confidentiality and anonymity measures;
- voluntary participation;
- and audio recordings.

Participants were informed of the purpose of the recordings and had the opportunity to ask questions before signing the consent forms. They were also informed that they could refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the discussion at any time without consequences.

Special attention was also paid to language accessibility and participant comfort. Participants could speak in Kyrgyz, Russian, or Uzbek, depending on their preferences and comfort level.

Although multilingual facilitation, translation, and transcription increased the research timeline and workload, this approach helped create a safer, more inclusive discussion environment where participants could express themselves more freely.

The research team also considered the emotional and political sensitivities surrounding discussions of activism, participation, visibility, and safety. Discussions were facilitated to minimize pressure on participants and avoid forcing disclosure of potentially sensitive experiences.

To reduce risks related to visibility and confidentiality:

- personal identifiers were minimized during analysis;
- findings were anonymized;
- and quotations used in the report do not contain identifying information.

Overall, *the research sought to prioritize participant dignity, safety, voluntary participation, and informed engagement across all stages of the study.*

Key findings

6.1. How youth understand civic engagement and activism

Young people in Kyrgyzstan understand civic engagement in diverse, layered, and sometimes deeply contradictory ways. There is no single shared understanding of what activism or civic participation means today. For some participants, activism remains associated with formal structures such as NGOs, elections, youth councils, public discussions, or organized civic initiatives. Others understand participation through more informal, everyday, and community-based practices, including helping people, supporting neighborhoods, mutual aid, charity, or simply trying to improve life around them.

At the same time, one of the strongest patterns across discussions was the growing ambiguity surrounding activism itself. Participants often simultaneously described youth as “active” and “passive,” hopeful yet disillusioned, independent yet fragmented. Civic engagement was discussed less as a stable social norm and more as something conditional, selective, emotionally exhausting, and dependent on safety, economic realities, and personal motivation. For many participants, especially those connected to youth organizations, volunteer initiatives, or municipal spaces, civic engagement was associated with leadership, responsibility, discipline, and contribution to society. Activism was often framed through the language of helping communities, supporting development, solving local problems, or strengthening social cohesion rather than directly confronting systems of power.

Several participants explicitly contrasted “good” or “constructive” participation with protests or other forms of openly confrontational political activism: “Вместо того чтобы выходить на улицы, проводить митинги... они должны помочь объединять людей, когда возникают трудности.” (“Instead of going out into the streets to organize protests... they should help unite people when difficulties arise.”)



This distinction became especially visible in discussions surrounding community support and mutual aid. In many cases, participants did not even use the word “activism” to describe these practices. Instead, they framed them in terms of responsibility, upbringing, solidarity, humanity, religion, or collective duty. Particularly in rural contexts, participation was often understood in terms of traditions of collective support and helping others rather than formal political engagement.

At the same time, discussions repeatedly highlighted how digitalization is reshaping understandings of participation itself. Many participants described online engagement as a legitimate and meaningful form of activism. Reposting information, sharing opinions, discussing social issues online, blogging, and simply raising awareness on social media were frequently described as forms of civic expression.

One participant reflected: “Даже если человек просто лайкает и репостит - это тоже своего рода активизм.” (“Even if a person simply likes or reposts something, it is still a form of activism.”)



Importantly, participants did not view online participation solely as a matter of convenience. Discussions repeatedly linked digital participation to safety, visibility, and emotional comfort. For many young people, online engagement appears to offer opportunities for expression while reducing exposure to confrontation or public pressure.

Participants also described how activism itself has increasingly become indirect, emotionally softer, and more strategically communicated. Rather than using openly confrontational language, many described how civic and political messages are increasingly expressed through creative, symbolic, artistic, or abstract forms: “Они не говорят напрямую, что в мэрии все плохо... говорят абстрактно.” (“They do not say directly that everything in the mayor’s office is bad... they speak more abstractly.”)



Others reflected on how creative formats make social and political discussions feel more acceptable and less risky: “Если через песню, намного мягче пойдём.” (“If it goes through a song, it will be received much more softly.”)



Another strong pattern across discussions was the growing distance many young people feel from traditional activist identities. Several participants openly associated activism with sacrifice, danger, burnout, repression, conflict, or unwanted visibility. One participant reflected on generational differences in activism: “У старшего поколения есть представление, что настоящий активизм связан с жертвами... у нашего поколения другой подход, более бережный.” (“The older generation understands that real activism involves sacrifice... our generation has a different, more care-centered approach.”)



This reflects an important generational shift in how activism itself is imagined. Younger participants increasingly reject the notion that meaningful participation requires suffering, confrontation, or personal destruction. Instead, many emphasize emotional sustainability, strategic communication, flexibility, and safer forms of participation.

At the same time, participants repeatedly linked evolving understandings of activism to broader economic and social realities. Rather than being discussed in isolation, civic engagement was closely connected to migration, employment, everyday survival, financial insecurity, and growing distrust toward institutions.

Many participants described young people as increasingly pragmatic and focused on personal stability: “Вместо митингов они попытаются найти работу и заработать денег.” (“Instead of protesting, they will try to find work and earn money.”)



For some participants, these shifts reflect weakening solidarity, growing individualism, or declining collectivism. Others interpreted the same processes differently, describing contemporary youth as more independent, self-aware, technologically literate, and capable of creating opportunities beyond traditional structures.

Importantly, many participants also questioned whether visible political participation genuinely produces structural change. Discussions of past political mobilizations and revolutions reflected disappointment, skepticism, and distrust toward political systems: “Молодежь делает революцию, а наверху остаются те же люди.” (“Young people make the revolution, yet the same people remain at the top.”)



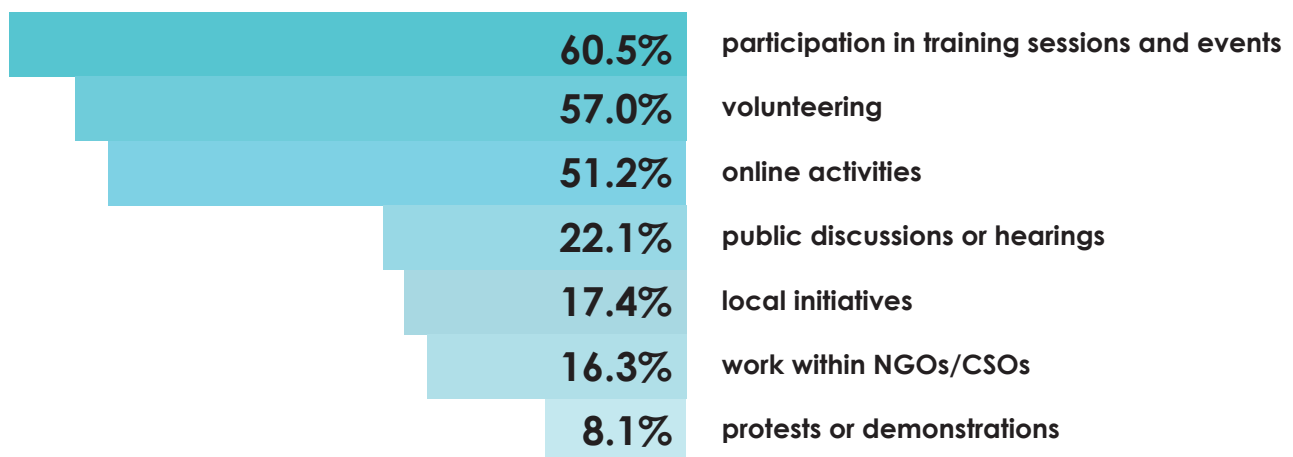
This skepticism helps explain why many young people increasingly view meaningful participation as localized impact, personal agency, mutual support, creative expression, or community-level change rather than as highly visible political activism.

Overall, the findings suggest that young people in Kyrgyzstan understand civic engagement not as a fixed category but as a flexible, emotionally negotiated practice, deeply shaped by safety, visibility, economic realities, generational shifts, and changing social conditions. Activism is increasingly understood not only through protests or formal political participation but also through helping others, digital expression, creativity, community support, self-development, and everyday forms of social contribution.

6.2. Where and how youth civic engagement takes place today

The findings demonstrate that youth civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan today takes multiple, overlapping, and often fluid forms rather than following a single model of participation. Civic engagement increasingly unfolds across both formal and informal spaces, combining online and offline participation, public and low-visibility engagement, institutional involvement, community support practices, and individualized forms of expression.

Survey findings reinforce this diversity of forms of participation. The most common forms of engagement among respondents were participation in training sessions and events (60.5%), volunteering (57.0%), and online activities such as posts, reposts, blogs, and other digital expressions (51.2%). Smaller numbers of respondents participated in public discussions or hearings (22.1%), local initiatives (17.4%), work within NGOs/CSOs (16.3%), and protests or demonstrations (8.1%).



These findings suggest that youth participation today is concentrated primarily in educational, volunteer-based, digital, and community-oriented spaces, while openly confrontational or highly visible political participation remains significantly less common.

Participants repeatedly cited schools, universities, youth organizations, and volunteer initiatives as key environments where young people continue to engage socially and civically: “в настоящее время молодежь активно участвует в школах, в университетах, в различных общественных мероприятиях.” (“At present, young people actively participate in schools, universities, and various public events.”)



“молодежь в качестве волонтеров подключается в общественные организации, там проявляют свою активность.” (“Young people join public organizations as volunteers and demonstrate their proactivity there.”)



Environmental initiatives emerged as one of the most visible and socially accepted forms of participation across regions. Participants frequently described ecological activism, waste collection, environmental campaigns, and community cleanups as normalized and relatively safe forms of engagement: “Молодежь сами между собой организуют группы... занимаются сбором и сортировкой мусора.” (“Young people organize groups among themselves... they engage in garbage collection and waste sorting.”).

Another participant shared that environmental engagement increasingly begins in schools and youth competitions: “Сейчас маленькие дети стали уделять больше внимания чистоте, соревнуются с другими школами и выигрывают призы.” (“Now small children pay more attention to cleanliness, compete with other schools, and win prizes.”).

The findings also demonstrate that civic participation often occurs through informal, localized community practices. Particularly in rural contexts, participants repeatedly referred to *ashar* and mutual aid traditions as important expressions of collective participation and social responsibility: “В селах, скорее всего, молодежь помогает своему сообществу через

ашар.” (“In villages, young people most likely help their communities through ashar.”).

Participants also described helping vulnerable families, collective fundraising, neighborhood support, and community problem-solving as meaningful forms of engagement: “Например, что-то сломалось, быстренько делаем ашар и на этом решаем вопрос.” (“For example, if something breaks, we quickly organize an ashar and resolve the issue this way.”)

At the same time, digital participation emerged as one of the most important arenas of contemporary youth engagement. Social media increasingly functions not only as a communication tool but also as a civic arena where young people:

share information;	raise awareness;	discuss social issues;
express political opinions;	organize initiatives;	and build networks.

Several participants described online participation as more accessible and flexible, and as capable of reaching broader audiences: “Почему молодежь уходит в онлайн... потому что это удобно.” В соцсети охват большой.” (“Why are young people moving online? Because it is convenient.”) (“Social media has a wide reach.”)

Participants repeatedly referred to blogging, reposts, awareness campaigns, online discussions, feminist and environmental content, and creative digital expression as important forms of engagement. Digital participation often seemed especially important for young people navigating restrictions, limited resources, geographic isolation, or fear of offline visibility.

Creative and cultural spaces also emerged repeatedly throughout the discussions. Participants described music, blogging, illustrations, videos, art initiatives, and cultural activities as spaces where young people increasingly discuss social issues, identity, violence, ecology, and inequality in softer, more accessible ways.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that participation itself is often selective and issue-based. Young people frequently engage in topics perceived as more socially acceptable or safer, such as volunteering, ecology, education, soft skills, youth development, sports, culture, and community support.

In contrast, overt political mobilization, protests, or direct criticism toward authorities appeared significantly less common and were often associated with greater risks or emotional costs. Importantly, the findings also demonstrate that participation today is highly hybrid and multidimensional. Many participants simultaneously navigate online and offline spaces, institutional and informal engagement, and visible and less visible forms of participation, depending on opportunities, emotional capacity, perceptions of safety, and the political context.

The survey also included several open-ended responses that offer additional nuance on youth participation. One respondent described working as a “guide for youth in the mountains,” highlighting forms of engagement associated with mentorship, tourism, and informal youth support outside traditional civic frameworks. Another respondent selected “did not participate,” but added: “Но очень хотелось бы” (“But I would really like to”), demonstrating that non-participation does not necessarily reflect lack of interest or willingness to engage.

At the same time, several participants described growing frustration, fatigue, migration aspirations, and disengagement linked to economic precarity, workload, survival pressures, and distrust of institutions. Some participants noted that many young people increasingly prioritize work, migration, education, and personal stability over collective participation.

Nevertheless, the findings overall suggest that youth civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan is not disappearing. Rather, participation is increasingly being reshaped into more flexible, localized, digital, community-oriented, and adaptive forms that reflect broader political, economic, technological, and social transformations.

6.3. Silent engagement, self-censorship, and adaptive participation

One of the strongest and most emotionally complex findings from the research is the normalization of quieter, more cautious, and lower-visibility forms of participation among young people in Kyrgyzstan. Across both survey and qualitative findings, participants repeatedly described how civic engagement increasingly is negotiated through safety, caution, indirectness, and self-protection rather than through open visibility or direct confrontation.

Survey findings strongly reinforce this broader shift toward quieter participation. Overall, 57.0% of participants somewhat agreed, and another 24.4% fully agreed with the statement that youth participation today increasingly takes place through “quiet” forms. In total, 81.4% expressed at least partial agreement with this statement, while only 16.3% disagreed to some extent and 2.3% remained uncertain.

Youth participation today increasingly takes place through “quiet” forms:

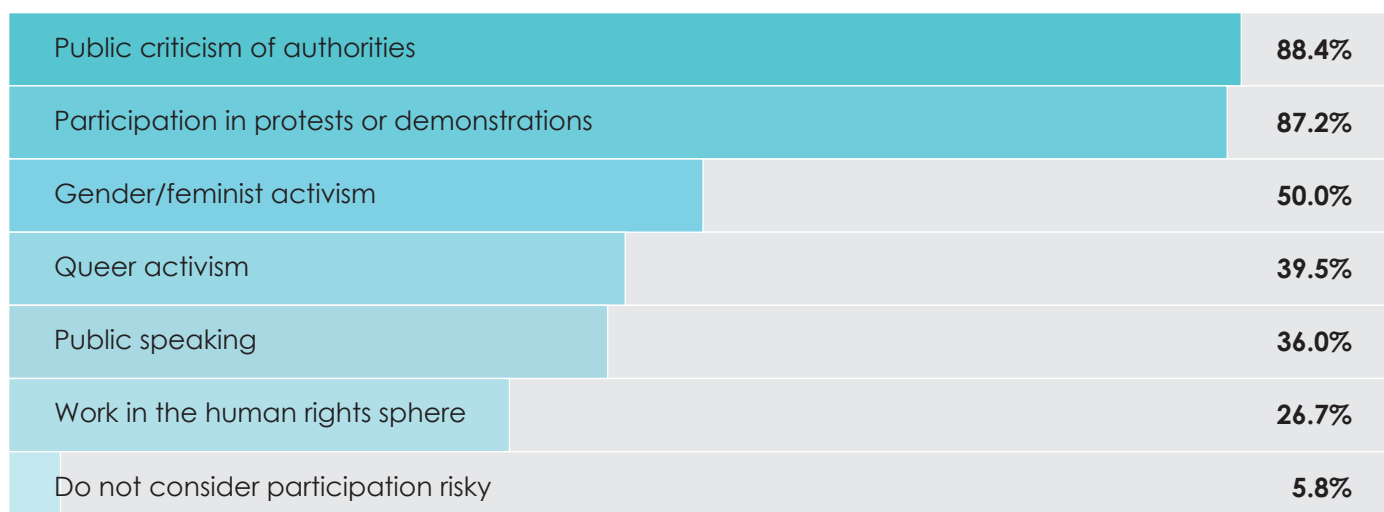
Somewhat agreed	57%
Fully agreed	24.4%
Disagreed	16.3%
Uncertain	2.3%

These findings are analytically significant because they demonstrate that quieter participation is not perceived as marginal or exceptional. Instead, many young people increasingly view reduced visibility, indirect participation, and lower-profile engagement as normal features of contemporary civic life.

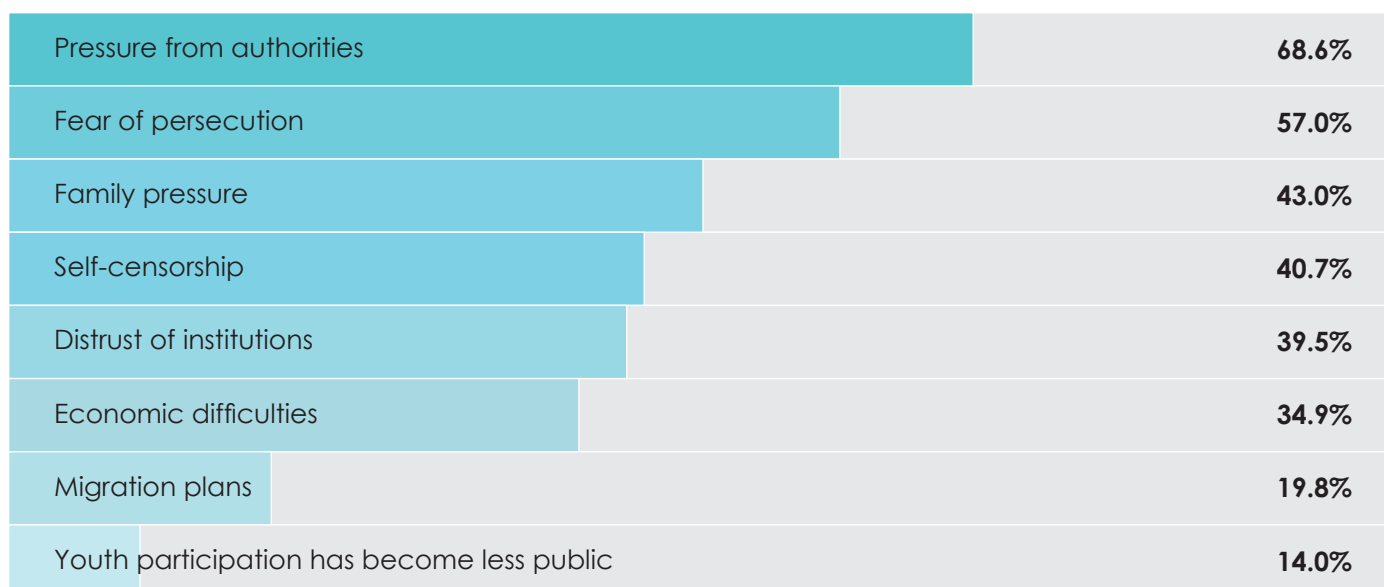
Survey findings also demonstrate that young people clearly distinguish between forms of participation perceived as relatively “safe” and those associated with greater political or social risk. The safest forms of participation were cultural and educational activities (70.9%) and volunteering (66.3%), followed by participation through official structures (48.8%), online activity (41.9%), and closed meetings or discussions (23.3%). At the same time, 5.8% of participants reported that no form of participation feels safe.

Cultural and educational activities	70.9%
Volunteering	66.3%
Official structures	48.8%
Online activity	41.9%
Closed meetings or discussions	23.3%
Participation feels safe	5.8%

At the same time, participants clearly identified forms of participation perceived as particularly risky. Public criticism of authorities (88.4%) and participation in protests or demonstrations (87.2%) were identified as the riskiest forms of engagement. Participants also frequently identified gender/feminist activism (50.0%), queer activism (39.5%), public speaking (36.0%), and work in the human rights sphere (26.7%) as risky forms of participation. Only 5.8% stated that they do not consider participation risky.



Importantly, survey findings also shed light on why youth participation is increasingly becoming less visible or more cautious. The most frequently cited reason was pressure from authorities, selected by 68.6% of participants, followed by fear of persecution (57.0%). Participants also frequently cited family pressure (43.0%), self-censorship (40.7%), distrust of institutions (39.5%), and economic difficulties (34.9%). Smaller but still significant numbers cited migration plans (19.8%). At the same time, 14.0% stated that they do not believe youth participation has become less public.



Taken together, these findings suggest that reduced visibility is not explained solely by direct repression. Instead, participation is increasingly negotiated emotionally, socially, economically, and politically. Young people appear to be constantly distinguishing between:

- safer and riskier topics;
- visible and less visible forms of engagement;
- institutional and confrontational participation;
- public and semi-private spaces of expression;
- and acceptable versus potentially dangerous forms of visibility.

Qualitative discussions strongly reinforced these broader patterns. Importantly, participants did not describe disengagement as complete passivity. Instead, many young people continue to participate socially and civically, but in ways that minimize exposure, reduce risks, and avoid unwanted attention. Activism itself is increasingly shifting from visible mobilization to quieter, adaptive, and strategically managed forms of engagement.

Participants openly described how even ordinary online behavior now requires calculation and caution: “можно

вести социальные сети, делать публикации но, нужно быть осторожным.” (“You can manage social media and make posts, but you need to be careful.”)

Others noted that caution increasingly shapes even seemingly minor actions such as posting photos, tagging people, or expressing opinions online: “нужно осторожно выкладывать фотографии с публичными людьми, делать посты и т.д.” (“You need to carefully post photos with public figures, make posts, and so on.”)

One of the strongest patterns across the findings was the normalization and internalization of self-censorship. Participants repeatedly described fear not as something exceptional, but as something gradually entering everyday behavior, language, routines, and emotional reactions.

One participant reflected: “Почему я пугаюсь в какой-то момент... самоцензура тоже приходит... оказывается я тоже пугаюсь.” (“Why do I suddenly become afraid at some point... self-censorship also comes... it turns out that I am becoming afraid as well.”)

Several participants explicitly framed this process as an act of self-preservation: “Просто это инстинкт самосохранения.” (“It is simply an instinct of self-preservation.”)

Importantly, fear was rarely described solely in terms of personal consequences. Participants repeatedly linked visibility and participation to concerns about family members, workplaces, relatives, and businesses. One participant explained: “боишься за близких тоже... потом начнут докапываться до твоих родителей.” (“You are afraid for your loved ones too... later, they may start targeting your parents.”). The same participant continued: “если у них есть бизнес, то начнут какие-то налоговые проверки.” (“If they have a business, some tax inspections may begin.”)

These findings demonstrate that self-censorship operates not only through direct repression but also through uncertainty, anticipation, and the possibility of consequences. Even without direct punishment, many participants already adjust their behavior in advance. Fear becomes preventive and deeply social.

Participants also repeatedly described how activism itself adapts to these conditions. Rather than openly confronting authorities, many young people increasingly opt for indirect communication strategies, softer language, symbolic messaging, humor, creativity, or less visible forms of participation.

One participant reflected: “если раньше мы через митинги выражали мысли уже сейчас другой подход.” (“If earlier we expressed our thoughts through protests, now there is a different approach.”)

The same participant continued: “мы сейчас учимся как преподнести чтобы от власти не получить что то.” (“Now we are learning how to present things in a way that we do not face consequences from the authorities.”)

This was one of the clearest patterns across the discussions: participation itself is becoming more strategically nuanced. Young people increasingly think not only about what to say but also about how to say it, where to say it, whom to say it to, whether to remain anonymous, and whether visibility is worth the potential consequences.

As a result, silence itself becomes complex. In many cases, silence does not necessarily reflect indifference or apathy. Instead, it often reflects adaptation, risk management, emotional exhaustion, or attempts to stay safe while remaining socially and politically aware.

Participants repeatedly described avoiding visibility altogether by using anonymous accounts, private channels, closed groups, indirect reposting, or by participating “behind the scenes” rather than publicly associating themselves with causes or movements. Others described consciously choosing “safe” topics such as ecology, volunteering, education, or charity over openly political issues.

One participant explained: “если прямо сказать ты можешь не понравиться власти.” (“If you speak directly, the authorities may not like it.”)

Another participant stated: “обязательно что-то прилетит тебе.” (“Something will definitely come back to you.”)

The emotional vocabulary used throughout the discussions is also analytically significant. Words such as:

“осторожно” (“carefully”),	“безопасно” (“safely”)	“завуалированно” (“in a veiled way”)
	“не прилетело” (“so nothing comes back to you”)	and “не высовываться” (“not to stand out”)

appeared repeatedly across interviews and FGDs. This demonstrates how caution increasingly shapes not only participation itself but also the emotional language surrounding civic life.

At the same time, despite fear and caution, participants did not describe themselves as completely silent. Many continue to engage through quieter, indirect, and less visible forms of participation, including:

private conversations;	reposting information;	anonymous accounts;
blogging;	creative expression;	volunteering;
localized initiatives;	closed communities;	and issue-based support networks.

Overall, the findings suggest that silent engagement in Kyrgyzstan should not be interpreted simply as disengagement. Rather, it reflects how young people adapt their participation to conditions marked by uncertainty, perceived surveillance, shrinking safety, and the normalization of self-censorship. In this context, invisibility itself becomes a survival strategy.

6.4. Drivers & barriers shaping youth participation

The findings demonstrate that youth civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan is shaped by a complex mix of motivations, pressures, structural inequalities, emotional realities, and political conditions. Participation does not emerge in a vacuum. Young people continually negotiate their engagement in light of family expectations, economic survival, safety concerns, social norms, peer influence, trust in institutions, access to opportunities, and their personal values and aspirations.

One of the strongest findings across discussions is that participation today increasingly feels conditional rather than guaranteed. Young people often participate not because the environment is supportive, but despite barriers, exhaustion, fear, uncertainty, and eroding trust. At the same time, the findings demonstrate that civic engagement persists because many young people still feel a sense of responsibility toward their communities, want to help others, seek belonging, or search for meaning and agency in rapidly changing social realities.

Values, motivations, and desire for impact

Participants repeatedly reflected on how shifting values and priorities shape youth participation today. Many described a growing tension between collectivist traditions and rising individualism. Older participants often nostalgically contrasted today's youth with earlier generations, whom they viewed as more community-oriented and socially connected: “Если кто-то строил дом, все собирались вместе и помогали.” (“When someone built a house, everyone gathered and helped.”)

At the same time, participants acknowledged that contemporary youth navigate fundamentally different realities shaped by economic pressures, migration, digitalization, and changing aspirations. One of the strongest findings was that civic engagement is often closely linked to personal dreams, dignity, self-development, and a desire to make some form of impact. Young people repeatedly framed their future goals not only in terms of career success but also in terms of contribution to society: “Моя главная цель - стать врачом и помогать людям.” (“My main goal is to become a doctor and help others.”). “Я хочу прославить Кыргызстан на весь мир.” (“I want to make Kyrgyzstan well-known throughout the world.”).

These narratives complicate the simplified assumption that youth are becoming fully apolitical or indifferent. Rather, many young people still express a strong desire to contribute socially, but increasingly through professional success, entrepreneurship, creativity, localized initiatives, volunteering, or community support rather than through formal political participation alone. At the same time, participants repeatedly described how priorities themselves are shifting. Economic stability, self-development, migration, and personal success increasingly shape young people's decisions and opportunities:

“Сейчас ценности молодежи другие... приоритеты молодежи прежде всего сосредоточены на экономической стороне.” (“Youth values are different now... young people’s priorities are primarily focused on the economic side.”).

The findings also demonstrate that youth participation in Kyrgyzstan cannot be understood as ideologically homogeneous. Participants described a wide range of engagement shaped by diverse social, political, religious, and cultural values. Some participants openly reflected on the growing visibility of conservative or state-oriented youth participation: “Есть другая активная часть, которая провластная... ценности глубоко традиционные.” (“There is another active group that is pro-government... with deeply traditional values.”)

At the same time, participants described feminist blogging, ecological activism, creative communities, educational initiatives, religious retreats, spiritual spaces, volunteer networks, and online advocacy. This demonstrates that young people participate in ways shaped by competing understandings of belonging, responsibility, and social change.

Family, peers, and social environment

The findings strongly demonstrate that family and close social environments play a major role in shaping whether young people participate or withdraw. Supportive parents, teachers, partners, friends, and mentors often serve as critical enablers of engagement. Several participants directly connected their participation to emotional support from parents and relatives: “Он всегда говорит мне делать то, что мне нравится.” (“He always tells me to do what I like.”). “Моя мама всегда поддерживала и мотивировала меня.” (“My mother always supported and motivated me.”). “Бабушка всегда поддержала.” (“My grandmother always supported me.”).

At the same time, participants described conservative environments, community judgment, and family resistance as key barriers to participation. In some regions, especially among girls and young women, participation may still be perceived as unnecessary, inappropriate, risky, or socially undesirable.

One participant reflected: “Менталитет Баткена скорее тормозит нас, чем продвигает вперед.” (“The mentality in Batken slows us down more than it moves us forward.”) Another participant explained: “У многих девушек этого выбора просто нет.” (“Many girls simply do not have this choice.”)



Importantly, participants also emphasized that restrictions are reproduced not only by men but also by broader community expectations and internalized social norms: “Проблема не всегда идет только от мужчин.” (“The problem does not always come only from men.”)

At the same time, younger participants repeatedly emphasized that social attitudes are gradually changing and being renegotiated: “Молодёжь постепенно начинает переосмысливать эти нормы.” (“Young people are gradually beginning to rethink these norms.”)

Peer environments also emerged as powerful forces shaping participation. In some cases, friendships, youth communities, and networks became spaces for solidarity, emotional support, and encouragement: “Со стороны друзей я получаю такую дозу поддержки.” (“I receive tremendous support from my friends.”)

At the same time, discussions revealed that peer environments may reinforce conformity, fear of standing out, or emotional pressure. Several participants reflected on fear of self-expression and of being judged: “Раньше я боялся самовыражаться.” (“Before, I was afraid to express myself.”)

Others described how young people often adapt to the dominant group’s expectations to avoid exclusion: “Они активно давят друг друга.” (“They actively pressure each other.”)

These findings demonstrate that participation is shaped not only by political structures but also by emotional dynamics within families, friendships, communities, and youth environments.

Economic pressure, migration, and survival

Economic realities emerged as one of the strongest forces shaping participation. Participants repeatedly emphasized that many young people prioritize work, migration, education, and financial stability over civic participation because survival demands it.

“Молодым людям часто приходится ходить на работу, и здесь деньги важнее.” (“Young people often have to work, and here, money becomes more important.”)

Several participants openly acknowledged that young people increasingly engage where they see practical opportunities, access to networking and resources, or economic benefits: “Если мы создаем бизнес... зал будет полон.” (“If we organize something around business... the hall will be full.”)

These findings suggest that civic participation cannot be analyzed in isolation from broader economic precarity, unemployment, unequal opportunities, and survival-oriented realities. Participation often competes directly with exhaustion, unstable employment, migration aspirations, caregiving responsibilities, and long-term uncertainty.

Lack of opportunities and unequal access

Participants repeatedly described structural barriers that limit youth participation, especially outside larger cities. Lack of spaces, funding, transportation, access to information, training opportunities, youth centers, and institutional support emerged consistently across discussions.

“Для молодежи практически нет места.” (“There is practically no place for youth.”). Several participants described difficulty organizing even basic activities because of limited accessible infrastructure: “Мы не можем найти подходящее место.” (“We cannot find a suitable place.”).

Urban-rural inequalities also came up repeatedly throughout the discussions. Participants from regions often reported fewer opportunities, less access to information, and lower institutional support compared to those in Bishkek and larger urban centers: “В городе для молодежи больше возможностей.” (“In the city, there are more opportunities for youth.”)

Participants repeatedly emphasized the need for:

more educational opportunities;	practical trainings;	safe youth spaces;
public speaking skills;	accessible community centers;	and stronger long-term support systems for youth initiatives.

The findings, therefore, show that participation is influenced by both motivation and disparities in access to infrastructure, information, mobility, and institutional support.

Distrust, disillusionment, and uncertainty

Distrust emerged as another major factor shaping participation. Many participants expressed skepticism toward institutions, political processes, official consultations, and formal participation mechanisms. Participants repeatedly questioned whether youth voices are genuinely heard: “Мы не знаем, сколько из этих сообщений доходит.” (“We do not know how many of these messages actually reach anyone.”)

Others described frustration with symbolic participation processes, in which youth are formally invited to participate, yet their input produces little visible change: “Они изо всех сил стараются не признавать свою вину.” (“They try their best not to acknowledge their responsibility.”)

Corruption and lack of transparency also came up repeatedly throughout discussions: “Честность и прозрачность воспринимаются как слабость.” (“Honesty and transparency are perceived as a weakness.”)

Importantly, distrust was not limited to the government alone. Participants also described broader social distrust of leadership, institutions, collective processes, and public discourse.

Several participants directly linked declining participation to growing disappointment and disillusionment: “Поскольку доверие исчезло, они взяли себя в руки и начали действовать сами.” (“Since trust disappeared, they took matters into their own hands and started acting on their own.”)

Despite barriers, distrust, fear, economic precarity, and a shrinking sense of safety, the findings demonstrate that many young people remain willing to engage in the civic and public life of Kyrgyzstan in the future. Overall, 57.0% of

participants said they plan to participate actively in civic or public life in the future, while another 37.2% selected “maybe.” Only 5.8% said they do not plan to participate.

These findings are particularly important because they complicate simplified narratives of youth apathy or total disengagement. Even under conditions marked by uncertainty, caution, distrust, and exhaustion, many young people still express interest in contributing to society, helping communities, participating in public life, or staying connected to civic life in some way.

At the same time, the large proportion of participants selecting “maybe” is analytically significant. It suggests that future participation is conditional and negotiated rather than guaranteed. Young people often continue to balance civic engagement with economic survival, migration aspirations, emotional exhaustion, safety concerns, and uncertainty about whether participation can genuinely produce meaningful change.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that youth civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan is shaped by a constant negotiation between motivation and exhaustion, hope and distrust, solidarity and individual survival, and participation and uncertainty. Young people continue to search for ways to participate, contribute, and express themselves, but increasingly do so under conditions marked by economic precarity, unequal opportunities, emotional pressure, eroding trust, and growing caution surrounding visibility and public engagement.

6.5. Inequalities & exclusion (including uneven participation)

The findings demonstrate that youth civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan is deeply unequal and shaped by overlapping structural, social, economic, cultural, and geographic factors. Participation is not experienced equally across gender, geography, socio-economic background, disability, language, social identity, or access to education and opportunities. While some young people have access to networks, training sessions, mobility, visibility, and supportive environments, others face layers of restrictions that significantly shape whether participation feels possible, safe, or meaningful.

Survey findings strongly reinforce broader patterns of unequal participation and exclusion. Participants most frequently identified youth with disabilities (48.8%), low-income youth (47.7%), young women and girls (46.5%), rural youth (40.7%), and queer youth (39.5%) as groups facing the most significant restrictions and barriers in civic and public life. Ethnic minorities were also repeatedly identified as experiencing unequal access and participation barriers (23.3%). At the same time, only 8.1% selected the option that “nobody faces special restrictions,” indicating that most participants recognize the inequalities and uneven conditions shaping youth participation today.

Youth with disabilities	48.8%
Low-income youth	47.7%
Young women and girls	46.5%
Rural youth	40.7%
Queer youth	39.5%
Ethnic minorities	23.3%
“Nobody faces special restrictions”	8.1%

These findings are analytically important because they demonstrate that participation is not experienced equally across social groups. Instead, access to civic and public participation is deeply shaped by overlapping structural inequalities related to gender, geography, disability, socio-economic status, social norms, and opportunities and support systems.

Importantly, inequalities in participation are not only about access to formal opportunities. They also shape confidence, visibility, the ability to speak publicly, access to information, emotional safety, mobility, social legitimacy, and

whether young people feel they have the right to participate at all.

Gender dynamics

Gender emerged as one of the strongest and most complex dimensions shaping youth civic engagement. Across discussions, participants repeatedly described how women and men experience participation differently because of social expectations, traditional gender roles, unequal responsibilities, and cultural pressures.

Several participants openly stated that women continue to carry disproportionate domestic and emotional responsibilities: “У женщин много обязанностей – забота о детях, ведении домашнего хозяйства, приготовлении пищи.” (“Women have many responsibilities, including caring for children, housekeeping, and cooking.”)

Another participant reflected: “Даже если вечером приходят домой уставшими, заботятся о детях и о своих мужьях.” (“Even when they come home tired in the evening, they still take care of their children and their husbands.”)

At the same time, participants repeatedly emphasized that women today are often highly active socially, professionally, and civically, despite these pressures: “Сейчас женщины и девушки более активно принимают участие в обществе.” Сейчас я думаю, что девочки в основном активны, девочки участвуют во всем, а мальчики менее активны.” (“Now women and girls participate more actively in society.”). (“Now I think girls are mostly active, and participate in everything, while boys are less active.”)

Several participants directly connected women’s activism to the realities of everyday survival and care work: “Женщины более активны. Потому что именно женщины строят свою повседневную жизнь.” (“Women are more active because it is women who build everyday life.”)

Participants repeatedly described women as more visible in volunteering, mobilization, education, self-development, social initiatives, and community organizing. Some discussions reflected admiration for women’s ability to simultaneously manage work, activism, and domestic labor: “Они работают и дома, и вне дома, они стараются.” (“They work both at home and outside the home, they really try.”)

At the same time, these narratives revealed how gendered expectations become normalized. Women’s participation is often accepted as long as it remains tied to care, education, community support, or social issues rather than to visible political leadership.

Several participants openly reproduced traditional gender roles: “Девушки должны создавать семью и сидеть дома.” (“Girls should create a family and stay at home.”)

Others emphasized that men are expected to hold leadership and political roles: “Мужчины часто в лидерстве и политически активно участвуют в решении проблем.” (“Men are often in leadership roles and actively participate in solving problems politically.”)

Meanwhile, women were more often associated with “acceptable” social spheres: “женщины участвуют, если социальная сфера, образование.” (“Women participate when it concerns the social sphere or education.”)



One of the strongest findings was that early marriage, family pressure, and unequal expectations continue to limit girls’ opportunities: “Разница в возможностях молодых девушек и юношей огромна.” (“The difference in opportunities between young women and young men is enormous.”)



Participants repeatedly connected this inequality to early marriage and the pressure surrounding womanhood: “Когда ты выйдешь замуж?” (“When will you get married?”). “Многие девушки не могут продолжать учебу и работать.” (“Many girls cannot continue their education or work.”)



Several participants noted that after marriage, girls often disappear from public participation spaces: “Девушки в студенческие годы активные. После брака становятся пассивными.” (“Girls are active during student years. After marriage, they become passive.”)



At the same time, discussions revealed important contradictions and transformations. Some participants argued that women today may be more motivated to participate because they increasingly seek economic independence, education, and autonomy: “Они больше не ждут мужчин.” (“They no longer wait for men.”). Another participant reflected: “Девушки преуспевают во всем.” (“Girls succeed at everything.”)



Importantly, several participants also highlighted that women themselves may reproduce restrictive norms toward other women. Discussions touched on internalized misogyny, distrust, and pressure from older women on younger women who participate publicly or politically: “Это может проявляться в форме недоверия, обесценивания или сомнений в её компетентности.” (“This can manifest as distrust, devaluation, or doubts about her competence.”)



At the same time, some participants described women as being perceived as “safer” mobilizers and communicators than men: “Люди могут больше доверять женщинам, чем мужчинам.” (“People may trust women more than men.”)



Overall, the findings suggest that women and girls in Kyrgyzstan face both stronger structural barriers and greater social pressure, alongside high levels of participation and resilience.

This contradiction became one of the central themes across the discussions.

Urban-rural differences and uneven civic ecosystems

Urban-rural differences emerged as another major dimension of inequality shaping youth civic engagement. Participants repeatedly emphasized that opportunities, visibility, resources, infrastructure, and even the meaning of participation differ significantly between cities and villages.

Many participants described cities as places that have:

more institutions;	seminars and trainings;	internet access;
youth organizations;	educational opportunities;	and broader exposure to ideas and networks.

As one participant explained: “В городе для молодежи больше возможностей.” (“In the city, there are more opportunities for youth.”). At the same time, discussions reflected that cities are associated with fragmentation, individualism, and weaker collective ties: “Мы, городские жители, эгоистичны.” (“We, city residents, are selfish.”)



Several participants contrasted urban individualism with stronger collective practices in villages: “Жители деревни всегда собираются вместе.” (“Village residents always gather together.”). “В селах, скорее всего, молодежь помогает своему сообществу через АШАР.” (“In villages, young people most likely help their communities through ashar.”)



Importantly, rural participation was often described not as formal activism but as collective labor, mutual aid, religious and community solidarity, sports, or practical problem-solving.

At the same time, participants repeatedly emphasized that rural youth face significantly fewer opportunities and stronger social pressure: “В селах у молодежи практически нет голоса.” (“In villages, youth practically have no voice.”)



Another participant reflected: “Даже на личную жизнь у них нет права голоса.” (“They do not even have a say on their own lives.”)



Participants also repeatedly connected rural inequality to:

weak infrastructure;	limited educational access;	lack of internet;
pressure from relatives;		and dependency on local social hierarchies.

One participant explained: “Даже в некоторых селах нету интернета.”
 (“In some villages, there is not even internet.”)



At the same time, several participants complicated simplistic urban-rural binaries by arguing that rural youth may actually demonstrate stronger collectivism, mobilization capacity, and practical participation: “Наша сельская молодежь более активна, чем городская.” (“Our rural youth are more active than urban youth.”)

Others explained this as a necessity: “Поскольку потребности сельских детей больше, активность начинается именно там.” (“Because the needs of rural children are greater, activity begins there.”)

These findings demonstrate that rural youth are not necessarily less active. Rather, their participation often takes different forms, shaped by collective survival, local responsibilities, and community interdependence.

Socio-economic inequality and participation

Economic precarity emerged repeatedly throughout discussions as a major factor shaping who can participate and how. Participants emphasized that many young people prioritize survival, work, and migration over civic participation. “Молодежь находит работу, чтобы прокормиться.” (“Young people find work to survive.”)

Several participants openly questioned whether activism is realistic under conditions of economic instability: “Им приходится решать повседневные проблемы.” (“They have to solve everyday problems.”)

Migration also repeatedly appeared as a response to inequality and limited opportunities: “Большинство горожан много думают об изучении языка, поездке за границу и жизни там.” (“Most urban residents think a lot about learning languages, going abroad, and living there.”)

Participants also described how participation itself increasingly depends on access to money, free time, education, and networks. Several noted that young people may engage more actively when opportunities are linked to professional development, stipends, networking, or career growth.

Marginalized identities and exclusion

The findings also demonstrate that some groups remain systematically excluded from meaningful participation. Participants repeatedly mentioned people with disabilities, young people from low-income backgrounds, queer youth, ethnic minorities, and socially isolated individuals as groups facing additional barriers.

One participant reflected: “Лицам с ограниченными возможностями здоровья сложно участвовать так как не созданы условия.” (“People with disabilities find it difficult to participate because conditions are not made for them.”)

Others emphasized that many young people simply cannot prioritize participation while struggling to survive: “Им приходится решать повседневные проблемы, а не куда-то ходить.” (“They have to solve everyday problems rather than go somewhere.”)

Several participants also reflected on social stigma and exclusion: “Есть хейтеры, которые могут негативно высказываться.” (“There are haters who may speak negatively.”)

Importantly, discussions around exclusion often returned to the broader issue of unequal conditions for participation. Participants repeatedly emphasized that participation requires access, safety, support, confidence, time, mobility, and recognition.

Without these conditions, many young people remain formally “included” yet are practically excluded from meaningful civic life

Overall, the findings suggest that youth civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan is shaped by deeply uneven social realities. Participation is not only about willingness or motivation; it is also about who has access to safety, support, information, economic stability, networks, mobility, and the social legitimacy to participate openly. These inequalities profoundly shape whose voices become visible, whose participation remains hidden, and whose experiences remain marginalized within civic and political spaces.

6.6. Perceived impact and the limits of structural change

One of the strongest contradictions emerging throughout the research is that many young people in Kyrgyzstan continue to participate socially and civically, while increasingly doubting whether participation can lead to bigger structural or political change. Across interviews and FGDs, participants often spoke about hope and disappointment almost simultaneously. They described local successes, community support, educational initiatives, fundraising, volunteering, and personal growth, but also frustration, exhaustion, distrust, and the sense that larger systems remain unchanged despite participation.

Importantly, this does not mean young people have stopped caring. On the contrary, many participants still described civic engagement as meaningful and necessary — especially when it helps solve immediate, practical problems in everyday life.

Participation was often discussed using concrete and tangible examples:

helping communities;	supporting vulnerable families;	creating educational opportunities;
organizing local initiatives;	volunteering;	taking environmental action;
fundraising;	or helping young people access new skills and professions.	

One participant directly explained: “гражданское участие становится особенно важным, потому что оно может влиять на такие базовые вещи, как доступ к образованию и равные возможности.” (“Civic participation becomes especially important because it can influence such basic things such as access to education and equal opportunities.”)

Many participants spoke proudly about local initiatives and youth-led efforts that create visible change within communities. Discussions about digital skills and new professions emerged particularly strongly, especially in regions where young people increasingly seek independent ways to create opportunities for themselves.

Several participants highlighted that youth in Batken are increasingly developing skills in SMM, mobilography, and digital entrepreneurship: “В Баткене также много специалистов по SMM... молодежь в этом деле очень хорошо разбирается.” (“There are now many SMM specialists in Batken... young people are highly skilled in this field.”)

Others described how young people increasingly study independently, purchase online courses, create projects, and support each other professionally: “Они учатся в этой области, открывают свои собственные пространства, покупают курсы.” (“They study in this field, create their own spaces, and buy courses.”)

Importantly, many participants no longer described “impact” in terms of major political victories or dramatic systemic transformation. Instead, impact was often understood as gradual shifts in everyday life, social attitudes, education, digital access, and opportunities.

Several participants reflected on how internet access and social media gradually change people’s thinking: “Взгляды людей совершенно отличаются от тех, что были 5-6 лет назад.” (“People’s views are completely different from what they were 5–6 years ago.”)

Another participant explained: “Большинство молодых людей видят много всего в интернете, а затем меняются к лучшему.” (“Most young people see many things on the internet and then change for the better.”)

Discussions of solidarity and mutual aid also appeared repeatedly. Some participants described fundraising campaigns, collective support, and community donations as key forms of social impact: “Можно создавать группы, и молодежь может делать пожертвования.” (“You can create groups, and young people can donate.”)

These examples suggest that many young people continue to see participation as meaningful when it produces visible and immediate improvements in people's lives and communities.

At the same time, participants expressed different understandings of what “meaningful participation” actually entails. Those connected to institutional or state structures often framed their contributions in terms of discipline, employment, education, entrepreneurship, and participation in state-supported development programmes.

Several participants emphasized that youth engagement is valuable when it contributes to social stability, professionalization, and economic productivity: “Молодые люди должны стать полезными для общества гражданами.” (“Young people should become citizens who are useful to society.”)

Government internship programs, vocational training, and entrepreneurship initiatives were repeatedly mentioned as examples of positive youth engagement: Сейчас проект ‘Молодежная стажировка’ работает уже 2 года.” (“The ‘Youth Internship’ project has now been operating for 2 years.”). “Государство работает над специальной программой развития предпринимательства.” (“The state is developing a specialized entrepreneurship program.”)

Within these narratives, participation was often framed less in terms of rights, representation, or political voice and more in terms of productivity, discipline, professional growth, and contribution to national development.

At the same time, one of the strongest emotional patterns across discussions was a growing skepticism about structural political change. Many participants openly questioned whether youth participation genuinely changes the power structure or decision-making.

This became particularly evident in discussions surrounding previous revolutions. One participant directly reflected: “Это просто использование молодежи как ресурс на время.” (“It was simply the use of youth as a temporary resource.”)

The same participant continued: “Молодежь делает революцию, а почему-то остались те же ребята на верхушке.” (“Young people make the revolution, but somehow the same people remain at the top.”)

This quote captures one of the central tensions evident throughout the research. Many young people continue to participate socially and civically, yet increasingly doubt whether visible political participation actually leads to long-term power redistribution or meaningful systemic change.

Several participants directly linked this disappointment to migration aspirations and to a loss of faith in local opportunities: “Продвинутая молодежь... в основном куда едут? На Запад, в Америку.” (“Advanced youth... where do they mostly go? To the West, to America.”)

Importantly, this skepticism does not necessarily translate into complete apathy or disengagement. Instead, many participants seem to have lower expectations about what participation can realistically achieve. **Rather than imagining participation as a revolution or large-scale political transformation, many increasingly focus on:**

solving local problems;	helping specific communities;	supporting people directly;
creating small opportunities;	or improving individual lives.	

One participant reflected: “маленькие люди могут внести большой вклад в развитие общества.” (“Small people can make a big contribution to society's development.”)

Another participant said: “Если я разбогатею, я помогу людям, которые страдают.” (“If I become rich, I will help people who are suffering.”)

These findings suggest that perceptions of impact are shifting away from collective political transformation toward localized, individualized, and practical forms of contribution. Across discussions, participants often expressed hope for gradual social change, frustration with political realities, belief in local impact, and skepticism about structural transformation.

This contradiction itself became one of the study's central analytical findings.

Young people continue to organize, volunteer, help communities, build initiatives, learn new skills, support each other, and adapt to new forms of engagement. However, many increasingly do so without a strong belief that formal political systems will fundamentally change in response to their participation.

As a result, participation itself increasingly becomes pragmatic, localized, emotionally cautious, and survival-oriented rather than openly transformative or revolutionary.

Overall, the findings suggest that youth civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan continues to have a meaningful impact across interpersonal, community, cultural, educational, and local levels. At the same time, many young people increasingly perceive a growing disconnect between participation and structural political change. This gap profoundly shapes how participation is imagined, practiced, and valued today.

6.7. Insights: What do these findings mean?

The following research has gathered some important insights. The most significant insight is the following: youth civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan remains in place and hasn't disappeared or become passive.

What this research offers is a complex reality. While youth participation and engagement may appear less visible than in previous years, youth in Kyrgyzstan continue to engage in their communities, support social causes, volunteer, organize initiatives and projects, share information, participate online, and respond to issues they truly relate to or care about. What has changed is not just youth's willingness to participate, but the conditions under which their participation takes place (a factor that is often overlooked).

At the same time, the research indicates that visibility itself has become increasingly complex. Many participants described carefully weighing risks before speaking up publicly, expressing opinions online, joining campaigns, or associating themselves with particular situations. Across in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and survey responses, young people repeatedly distinguished between "safe" and "risky" (dangerous) forms of participation. As a result, participation is increasingly shaped by assessments of safety, visibility, and potential consequences.

One of the strongest patterns identified in the research is the normalization of self-censorship and its integration into the lives of youth. Participants revealed that self-censorship is not limited to activists or human rights defenders. Self-censorship has become a common experience for many individuals and an important part of navigating public life. Many participants described learning to phrase their words carefully, avoiding certain topics, especially those related to politics, limiting their visibility, or choosing indirect ways to express concerns, such as through local media channels. What emerges from these discussions is not merely fear, but adaptation. Therefore, youth continue to participate and engage, but often in ways that reduce risks to themselves and, importantly, to their families, peers, and communities.

The findings also challenge narrow or limited understandings of civic engagement. If participation is measured only by protests, advocacy campaigns, public mobilization, or formal civil society structures (such as NGOs), an important part of modern youth engagement remains invisible and unrecognized. Many young people described participating through volunteering, mutual aid, fundraising (including crowdfunding), community support, educational initiatives, online spaces, creative expression, and informal solidarity networks of solidarity. These forms of engagement may be quieter and less visible, yet they remain meaningful.

At the same time, the research highlights how uneven participation persists. Access to civic engagement is shaped by gender, geography, socio-economic status, disability, access to information, mobility, and social support. Young women and girls, rural youth, youth with disabilities, queer youth, and young people from low-income backgrounds often face additional barriers that affect whether participation feels possible, safe, or worthwhile. Therefore, participation is not simply a matter of motivation or interest, as it is shaped by unequal access to opportunities, resources, and safe, supportive environments.

Another important insight concerns how young people understand impact. Many participants continued to believe

that participation can make a difference in people's lives and communities. They spoke about helping others, supporting local initiatives, creating opportunities, and addressing everyday problems. Yet many expressed skepticism about the possibility of broader structural change. The findings suggest that while belief in local impact remains relatively strong, trust in formal political systems, institutional responsiveness, and accountability is often much weaker. As a result, participation increasingly becomes localized, practical, and focused on achievable change rather than on large-scale national transformation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that youth civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan is not disappearing, but transforming. It is becoming more adaptive, more selective, and often less visible. Rather than interpreting quieter participation as evidence of disinterest or disengagement, the findings support viewing it as a response to shifting political, social, and economic realities. In this context, participation is increasingly framed by questions of safety, belonging, opportunities (including economic ones), and impact.

Finally, the research underscores the need for a broader understanding of civic engagement in restrictive environments. Young people continue to participate, contribute, care, organize, and imagine different futures, full of hope for positive change. However, they increasingly do so in ways that may not always align with traditional definitions of activism or civic participation. Recognizing these emerging forms of engagement is essential to understanding how young people continue to exercise agency amid uncertainty, inequality, and shrinking civic space.

Conclusion

This research suggests that youth civic engagement in Kyrgyzstan is not disappearing. Rather, it is evolving under the pressure of shrinking civic space, economic barriers and uncertainty, social expectations, unequal opportunities, and shifting ideas about safety and visibility.

The youth of Kyrgyzstan continue to participate in many ways, including volunteering, online engagement, community support, environmental initiatives, educational spaces, local problem-solving, creative expression, mutual aid, fundraising, and informal networks of solidarity. However, many of these forms don't always look like "traditional" activism. They may be quieter, less visible, more localized, or more indirect. This is why youth participation can be easily underestimated if we only look for protests, public campaigns, NGO- or government-related engagement and work, or formalized political engagement.

One of the strongest findings of the research is that visibility itself has become more complicated. Many young people carefully assess what can be said, where it can be said, how publicly it can be expressed, and what consequences may follow. Self-censorship, caution, and strategic silence are increasingly part of how young people navigate civic life. This does not mean that young people do not care. In many cases, it means they are trying to stay safe while remaining socially and politically aware.

The findings also show that participation is deeply unequal. Gender, geography, disability, socio-economic status, language, access to information, family support, and mobility shape who can participate and how safely. Young women and girls, rural youth, youth with disabilities, queer youth, ethnic minorities, and low-income youth often face additional barriers. At the same time, the research shows that these groups are not only "vulnerable" or "excluded"; many are active, creative, and resilient, and often participate under more challenging conditions.

Additionally, economic pressure and migration strongly shape youth participation. Many young people want to contribute to society, but they also need to study, work, support families, consider migration, and build personal stability. From this perspective, youth participation increasingly competes with survival. This doesn't make young people passive; it actually shows that civic engagement cannot be separated from broader questions of economic security, dignity, and future prospects.

At the same time, it is worth noting that young people still believe in change, especially at the local and community levels. They continue to help others, launch initiatives, learn new skills, and support one another. However, many are also skeptical about whether participation can influence larger political systems or produce lasting structural change. This gap between everyday engagement and structural transformation is one of the most significant tensions identified in the research.

Overall, the current research advocates a more comprehensive and realistic view of youth civic engagement in restrictive environments. Young people in Kyrgyzstan continue to care, participate, adapt, and contribute. Yet they increasingly do so through forms shaped by caution, inequality, pragmatism, digital spaces, community care, and survival. Recognizing these forms is necessary to support youth participation in ways that are safer, more inclusive, more equal, and more meaningful.

Recommendations

The following research offers recommendations for stakeholders seeking to enhance youth civic engagement across Kyrgyzstan. We believe these practical recommendations can effectively support youth civic participation in Kyrgyzstan, especially in the context of a shrinking civic space.



FOR GOVERNMENT AND STATE INSTITUTIONS

- Create safer, more meaningful conditions for youth participation by protecting the freedoms of expression, association, peaceful assembly, and public participation. Young people should not feel that civic engagement, criticism, or public expression may lead to punishment, pressure, or consequences for themselves, their families, or their peers.
- Strengthen youth participation mechanisms beyond symbolic inclusion of youth. Youth councils, public hearings, municipal consultations, and state-supported youth programs should include clear feedback loops, transparency, and evidence that young people's input is genuinely considered in decision-making at all levels.
- Invest in youth infrastructure outside Bishkek and other large cities, such as Osh, including youth centers or hubs, community spaces, accessible public venues, internet access, transportation support, and local educational opportunities.
- Pay particular attention to rural youth, young women and girls, youth with disabilities, low-income youth, queer youth, and ethnic minority groups. Youth policy should address unequal access to participation and ensure the inclusion of diverse youth groups.
- Support economic opportunities for young people, including employment, internships, skills development, entrepreneurship, and decent work. Civic engagement becomes more possible when young people aren't forced to choose between participation and mere survival.



FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSOS)

- Recognize and support diverse forms of youth participation, including online activism, informal initiatives, mutual aid, creative expression, local volunteering, community care, and less visible forms of engagement.
- Create safer spaces for participation where young people can speak honestly without pressure, judgment, punishment, or forced visibility. Not all participation needs to be public to be meaningful.
- Invest in long-term accompaniment, not just one-time activities. Young people need mentoring, peer support, protection, well-being support, digital security, and opportunities to grow over time.
- Work beyond the same visible urban circles. More intentional outreach is needed to rural youth, young people from marginalized communities, youth with disabilities, young women and girls, and those not already connected to NGOs or donor-funded spaces.
- Avoid normalizing or romanticizing burnout, sacrifice, or risk as signs of "real activism, engagement, or participation." Youth participation should be sustainable, caring, and emotionally safe.



FOR DONORS AND INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

- Support long-term, flexible, and locally grounded approaches to youth participation rather than prioritizing short project cycles. Young people need continuity, and civic engagement requires sustainability. Building trust, participation, leadership, and community ownership takes time and cannot be achieved by short-term interventions alone.
- Support regional and rural youth ecosystems, including local youth organizations, informal groups, community initiatives, and grassroots spaces outside Bishkek and Osh.
- Include safety, well-being, digital security, and risk mitigation as core components of youth civic engagement programs, especially in shrinking civic spaces.
- Recognize and commission frameworks for low-visibility and adaptive forms of participation as legitimate civic engagement. Donor frameworks should not value only public campaigns, visibility, indicators, or formal outcomes.

To effectively support youth civic engagement, all interested parties must challenge their assumptions about how participation should manifest and focus on the realities young people face today. Policies, programs, and funding must adapt to the evolving nature of engagement, the unequal conditions that shape participation, and the broader social, economic, and political factors that influence young people's lives. **Only then can we make participation not only more visible but also more accessible, meaningful, and sustainable.**

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Annexes

Annex 1. Survey Questionnaire (Kyrgyz & Russian)

The questionnaire used for the online survey conducted as part of this research.

Access here: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/15Ofhl0DkhRqZqTWghMiYX2Z5D2Y3cf3bp_Ahy-PV3e8/preview

Annex 2. Focus Group Discussion Guide (Kyrgyz & Russian)

The semi-structured discussion guide used during the six focus group discussions.

Access here: <https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1c9-0ijEUHA5si7CHot8ubG-gKfyOB96K>

Annex 3. In-Depth Interview Guide (Kyrgyz & Russian)

The semi-structured interview guide used for the in-depth interviews.

Access here: https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1KcA-YIHS-zb9T9_vRlop1VTY2Dmg0zLf

Annex 4. Research Ethics and Informed Consent (Kyrgyz & Russian)

Participant information sheet and informed consent form used throughout the research process.

Access here: <https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1Ww1kJY9N-Uvv2o1We6rc02T3LqtTwEy->

Annex 5. Data Collection Overview (Kyrgyz, Russian, English)

Access here: <https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1IDlg3-uYm5ASVL1fSsWX9eAk35VxGFup>

Data collection period - February - May 2026

Research locations:

- Osh
- Batken
- Talas
- Issyk-Kul
- Bishkek/Chüy
- Manas (Jalal-Abad)

