“Surrealism is maintained by the feeling that time seems to have stopped for the inhabitants of these settlements. Any conversation with researchers was about how good it was before and how bad it is right now. The term “ghost town” reflects well the nature of these settlements because they exist as ghosts of the past, as the last living monuments to Soviet ideology, live ruins of the “empire”, said Emil Nasritdinov, teacher of Anthropology, AUCA (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan), in an article written for cabar.asia.

In this paper, I analyze the de-urbanization as the downside of urbanization through the discussion of dialectical vision of the Soviet modernity with a focus on its “dark” side. Using the examples of deserted mining towns of Kyrgyzstan, I observe how the collapse of the Soviet industry led to the formation of the ruins on the periphery of the Soviet Union. In my main hypothesis, I suggest that a sudden collapse (rather than gradual transformation) produce gaps in time and space in the form of: a) the ruins and empty spaces, and b) fragmented identities and nostalgic stories. The ethnographic part studies these two dimensions in six mining towns of Kyrgyzstan.

INTRODUCTION

Today, there has been a lot of talk about the process of urbanization in the world. More and more people live in cities, and it causes a lot of interest both in the scientific community and among the public. However, focusing on the big cities as points of attraction of the population, we often forget about what is happening in small towns. Kyrgyzstan is also a vivid example of urbanization and rapid population growth and the expansion of large cities such as Bishkek, Osh, Jalal-Abad and others. However, the focus of analysts often omits small cities of the country with their exciting and often very tragic story. What is happening in such cities during the past two decades can be called de-urbanization – they are prime examples of how cities are losing their population and becoming a kind of villages or simply ruins. In this article, I invite readers to consider the de-urbanization as a process of reverse urbanization on the example of Kyrgyzstan’s mining towns. As an explanation of de-urbanization, I propose to look at the fate of the settlements within the discourse of the Soviet modernity.

This article describes the life of people in the mining towns of Kyrgyzstan, which had been founded in the 1930-1960s, thrived for decades, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, they lost almost all of its population due to the decline of the mining industry. My focus is on the later part of the decline, and my introductory thesis is that if gradual transformations lead to more organic metamorphosis in society, the sudden crises and crashes, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, lead to ruptures, crises and human tragedies. I am particularly
interested in the gaps in space and human biographies, and in how these two types of gaps generate specific types of voids, fragmentation and nostalgia.

The Kirghiz SSR was one of the republics that produced for the Soviet Union various kinds of raw materials: coal, minerals, metals, and even uranium. About two dozen of small towns were founded from scratch, often in very remote deadlock areas. The raw materials were sent to factories in Russia, as well as in the neighboring republics of Central Asia. Due to the nature of functioning of Soviet industry, many of these mining towns were not profitable and existed at the expense of subsidies from Moscow. These small towns received special “Moscow’s support”, and in times of deficit, one could find the goods in these cities that were not available even in the capital city of Frunze. On top of that, the miners in these cities received salaries that were five or six times higher than normal salary at that time. The Soviet government sent engineers, specialists and miners from Russia to such cities. Local experts with relevant education also came there to work. As a result, those cities developed quite well, were full of life, had the necessary infrastructure, hospitals, houses of culture and recreation, etc. During many years, people were building these cities, working there, planning to retire at the proper time and live well at their old age.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and its industrial system, Moscow lost interest in supporting low-profit mining industries on the periphery located on the territory of independent states. Within two or three years, mines stopped working, and almost all of them were closed. The future suddenly seemed bleak and realizing it, people began to leave those settlements. In some cities, nine out of ten people left to the capital of the republic or to Russia. Mines and factories have been privatized through various kinds of corruption schemes, and the new owners, in order to generate profit, sold high-technological equipment at the price of metal, and factories and shops were dismantled, and almost each brick was sold. Even multi-storey houses were dismantled. And every destroyed building took the hopes of residents away, the hopes for the revival of industry. Migration of the population in these cities increased. Those who remained live today in the ruins of industrial and residential buildings and to some extent, on the ruins of their own identity.

In the world, you can find many similar examples of the decline of industrial cities. Global economic, financial and oil crises that shook the world in 1980-1990s caused the decline in many industries producing mass production and in the mining industry in America and Europe. This period is known as the post-Fordist transition to a flexible industry and the knowledge economy. The post-industrial decline in this period could be observed in many cities of the West that used to be prosperous in the past (Allen, 1996). One of the most famous examples is the city of Detroit, which had grown thanks to the well-known company
“General Motors” that produced cars. Today it is a half-empty town with memories of its glorious past (Boyle, 2001). Cities like Detroit are often called “ghost towns” – a term that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, describing depopulated mining towns of America. Today, many of these towns have become tourist attractions (DeLaser, 1999). Some places in Europe, such as the Ruhr region in Germany, can also serve as an example of how industrial areas have been transformed into amusement parks (Barndt, 2010).

James Ferguson in his book “The expectations of our time” (1999) describes the counter-urbanization, de-industrialization and even de-zambinization of Zambian mining towns that once embodied the promise of modernity for this African country that used to move at full speed toward progress and improvement of living standards. However, the promise turned out to be a myth. Ferguson describes how changes in communication technologies led to a sharp decline in global demand for copper and the collapse of the Zambian copper-mining industry, rampant unemployment and the impoverishment of a large part of the population. The author describes how the Zambian crisis was not just an economic crisis but also a crisis of meaning for people whose hopes for the future progress had been cheated.

We can continue the idea of a “crisis of meaning” on the example of the discussion of contemporary identity. Serguei Oushakine (2004) describes how the Soviet “way of life” or the order of things was important to create a new contemporary Soviet man. Soviet identity has been formed through the creation of special working conditions, education, social practices, as well as a managed and highly controlled space. The identity of the Soviet working man was formed in an industrial environment of factories and mines. Describing the post-Soviet changes, Oushakine wrote that “dramatic dismantling of the Soviet order of things has caused a deep crisis of collective and personal identities, the fragmentation of social relations and rejection of the social principles” (p. 396).

Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle in their book “The ruins of modernity” (2010) describe the ruins as a phenomenon symbolizing the emptiness and loss as the basic components of modern identity. The authors suggest that the ruins themselves are an integral product of progress, and the ruins of ancient civilizations support this idea. The ancient ruins and post-industrial ruins have a lot in common. An engraving by Italian artist Giovanni Piranesi shows the ruins of the Roman temple of Neptune, and by accident, it has a lot of common with the photo of the ruins of the plant in the mining town of Tash-Kumyr.
Andreas Huyssen (2010) describes how Piranesi admired the frightening nature of Roman ruins and tried to show the naive essence of modernity in his engravings, revealing the dark side of what remains of it. Such self-critical consciousness shows the utopian character of the idea of “freedom and progress as a linear development” (p. 26). Todd Presner (2010) also analyzes the dialectic of modernity, which, on one hand, brings progress and emancipation, and, on the other hand, leads to an increase in authoritarian power, personality fragmentation, increasing the destructive potential and even death on a massive scale. He describes how the west bank of the UK became a place of waste and debris of the world history and the pathetic remnant of the former might of the empire. This analogy of Presner is perfectly suited to the description of the Kyrgyz mining towns: today, they are really the waste of Soviet industrialization. Radioactive waste in such settlements as Min-Kush, Maili-Suu, Ak-Tuz and Kadijsay adversely affect the health of local people and the ecology of the environment for decades. A resident of Mailu-Suu in an interview told that her parents and her husband died of cancer and that she was sick with cancer, and that her four children have goiter. Uranium, metals and minerals, developed in Kyrgyzstan, helped to
strengthen the power of the Soviet empire, while all the garbage and radioactive waste remained on the periphery.

The exploitation of resources and the relationship between the “first”, the “second” and the “third” worlds, between the colonizers and their colonies, give us the opportunity to look at the ruins through the lens of empires and their destinies. Julia Hell (2010) describes three scenarios of contemplating the ruins: a) by a representative of an empire, looking at the ruins of another empire, b) by a representative of the shattered empire, and c) by a representative of the colonized population, looking at the ruins of the empire that conquered his land or country. All three scenarios can be seen in the Kyrgyz mining towns. In the first scenario, we can imagine an American or a European looking at the ruins of the “enemy” Soviet empire during the Cold War, feeling a triumph of winning, and, at the same time, fearing that the same fate awaits his empire. In the second scenario, we can imagine a Russian pensioner – former miner, who came here being young and served all his life in the mine and the city. Now he is looking at the ruins of a glorious past. In the third scenario, a local Kyrgyz moved to the ruined city from village and brought a rural way of life and even animals to this city. He is a colonized subject, looking how his sheep graze near the monument to Lenin, and who understands the frailty of civilization better than anyone else.
A retired miner from the village of Vostochnyi in Sulukta (photo by the author) and sheep grazing in front of the monument to Lenin in Kadjisay (photo by Matais Pelkmans)

In my research, I have focused on the experience of the second type of observer – a local miner who has worked all his life in the mine, and who failed or did not wish to leave. The worldview of this miner is very nostalgic. Svetlana Boym in her book “The Future of Nostalgia” (2001) discloses the concept of nostalgia as a desire to return to childhood, as a utopian vision of the past, as an interaction of the landscapes of memory and of imagination with the landscape of the present. The collapse of the Soviet Union made a special type of nostalgia: people are nostalgic about the stability of the Soviet era. She describes how Russia was transformed from “a country of the future into a country of today dreaming of yesterday” in 1990s (p. 67). She also shows that nostalgia is not only an individual feeling. It develops in relation to both personal and collective memories. These stories are based on the ruins, and it “pushes one to tell a story about the connection between the past, present and future” (p. 50).

The main ethnographic part of this article is divided into two halves: the first, entitled “Empty windows” tells about the physical state of Kyrgyz “ghost towns”. In the second part “The fragmentation of identity and nostalgic stories”, I use the stories of residents to disclose how they describe the present through the nostalgic images of the past. The study was conducted in six miners settlements: Ak-Tuz, Kadjisay, Tash Komur, Kok Jangak Mayluu-Suu and Sulukta. Studies in these cities were carried out during different periods and using different tools, but interviews with residents and observation were used always. In addition, an important tool is visualization based on my photos and photos of my colleagues – Matais Pelkmans, Cholpon Zhanadylova and Rene Provis – taken during our
Empty windows

Privatization in the 1990s has affected not only mines, but also housing facilities of the miners’ settlements. Residents leaving these settlement and going to Russia or to Bishkek, sold their apartment for a very small price to local entrepreneurs who bought houses not to stay or rent, but to dismantle them brick by brick and sell them, along with the window and door frames. Even the big four-storey houses were dismantled in a similar way after some businessman bought all the apartments in the house. The tragedy was that the building had a lesser value than the bricks from which they were built. The process of dismantling of buildings can serve as an almost literal illustration of postmodern fragmentation.

Some homes were dismantled by the residents themselves who left the village and could not sell their homes. These people left and tried to destroy the traces of their stay in these settlements, thereby creating more void and gaps for those who remained. Such actions can be hyperbolically called revenge – revenge for the broken promises of the Soviet modernity.

Also, very often, the remaining residents were hired to dismantle the buildings, and another tragedy was that the people, who with their own hands built up their city, were now forced to destroy it. They dismantled into pieces what they had been building for decades.

Locals dismantle a two-storey apartment building in Kok-Jangak (photo by author)
This process of deconstruction of buildings is largely symbolic. We can say that it symbolizes deconstructive consciousness, loss of hope and psychological anxiety that often lead to alcohol abuse. Living among ruins is not easy, especially among the ruins of the past. The locals often spoke about the voids, like, for example: “There was a wonderful club here, we used to come here to dance and watch movies, and now only the foundation of the club building has remained”. One woman in Ak-Tyuz took us to the ruins of the former hospital and showed a room where she was staying when she was pregnant, and the room in which she gave birth to her children. Through openings in the remaining walls of the ruins of the hospital, one could see a beautiful view of the mountain scenery, and through the huge doors in the walls of a local store, we could see a mini-bus, taking residents to the nearby district center once a day.

Not only the buildings were destroyed, but almost all city/village infrastructure. One of the most serious was the condition of the village of Vostochnyi in mining town of Sulukta. Around the area, there was a very strong smell of human excreta, and it was impossible to
escape this smell. We saw human excrement to leak from a manhole in the courtyard of a residential neighborhood right to the garden of one of the residents, and thick green flies flew around that manhole.

The residents of five-storey buildings in the Kok-Jangak had the same problem. The sewer system had not been working for many years, and the residents living on the upper floors of those buildings were forced to go to toilet right in the yard. You can imagine the situation: residents of a multi-storey building, even if more than half empty, had to use the yard as toilet. The sewage draining car comes to clean the toilet, but not as often as required. Besides the obvious problems of poor sanitation, the threat of infection and the strong odor everywhere, sewage have a specific cultural meaning and cause a variety of negative connotations. As one of the residents of Vostochnyi said: “You see yourself, we literally live in shit”.

Another pressing issue for many of these settlements is water, or rather its absence. So, in the same village of Vostochnyi, people begin to stand in line early in the morning, in order to get water from a village water pumping well. If they are lucky, they will get some water before it disappears. If not, they will have to return home without water until the next morning.

Finally, electricity is one of the commonly cited problems. It is often cut off, and the city “catches the silence”. Many residents in their stories of past life spoke proudly of how much electricity they used to have. A resident of Ak-Tyuz said: “Even in the middle of the night, we could walk in the city without fear, because all the streets were illuminated. Todau, I’m afraid to go out after dark. The streets are no longer illuminated”. The darkness in this case can also be considered as an element of emptiness. It does not give people any opportunity to communicate and isolates them in their apartments. Lack of electricity may not be a particularly big problem in villages, where families are large, but in the former mining towns, where the majority of inhabitants are single pensioners, the darkness increases loneliness and depression.

However, in these towns, there is another form of darkness – darkness of empty windows in apartment buildings. Those buildings were not destroyed, but are mostly empty today. It is quite typical to see a 4-5-storey residential building, where people live only in 4-5 apartments, and the rest of the building is completely empty. People have long taken out the window frames in those empty apartments, and now the window openings are black holes. When a building is destroyed, it almost disappears from view. But when a building remains standing, dark window holes remind even more vividly that the city is depopulated.
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Empty and broken windows in the towns of Kadjisay, Maylu-Suu and Tash-Komur (photo by author)

Some residents are trying to close these black holes by various improvised means. For the visitor, it looks like an attempt to protect oneself from the aggression of gaping void.
Filled and covered windows in Kadjisay (photo by Matais Pelkmans)

Visually, these settlements look very surreal, but the ethnographic experience also adds to the surreal feeling. One of the reasons is high levels of radiation in some of the settlements (Ak-Tyuz, Maylu-Suu, Kadjisay). One day in such a settlement leaves a weird feeling throughout the body for the rest of the week. But certain practices of local residents are even more surreal. The people there believe that drinking 100 grams of vodka every day will save one from the effects of radiation. So far, no one has confirmed how close it is to reality, but such a practice makes many residents alcoholics, and it is a proven fact.

Surrealism is maintained by the feeling that time seems to have stopped for the inhabitants of these settlements. Any conversation with researchers was about how good it was before and how bad it is right now. The term “ghost town” reflects well the nature of these
settlements because they exist as ghosts of the past, as the last living monuments to Soviet ideology, live ruins of the “empire”. That is why, monuments to Lenin remains intact, even though everything else around gets destroyed. To paraphrase Marx: “A specter is haunting Central Asia – the specter of communism”. In the photos below, you can see the monuments to Lenin from different settlements. Weather and time leave their trace on them, but you cannot see the traces of vandalism or deliberate destruction. The communist past is respected here.
Description of the spaces presented in this section, illustrate different kinds of gaps and voids in the form of fully or half-dемolished buildings, destroyed infrastructure, dark nights and empty windows. These types of spatial emptiness carry various types of meanings and values for local residents. Kathryn Millun (2007) describes how spaces with pathological features have a negative impact on the psyche of the people living there. For residents of the miners’ settlements, pathological void space is also having a negative depression impact. Severe forms of alcohol dependence are proof of that. The most striking to the visitor from the outside is despair and hopelessness on the faces of local residents. Empty houses, empty streets and empty settlements create powerful spatial gaps that cannot remain unreflected in the fragmentation of the lives and identities of local people. In the next section, we will look at this issue in more detail.

Fragmentation of identities and nostalgic STORIES

According to Jon Beasley-Murray (2010), “Storytelling inspire the ruins... The ruins themselves are unreadable: we must speak for them, they should be interpreted ... Such storytelling restores the ruins before our eyes, allowing us to imagine them in their original form and to understand what has led to their destruction” (p. 215). In this part of the article, I use the stories of miners’ settlements residents, to understand what the ruins of their settlements mean for them.
Between 1991 and 1993, a turning point in the history of miners’ settlements, dividing people’s lives into two temporary categories: “before” and “after.” These two values were the main changes in their understanding. Svetlana Boym (2001) describes that nostalgia is based on the “overlay of two images – the house and the outside world, the past and the present, fantasy and daily hassle” (p. xvi). Studying the contrast between such opposing categories in the stories of miners allows us to better understand the nature of the prefix “post” in the analysis of post-Soviet transformation.

The argument in a simplified form sounds as follows: Life was good “before” and became terrible “after.” To illustrate the difference, this article examines how many residents the surveyed towns remember in the smallest details how it was before, although more than twenty years have passed, and constantly compare the past with the way things are now. I looks at the gaps in people’s lives in three main areas: work, economic situation and social life. If in the previous section, there were used visual images, in this part, I use quotes from the interviews with residents. They reveal well not only the nature of change, but also the emotions associated with them.

**JOB**

The job was one of the main components of the identity of the inhabitants in mining settlements. The idea of job was lying at the root of the base of these settlements: they were often built from scratch specifically for the development of mineral deposits. Accordingly, the collapse of the mining industry also means the collapse of the identity of these communities. Referring to the amount of work they had to do during the “good times”, the people were constantly complaining about the current unemployment.

“We had a wonderful plant. Our products were known not only in the Soviet Union, but also in India, China and Japan. We produced diodes. But when these people were given the power, they plundered everything. It’s a pity” (a resident of Kadjisay)

“We all worked: from the old to the young. If someone did not work, the police came and arrested for parasitism. Now people want to work, and they have skills and qualifications, but there is no work” (a resident of the village of Ak-Tyuz)

People always talked with pride about working in the Soviet times:

“Every third bullet used during the Great Patriotic War was made of the lead mined in Ak-Tyuz” (a resident of Ak-Tyuz)
“Volumes of development were very large during the Soviet era. We used to produce up to 200 thousand tons of coal every day. Coal was transported to Frunze, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In those days, there was a Technical College in Kok Jangak, where young people studied mining and often stayed to work in the city after graduation. At that time, there was a dormitory where they lived before they received apartments or land for building houses. Also there was a garment factory in the village that worked from 1969 to 1994. It used to employ about 800 women. The factory produced clothing and sleeping pajamas” (a resident of Kok-Jangak)

This volume of work is compared with how people survive today:
“Today, the city has no jobs. We can earn only by dismantling the houses. One brick costs 25 tyin. Sometimes you can earn 30-40 soms per day. A loaf of bread costs 14 soms. I can also buy three potatoes and three onions, and this is my diet for one day. If there is no work, we eat the grass” (a resident of Kok-Jangak)

The opportunities to earn are different from city to city. Our research shows that the people in transit cities, such as Tash Komur and Kadjisay that are located along the major national highways, have the opportunity of involvement in trade, as opposed to the dead-end and geographically isolated settlements like Ak-Tyuz, Kok Jangak and Maylu-Suu. Kadjisay is also located next to Lake Issyk-Kul, and has tourism potential. The lack of economic opportunities certainly affects the economic situation of the local residents.

**ECONOMIC SITUATION**

The residents spoke most often about the economic situation. Poverty of the majority of the inhabitants today is constantly compared with prosperity during the Soviet times. Miners in the past used to be very wealthy representatives of the Soviet working class, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, they turned out to be among the poorest.

“Until the 1990s, we lived very well. We had a great house and furniture. My husband worked in the mine, and we had 25,000 rubles in Sberbank account. We could buy three cars for that sum of money. We lived a happy life with our children. Today Kadjisay people’s lives are very different: there are the rich who are working in Russia or at Kumtor, there are people with average income who have shops in the city, but the majority – 70-80 per cent of residents are people living in abject poverty and sometimes are forced to eat animal feed. My pension is 1,200 soms, and the meat costs 180 soms per kilogram. My pension is enough to go to the store once and buy food for a week. I buy noodles and cereals, then I have
Many residents are simply trying to survive, and the food is very important to them. Malnutrition is a common thing. Accordingly, the food is also a relative category in the narratives of residents.

“My salary was 850 rubles, and in addition, I received meal coupons to eat in the dining room – 86 kopecks each. We never bought meat in kilos. We used to buy the whole carcass for 200 rubles. In winter, we used to buy three carcasses and jerked meat. Sausage in the store was so tasty and fragrant. I cannot call sausage what is now sold in stores” (a resident of Ak-Tyuz)

“We’re just surviving. I miss the sausage. I have not tried it for a long time” (a resident of Ak-Tyuz)

“Kadjisay was a town supported directly from Moscow. We had a lovely shop Aichurek, where on the ground floor, there was a grocery store. There were six types of fish, and all were cheap. Today, we do not fish, it is too expensive. Now everything is expensive” (a resident, Kadjisay)

Most of the population of mining towns are pensioners, and pensions play an important role in their lives. The irony lies in the fact that due to the lack of work, family members of pensioners also live off pensions of the elderly.

“Our seniors have given their lives to mines. But today they are ignored; we do not have even a hospital. If someone has heart problems, there is no one to help. Recently a 1-year-old girl died on the way to the hospital, which is located in another city” (a resident of Ak-Tyuz)

“When I got my first pension, I began to cry. I got 160 soms, it was enough only to buy four liters of vegetable oil” (a resident of Tash Komur)

Poverty in many settlements is politicized. Talking about their poverty, people are accusing those who destroyed the Soviet Union, the government of Kyrgyzstan, the circumstances and wealthier categories of the population.

“The rich plunder all financial aid that we are supposed to receive. We get nothing. They have a good life, and we suffer. I had gangrene of the feet because of my work at the mine, and I am now disabled. I earn by sweeping the streets for 650 soms. Yes, I drink alcohol. I have enough money to buy some food and tea, but not enough to buy clothes. Here’s my
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shoe with a hole. I cannot afford to buy new shoes” (a resident of Kok-Jangak)

“We lived very well. Gasoline cost 5 kopecks. Rascal Gorbachev and rascal Yeltsin destroyed everything” (a resident of Kok-Jangak)
But the fact that the city was supported directly from Moscow was mentioned most often. It was a much differing marker of the special status of residents at the country level, it was a source of pride and strong nostalgia.

“In Soviet times, Kok Jangak received provision directly from Moscow. Items that were not available in other cities were available here, so that people came from other cities to purchase them. The goods were also cheaper. For example, one kilo of lamb meat cost one and a half ruble, while in the market, it cost three rubles”.

Changes in the economic situation of the people affected and continue to affect the changes in the social life of cities. This is described in the next section.

SOCIAL LIFE

Active social life in these cities during the Soviet era is very contrasting with the current state of isolation. This loss of socialization is reflected in many areas of personal and social life.

“My life was very interesting. I attended Pioneer and Komsomol meetings at school and was a member of all possible committees. I lived in the human maelstrom. In Soviet times, mailboxes were hanging at the entrance hall. Now, we do not have mailboxes, and the postman does not want to go upstairs to the fourth floor, so I do not get any letters. I do not have a landline phone, and I do not have a mobile phone either. It turns out that I am totally isolated from my family, and I live here all alone” (a resident of Kadjisay)

The ethnic diversity in mining towns in the Soviet era was always perceived positively. Such towns were multi-cultural and, as shown by the following statements of the respondents, the different ethnic groups coexisted pretty well. Now, the former ethnic diversity is no longer there, and at least, there was one example of ethnic conflict involving the Kurdish Turks living in Kok-Jangak.

“We all lived well and happily: 3,500 workers and 37 ethnic groups. We, the Kyrgyz, did not even talk Kyrgyz. We all spoke Russian” (a resident of Ak-Tyuz)
“In Soviet times, we had a tradition of national holidays. Each month, one ethnic group used to organize parties, cooked national dishes and prepared some performance. All other residents came to eat and watch. We all lived in harmony with each other. There were no conflicts. There were fights at disco clubs sometimes, but they had nothing to do with the nationality of the fighters. The mine united us all” (a resident of Kok-Jangak).

Respondents also frequently referred to active social life and all sorts of celebrations, popular in Soviet times.
“We also celebrated the Miner’s Day. The whole town gathered at the club; there was a concert, and honorary miners were awarded, then all went to celebrate, for example, to the park, and there were music and dancing. Also, people went on a picnic in the nearby mountains. Everybody had fun, and the next day, we all went back to work” (a resident of Kok-Jangak)

“We had an ice rink, and we skated there and played hockey. During New Year celebrations, a New Year tree was put there, with many decorations and lighting. Another New Year tree was put at the entrance to the city. It was very beautiful and decorated with light at night. Our club was the best in the area. It could host 360 people and held various conferences and meetings. Unfortunately, the club burned down. Democracy came and brought destruction. People began to leave their city. All left. To Russia, to Kazakhstan... Only the old people remained, as they have nowhere to go. We sit, remember our mine, our lives and get upset about modern life in which nothing is left, only devastation. Only ruins remained” (a resident of Ak-Tyuz)

Almost all representatives of the older generation, who remember both Soviet and post-Soviet life, went through the painful experience of seeing how the city grew and flourished, and then it collapsed and got depopulated. Their friends and associates were leaving en masse, and they stayed. Their jobs simply disappeared, and places of social communication were destroyed. They experienced a very negative and sad period of destruction of everything that surrounded them.

The contrasts described in this section reveal large voids in the current economic and social life of the inhabitants of the mining towns. The image of the past is idealized and used as a point of comparison with the sad present. This article is showing the importance of context in facing with difficulties of a transition period. Residents of the entire country have passed through changes but the crisis is not over in miners’ settlements, many of which are isolated from other settlements. These settlements are a vivid manifestation of gaps, fragmentation and void of Soviet modernity.
CONCLUSION

The ruins of the Soviet industrial empire in mining settlements in Kyrgyzstan are weird places that seem completely dislocated and out of context. They help us to reconnect the intermittent geographies of Soviet modernity, which tried to unite nations under the flag of communism and industrial progress. Joma Nazypary (2002) describes the concept of “mess” as an extreme form of disorder in the social life of the post-Soviet societies. His book “Post-Soviet chaos” analyzes the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union to its periphery in Central Asia almost as a “natural disaster or epidemic” (Nazypary, 2002, p. 49). Nazypary describes the emotional result of this disaster on the level of feelings of loss – loss of property, work, self-esteem, relaxation, safety and equal society. According to his vision, “the future has been canceled” and replaced by nostalgia (p.62). Stories of people in the empty mining towns of Kyrgyzstan are well suited for his description of the post-Soviet changes. Examples of post-Soviet voids, described in this paper through visual and narrative images of the inhabitants of the mining towns, can serve to criticize the dark side of modernity. Tragedies of former miners and their families are real. The old, hungry and desperate residents described in this paper are direct witnesses of unfulfilled promises of Soviet modernization.

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*The views of the author do not necessarily reflect the views cabar.asia*

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