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FROM RESOURCE EXTRACTION TO LOCAL DISSENT: UNDERSTANDING ENVIRONMENTAL PROTESTS IN THE GOLD MINING SECTOR OF KYRGYZSTAN



An aerial photograph of a mountain valley. In the foreground, a dirt road winds through a lush green valley. A river flows through the middle ground, surrounded by dense evergreen forests. In the background, majestic mountains with snow-capped peaks rise against a clear sky. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent green filter.

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An aerial photograph of a mountain valley. In the foreground, a dirt road winds through a lush green valley. A river flows through the middle ground, surrounded by dense evergreen forests. In the background, majestic mountains with patches of snow rise against a clear sky. The overall scene is serene and natural.

ABSTRACT

This analytical report scrutinizes the underlying determinants of local discontent within Kyrgyzstan's gold mining sector, categorizing them across environmental, social, cultural, and governance dimensions. Understanding these driving forces is paired with an exploration of how dissent takes shape – from peaceful gatherings to roadblocks and confrontations, extending to instances of riotous expressions, all working as outlets for protestors to voice their urgent demands. The articulated demands of protestors are directly interlinked with the root causes that propel these demonstrations. The report takes a comprehensive approach, avoiding a narrow focus on specific case studies. Additionally, an exploration of strategies adopted by mining companies to achieve local acceptance in the Kyrgyz context is explained. Moreover, the report extends valuable insights into policy recommendations designed to improve the gold mining sector in Kyrgyzstan.

The publication is intended for experts and consultants of foreign policy departments of the Kyrgyz Republic, researchers and academia, decision-makers, and a wide range of readers interested in politics and sustainable development in the Central Asian region.

The views expressed herein do not reflect the position of the CABAR.asia analytical platform.

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A vertical aerial photograph of a mountain valley. In the background, there are snow-capped mountains. The middle ground shows a winding river with a light-colored, silty appearance, surrounded by dense evergreen forests. A dirt road or path runs along the riverbank. The foreground shows a mix of green grass and trees.

1. INTRODUCTION

Surrounded by oil and gas-rich neighbors, Kyrgyzstan's economy is significantly influenced by gold mining, constituting approximately 15 % of the country's GDP. Despite diminishing gold reserves, it remains the primary exported product of this Central Asian state. Not only has the economy been shaped by gold, but national politics has also revolved around this sector. A clear illustration of this is the current President of Kyrgyzstan, Sadyr Japarov, who gained popularity through protests advocating for the nationalization of Kumtor, the largest gold mining site that contributes 12 % to the GDP.¹

According to the Ministry of Natural Resources, Ecology, and Technical Supervision, as of 2019, there are 470 licenses given to mining companies in the country.² These licenses include gold, placer gold, silver, ore, copper, antimony, cobalt, platinum group metals, and other metals. Around 2,700 primary occurrences of gold have been identified so far and the gold reserves recorded in the state reserve balance totaled 645.23 tons.³ Due to the vast amount of mining, the sector is both economically and politically significant, highlighting a focal point for environmental protests in the country. From 2011 to 2023, Kyrgyzstan witnessed a notable surge in local dissent, with 81 environmental protests related to gold mining enterprises and governmental institutions.

Since gaining Kyrgyzstan's independence, and particularly after 2010, the sector has grappled with a myriad of challenges related to protests, including environmental concerns, community dissent, and increasing national anti-mining sentiments. While the environmental and social impacts of gold mining cannot be ignored, balancing the economic benefits is critical. This landscape demands an exploration of the current state of gold mining in Kyrgyzstan, examining both pressing issues it faces today and opportunities for future extractivism.

In this policy brief, I aim to identify the driving factors that led to environmental protests in Kyrgyzstan's gold mining sector over the period from 2011 to 2023. Also, I will explore the fundamental reasons behind these incidents and look at the various forms these protests take. By uncovering the roots of heightened environmental concern and examining the various expressions of local content, I will provide a comprehensive picture of protests in the country's gold mining industry. In doing so, I seek to shed light on the broader implications for resource sustainability and the environmental impact of the ongoing development of critical raw materials.

¹ Kamila Eshalieva, "Kumtor: The Gold Mine That Could Make or Break Kyrgyzstan," openDemocracy, June 22, 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/kumtor-gold-mine-could-make-or-break-kyrgyzstan/>.

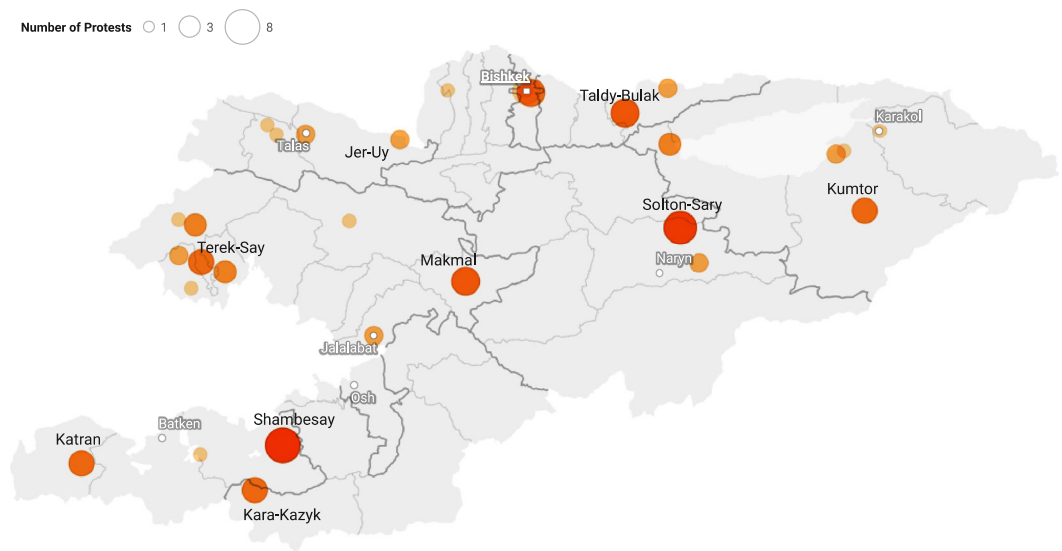
² Open Data Kyrgyzstan, "Perechen' deystvuyushchikh litsenziy na zoloto - Perechen' deystvuyushchikh litsenziy na zoloto (po sostoyaniyu na 3 kvartal 2019 g.)," accessed December 2, 2023, <https://data.gov.kg/dataset/perechen-dejstvuyushih-licenzij-na-zoloto/resource/08a4d260-cb75-4149-a7a5-e7c2c33902e7>.

³ Tazabek, "Infografika – Krupneyshiye Mestorozhdeniya Zolota Kyrgyzstana (Karta)," accessed December 2, 2023, <https://www.tazabek.kg/www.tazabek.kg/news:1642318?f=cp>.

2. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

This analysis was derived from comprehensive desk research encompassing news agencies and related sources, highlighting the magnitude of environmental concerns in the country. The data collection consisted of three steps. First, I searched for keywords such as 'protests,' 'rally,' 'uprising,' 'riot,' and 'gold mining' in both the Kyrgyz and Russian languages on major Kyrgyz news agency outlets such as Radio Liberty (Azattyk), 24.kg, Kloop.kg, and Akipress.org as well as on Google search engine itself. Second, upon identifying specific protests at a gold mine, I appended the field name along with those keywords to explore the existence of other protests spanning the 13 years. Finally, I investigated each of the 470 gold mines together with those keywords to document any possible incident. The primary data was collected in 2019 and updated in November 2023 to include anti-gold-mining protests that happened in recent years. Since there is no systematic data about gold mining protests in the country, this dataset will be a valuable contribution to academia, policymakers, and civil society.

Figure 1. Protest locations



The map above presents a detailed heatmap of 81 environmental protests in Kyrgyzstan, highlighting a notable concentration near gold mining sites. Notably, several gold sites experienced multiple protests throughout 13 years; for instance, the Shambesay field in the Batken region alone witnessed eight incidents of protests. Predictably, some of the protests escalated to a national level, particularly in the capital city of Bishkek. It is worth noting that these national-level gatherings frequently elevate local extractivist issues to national importance, showcasing the interconnected nature of environmental concerns and their potential to resonate in broader domestic politics.



There are several limitations to this research. Firstly, the dataset lacks certain crucial variables, such as the volume, reserve, and territory of gold mines. This limitation becomes particularly critical when investigating whether protests are more likely to occur in major gold sites as opposed to smaller fields. Secondly, since my dataset was collected based on news content, I cannot account for its fairness in reflecting the true story behind the protests. Nevertheless, to mitigate potential bias, I made efforts to compare information from multiple sources during both the data collection and analysis stages.

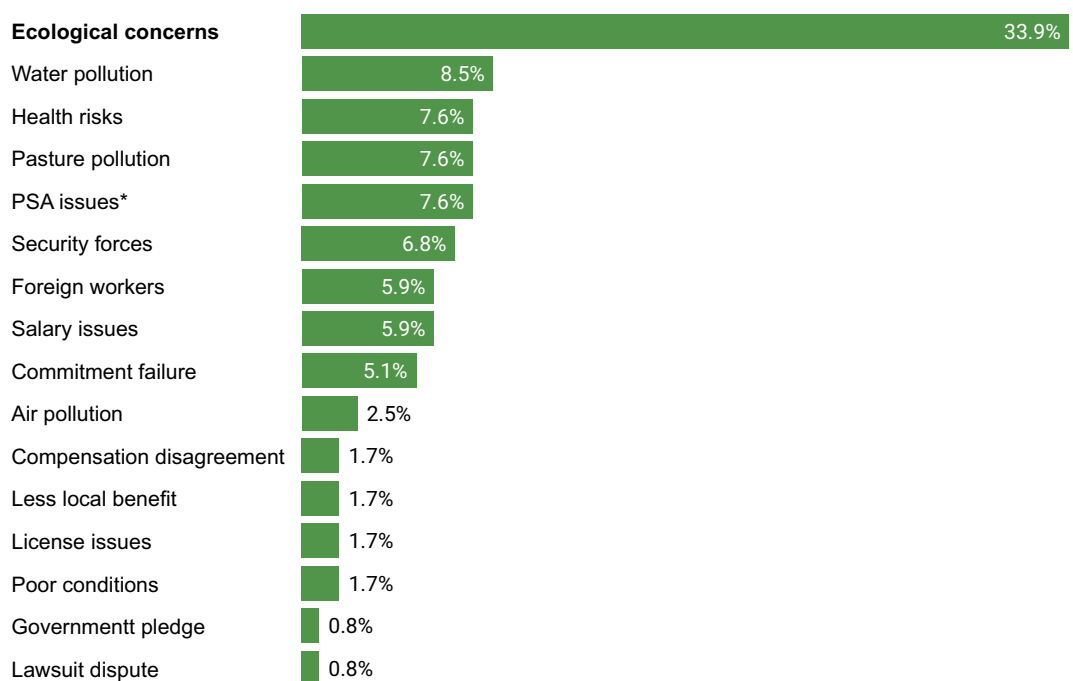
3. WHY GOLD MINING PROTESTS HAPPEN: THE UNDERLYING ISSUES

The protests' fundamental issues fall into four broad categories: environmental, social, cultural, and governance. Identifying these concerns required analyzing specific keywords in news content. However, there were instances where the information was not reported. In such cases, I explored additional sources to uncover potential root causes. Subsequently, I will delineate these issues within the environmental, social, cultural, and governance realms based on reported news content. Since this paper approaches the topic from a comprehensive perspective, it is organized by thematic issues rather than focusing on specific case studies. This is because no single protest can reflect all the issues raised in every protest.

3.1. Environmental Issues

The predominant factors driving local protests are environmental in nature, with news outlets frequently citing 'ecological concern' as the primary motivation. However, these reports often lack specificity, failing to distinguish whether the concerns are around water pollution, landscape degradation, or other environmental issues. This ambiguity underscores the complex environmental challenges faced by communities impacted by gold mining activities. With the collected data, it was clear that around one-third of the 81 uprisings explicitly linked the operations of gold-mining companies to various ecological concerns, as illustrated in Table 1. These concerns primarily stem from mining operations that utilize surface water from rivers, impacting downstream stakeholders, including local villagers, farmers, and agricultural users.

Table 1. Issues raised in protests



*PSA issues are related to Product Sharing Agreements between the national holding and foreign mining companies.



Water pollution:

The connection between gold mining operations and water pollution is well-established in the existing literature. Gold extraction processes often involve the use of hazardous chemicals like cyanide and mercury,⁴ both of which pose significant risks to water quality. Extensive research conducted in regions with active gold-mining operations consistently reveals high levels of pollutants in nearby water bodies, negatively affecting water systems and posing potential health risks to local populations.

Water pollution is a frequently reported issue in Kyrgyzstan as well. For example, in the Katran village of the Batken region, local communities source their drinking water from the Kozu-Baglan River. The Aprel gold mine site is situated upstream from Katran, in the upper part of the region, raising concerns about water quality. In November 2012, residents gathered for a rally demanding the permanent termination of mining activities at the Aprel site, which is operated by the Russian CJS company 'A.Z. International' with an extractive license.⁵ A journalist stated, "According to people's information, a Russian company developing gold is causing water degradation, as wastewater is entering the river."⁶ This dispute has not been solved and the issue has remained for several years. In 2021, the residents of the same village again rallied over the streets. Saparali Borubaev, the Chairman of the village council stated that,

"Since 2012, we have been fighting to prevent mining from starting. But the result of our efforts is zero. The authorities have not conducted any explanatory work with us... We drink this water not only ourselves but also bring livestock there for watering. We may face a situation where we have neither water nor the mountain, and our health will be at risk."⁷

Another similar contentious mining site is Solton-Sary in the Naryn region. With the license for exploration and development in Solton-Sary, the Chinese company Jhong Ji Mining was planning to build a gold processing plant there with estimated investment of \$100 million.⁸ However, around a hundred people from Emgekchil village protested against the construction of a gold mining plant on May 15, 2018.⁹ They demanded the suspension of plant construction on the Solton-Sary mine, expressing con-

⁴ Kubanychbek Zholdoshev, "Tsianid v zolotodobyche zapretit, nel'zya ispol'zovat'?" Radio Liberty, May 8, 2018, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/29214422.html>.

⁵ Zhazgul Masalieva, "V Leylekskom rayone Kyrgyzstana zhiteli vyshli na miting i trebuyut priostanovit' deyatelnost' zolotorudnogo mestorozhdeniya," 24.kg, November 28, 2012, <https://24.kg/archive/ru/community/142790-v-lyajlyakskom-rajone-kyrgyzstana-zhiteli-vyshli.html/>.

⁶ Masalieva.

⁷ Naizabek Mukambetov, "Zhiteli Leyleka vystupili protiv razrabotki mestorozhdeniya 'Aprel,'" KLOOP.KG, April 17, 2021, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/04/17/zhiteli-lejleka-vystupili-protiv-razrabotki-mestorozhdeniya-aprel/>.

⁸ Troy Sternberg, Almaz Tchorev, and Kemel Toktomushev, "The Role of Mining in Kyrgyzstan's Social Acceptance of Protest," *Resources Policy* 85 (August 1, 2023): 103794, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2023.103794>.

⁹ Mirlan Kadyrov, "Solton-Sary: Zhiteli protiv stroitel'stva kombinata investorami," Radio Liberty, May 16, 2018, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan-china-gold-mining/29230010.html>.



cerns about the possibility of waste entering the river used by locals and livestock, posing a threat to health. “*The plant will be built on an elevation, and the tailings dam will be located where the swamp is. We are concerned about it. Can a tailings pit be built on a swamp?*” questions a resident of the Emgekchil village.

The question that was raised above is highly critical because the construction quality of the tailings dam or pits matters a lot. For instance, the rupture of two tailings dams in Brazil, in the towns of Mariana in 2015 and Brumadinho in 2019, resulted in the release of toxic waste, causing widespread pollution, and posing severe threats to human health and the ecosystem.¹⁰ The Emgekchil villagers’ concerns about the potential hazards of constructing a tailings pit on a swamp align with the global awareness of the risks and consequences associated with such structures.

Additionally, alterations in water flow patterns resulting from mining activities disrupt water systems, giving rise to broader ecological consequences. The well-established link between gold mining and water pollution, evident in cases like Katran and Solton-Sary, demands immediate attention. These are just two examples among dozens of places facing similar concerns. The struggles faced by residents of Katran village since 2012 resonate with the inefficient policymaking and weak regulation in this domain in the country.

Pasture degradation:

Gold mining activities in Kyrgyzstan have raised significant concerns about pasture degradation. The extensive use of chemicals in the extraction process poses a threat to the quality of pasturelands, impacting the livelihoods of local communities and livestock dependent on grazing.

In the Solton-Sary field, exactly one year later in July 2019, villagers from Emgekchil, Min-Bulak, and On-Archa engaged in an open confrontation with the mine operators,¹¹ demanding the immediate closure of the Solton-Sary site. An emergency department employee shared, “*residents assert that small cattle are dying due to water and grass issues. They complain about frequent explosions [at the mining site]. They say 29 animals have died.*”¹² Later the State Inspectorate for Veterinary Sanitary Safety also confirmed that the examination of the carcasses revealed traces of cyanide and nitrate. The subsequent riots and attacks on the Chinese workers on August 7 led to a complete shutdown of the Zhong Ji Mining company.¹³

¹⁰ Fernando António Leal Pacheco et al., “Geochemistry and Contamination of Sediments and Water in Rivers Affected by the Rupture of Tailings Dams (Brumadinho, Brazil),” *Applied Geochemistry* 152 (May 1, 2023): 105644, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeochem.2023.105644>.

¹¹ Elvira Sultanmurat kyzy, “Naryn: Mestnyye zhiteli potrebovali zakryt’ zolotodobyvayushcheye mestorozhdeniye Solton-Sary iz-za massovoy gibeli skota,” KLOOP.KG, July 16, 2019, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2019/07/16/naryn-mestnye-zhiteli-potrebovali-zakryt-zolotodobyvayushchee-mestorozhdenie-solton-sary-iz-za-massovoj-gibeli-skota/>.

¹² Sultanmurat kyzy.

¹³ Radio Liberty, “Chinese Company Suspends Operations at Kyrgyz Gold Mine After Clashes,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 12:45:36Z, sec. Kyrgyzstan, <https://www.rferl.org/a/chinese-gold-mining-company-suspends-kyrgyz-operations/30097658.html>.



The concern over pasture degradation due to gold mining activities extends to the Shambesai deposit in the Batken region, with estimated gold reserves at 8 tons. The current extraction license lies in the hands of 'Tian-di,' another Chinese company, prompting local protesters to take extreme measures, as evidenced by a February 2018 confrontation in Shambesai.¹⁴ Villagers expressed fears that continued mining operations would leave them devoid of pasturelands, further highlighting the widespread environmental and socio-economic impacts associated with gold mining.¹⁵

Air pollution:

While the direct impact of air pollution from gold mining extraction may not be immediately felt by nearby village communities, it remains a critical concern. The extraction process, involving the release of toxic chemicals such as cyanide and mercury, contributes to air pollution. Research by Sternberg also finds out that the dispersion of 'orange dust' from unfilled mine exploration holes poses a lethal threat to livestock.¹⁶

Surprisingly, out of the 81 documented protests related to gold mines, air pollution was explicitly raised in only one particular instance, specifically at the Terek-Say field, witnessing three distinct protests. This limited mention could be attributed to the geographical remoteness of mining activities, situated in upstream mountainous areas, making the direct observation of pollution challenging for nearby village communities. Alternatively, it might be indicative of the difficulty in quantifying air pollution from the villagers' perspective. Furthermore, it may point to a potential lack of environmental awareness among the local populace regarding the intricate effects of mining operations on air quality.

Residents of Terek-Say village in the Jalal-Abad region held a protest on September 8, 2021, against the Kyrgyz-Turkish gold mining company LLC 'Eti Bakir Tereksay.'¹⁷ Community activists reported that the company's operations are contaminating the air and causing illnesses and respiratory issues, particularly asthma among children. According to their perspective, the activities of the company have led to air pollution, resulting in children. A protesting woman shared her concern, stating,

"Due to the dust, my child developed asthma. Doctors informed me that the illness was triggered by environmental factors. It started with allergic coughing three months ago and has now progressed to asthma. Hospital doctors are shocked at the swift development of the disease, attributing it to environmental problems."¹⁸

¹⁴ Ferghana News Agency, "Zhiteli Kirgizii Zaperli v Konteynere Kitayskikh Zolotodobytchikov," Ferghana News Agency <http://www.ferghananews.com/news/33008>.

¹⁵ Ferghana News Agency.

¹⁶ Troy Sternberg, "Conflict and Contestation in Kyrgyz Mining Infrastructure," *The Extractive Industries and Society* 7, no. 4 (November 1, 2020): 1392–1400, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2020.10.016>.

¹⁷ Gulmira Makanbai kyzy, "Zhiteli sela Terek-Say s det'mi vyshli na miting protiv zolotodobyvayushchey kompanii," 24.kg, September 9, 2021, https://24.kg/obschestvo/206544_jiteli_sela_terek-say_sdetmi_vyishli_namiting_protiv_zolotodobyvayushchey_kompanii/.

¹⁸ Gulmira Makanbai kyzy.



The protesters in this event collectively expressed concern for their children's well-being, attributing health issues to the arrival of the 'Eti Bakir Tereksay' company, specifically linking them to the company's tree-cutting activities and air pollution from gold extraction.¹⁹ This incident vividly illustrates the direct and immediate health consequences of gold mining on the local populace, emphasizing the urgent need to address environmental challenges stemming from such operations.

3.2. Social Issues

Beyond the predominant environmental focus, a layer of social issues causes community protests, as highlighted in documented media reports. These contentious matters revolve around the social and compensation packages offered by extractive companies, which are designed to fund specific infrastructures or provide financial reparations for environmental harm. The issue of employment dynamics adds another layer, as concerns arise from the noticeable disparity between commitments to increase local hiring and the observed trend of fewer employment opportunities for the local population.

Numerous instances exist where extractive companies have been accused of failing to fulfill their commitments regarding social packages. One such example is the village of Oruktu in Jalal-Abad. In January 2018, residents demanded the payment of past debts related to the social package by the KGM Ltd company. The company had previously agreed with local authorities, committing to monthly payments of a social package totaling 300,000 Kyrgyzstani som (KGS) in 2015. Initially, for seven months, the company fulfilled its commitment. However, it later ceased payments and suspended production, resulting in an accumulated debt of 6,900,000 KGS.²⁰ By 2018, the Chinese company was returning with equipment to resume operations, and the residents insisted that "all previous debts be settled before any further work continues."²¹

Indeed, there was already a compensation dispute between the local population and the Kyrgyz Chinese company KGM Ltd in 2014. Gold extraction was scheduled to commence in autumn 2014 after exploration and preparation work that began in 2010.²² However, before the operation, residents voiced their demand that the company must provide an infrastructure package to divert water to several thousand hectares of arid land from the Orto-Tokoy reservoir, situated 200 meters below the arid land. KGM Ltd estimated the project at \$40 million and asserted that a small company could not afford such expenses.²³ The company pledged to address other

¹⁹ Gulmira Makanbai kyzy.

²⁰ Ruslan Kalmatov, "Ala-Buka: pretenzii k zolotodobyvayushchemu predpriyatiyu," Radio Liberty, January 16, 2018, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/28977722.html>.

²¹ Kalmatov.

²² Eleonora Beishenbek kyzy, "Ala-Buka: Ne Pozvolyayut Nachat' Rabotu Na Mestorozhdenii Solomo," August 19, 2014, https://www.gezitter.org/society/32432_ala-buka_ne_pozvolyayut_nachat_rabotu_na_mestorojdenii_solomo/.

²³ Beishenbek kyzy.



social issues. However, the question of whether the demands of Oruktu residents are justified remains unclear.

A similar infrastructure package was stipulated by the Chandalash community in the Chatkal district. Since 2013, villagers have been discontented with the fact that the Korean company, Booster, responsible for the development of the mine, has been unable to complete the construction of a bridge connecting two villages for three years.²⁴ For this reason, on October 18, 2016, several residents gathered at the office of the Booster company, demanding a halt to mining operations until the completion of the bridge.

Furthermore, employment-related issues are documented in several cases based on the data. Discontented youth from Orlovka village in the Chuy region raised questions about the employment practices of 'Alтынken,' 60% of which is owned by Chinese Ziin Mining, whereas a Kyrgyz national company owns the rest.²⁵ While the company promised to employ 90% of its workforce locally, activists reported that, besides the 260 Kyrgyz employees, approximately 300 additional unregistered Chinese workers were alleged to be present.²⁶ The company defended itself, stating that these were specialists with unique skills not readily available in Kyrgyzstan, brought in for specific tasks.²⁷ Such employment-related issues were identified in several cases, including Shambesay in Batken, Kara-Kazyk in Osh, Makmal in Jalal-Abad, and many others. This ongoing employment dispute adds another layer to the intricate socio-economic tensions associated with gold mining operations in the region.

3.3. Cultural Issues

In addition to the environmental and social dimensions, community protests against extractive activities are underpinned by cultural issues, as illuminated by various documented media reports. The identity and preconceptions associated with foreign investors and workers, particularly Chinese companies, emerge as a pivotal factor influencing community sentiments. Stengerg and others' study on the Solton-Sary gold mine and the logistics center in At-Bashy of the Naryn region revealed that there is a "prevailing distrust of China and the Chinese (i.e. Sinophobia)" in the region, echoing broader national trends.²⁸ This cultural aspect contributes to complex concerns, prompting residents to draw parallels with protests vis-a-vis Chinese companies in neighboring regions. These sentiments, particularly among older participants, underscore a deep-seated resistance to the involvement of Chinese investors in the country.

²⁴ Ruslan Kalmatov, "Chandalash: snachala most, potom zoloto," Radio Liberty, October 24, 2016, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/28071187.html>.

²⁵ Aziza Kul'taeva, "'Alтын-Ken': investory i mestnoye naseleniye," Radio Liberty, September 28, 2012, https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_investment_alytn_ken/24722573.html.

²⁶ Kul'taeva.

²⁷ Kul'taeva.

²⁸ Sternberg, Tchorojev, and Toktomushev, "The Role of Mining in Kyrgyzstan's Social Acceptance of Protest."

Table 2. Investment sources of companies that witnessed local protests

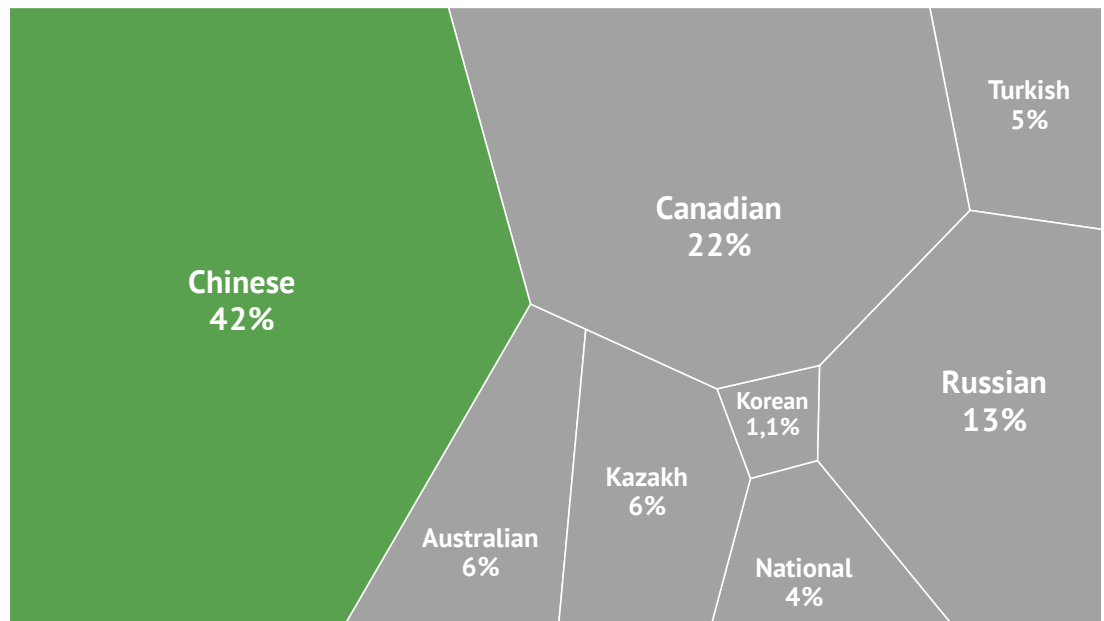


Table 2 presents a breakdown of protests categorized by the origin of investments from various countries, encompassing China, Canada, Russia, Kazakhstan, Australia, Turkey, Korea, and national sources. The data reveals that, during the study period involving 81 protests, approximately 42% or 33 uprisings occurred in mines associated with Chinese companies. Significantly, the second-highest proportion, constituting around 22% of protests, centered around the Kumtor Mining Company, primarily owned by the Canadian venture Centerra Gold. This distribution underscores the influential role of Chinese investments in triggering community protests against gold mining activities during the study period.

A relevant example illustrating cultural issues is the community discontent regarding the development of the Shambesay gold mine. Village residents expressed their concern about a sharp increase in the number of Chinese citizens at the gold mine.²⁹ Another incident unfolded in the Jalal-Abad region, where locals disrupted the operations of the 'Ishtamberdy' gold mining plant operated by the Chinese company Full Gold Mining. On August 17, 2011, residents of Terek-Sai village blocked the road to the gold processing plant and forcefully entered the company's premises, expelling its leadership.³⁰ The residents demanded the expulsion of Chinese employees and the transfer of the mine to the balance of the 'Kyrgyz Altyn' government enterprise. The workforce comprised 100 Chinese citizens and 300 Kyrgyz citizens. These incidents further underscore the community's sentiments regarding Chinese involvement in gold mining projects in Kyrgyzstan.

²⁹ Yulia Kostenko, "Zhiteli Batkenskoy oblasti vystupili protiv razrabotki mestorozhdeniya Shambesay," 24.kg, March 14, 2017, https://24.kg/ekonomika/47141_jiteli_batkenskoy_oblasti_vyistupili_protiv_razrabotki_mestorojdeniya_shambesay/.

³⁰ Askar Aktalov, "V Dzhahal-Abadskoy oblasti mestnyye zhiteli blokirovali rabotu zolotorudnogo kombinata «Ishtamberdy»," K-News, August 23, 2011, <https://knews.kg/2011/08/23/v-djalal-abadskoy-oblasti-mestnyie-jiteli-blokirovali-rabotu-zolotorudnogo-kombinata-ishtamberdy/>.



3.4. Governance Issues

In addition, governance issues play a pivotal role in shaping local content and fostering protests. The governance challenges extend beyond the environmental impact and social dynamics, influencing how communities perceive and interact with extractive companies. Corporate practices, employment conditions, and wage structures emerge as crucial elements in comprehending the reasons for community responses and protests. It is important to clarify that the focus here is on internal governance problems within extractive companies, distinct from the broader government management of natural resources in the country.

Numerous instances highlight artisanal workers' grievances regarding work conditions, salary delays, lack of uniforms, and other agreement-related issues. A clear incident is the June 2018 strike at the ore enrichment factory in the Kemin district, owned by CJSC 'TK Georeserve,' processing gold-bearing ore from the Kurandy-Zhailoo deposit.³¹ Despite continuous production, the workforce had not received wages since January of the same year, citing financial challenges and alleged sales constraints.³² Additionally, the absence of protective clothing and the imposition of fixed-term employment contracts instead of indefinite contracts prompted employee dissatisfaction. Faced with labor rights violations, workers initiated an indefinite strike, seeking overdue wages, conversion to indefinite contracts, and the provision of protective gear.

Similar grievances and labor disputes have been observed at the "Jamgyr" gold mine operated by Vertex Gold Company LLC in the Chatkal district. The labor collective brought their demands to the company's management on January 16, 2016, seeking salary increases, payment for night shifts, overtime, holiday bonuses, provision of protective clothing, specialized meals, and improvement of sanitary and hygienic conditions.³³ The collective also called for membership in the Mining and Metallurgical Trade Union to better represent the interests of the workers.³⁴ These situations emphasize the need for effective governance mechanisms within extractive companies to address internal labor rights issues and maintain operational stability.

³¹ Aidana Abduvaitova, "Rabotniki Obogatitel'noy Fabriki v Kemine Ob'yavili Bessrochnuyu Zabastovku," Vecherniy Bishkek, June 28, 2017, https://www.vb.kg/doc/362380_rabotniki_obogatitelnoy_fabriki_v_kemine_obiavili_bessrochnuyu_zabastovky.html.

³² Abduvaitova.

³³ Radio Liberty, "Tadzhibayev: Rabotniki Vertex Gold ostanovili vse raboty na rudnike 'Zhamgyr,'" Radio Liberty, January 21, 2016, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/27500846.html>.

³⁴ Radio Liberty.

A vertical aerial photograph of a mountain valley. In the background, there are snow-capped mountains. The middle ground shows a winding river with a light-colored, silty appearance, surrounded by dense evergreen forests. A dirt road or path runs along the riverbank. The foreground is a grassy slope.

4. VOICES OF DISSENT: THE DEMANDS AND TARGETS OF MINING PROTESTS

4.1 The Demands of Protestors

The demands articulated in gold mining protests are intricately tied to the multifaceted issues discussed earlier, encompassing environmental, social, cultural, and governance concerns. In a single protest, activists may express multiple demands, reflecting the complexity of the issues faced by communities, and these demands are registered in the dataset as presented in various news outlets.

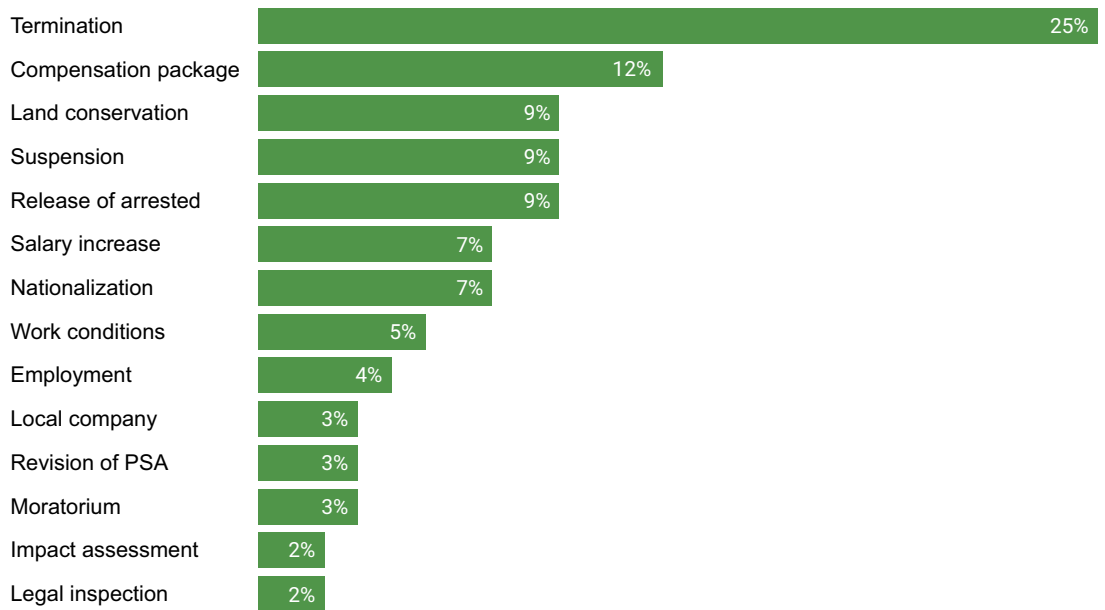
As indicated in Table 3, the termination of extraction activities by companies stands out as a prevalent demand, reflecting a quarter of the protests calling for the permanent closure of gold mines. This aligns with the environmental issues discussed above, emphasizing the urgency felt by communities to address a variety of ecological concerns arising from mining activities. Similarly, the demand for suspension (9%) reflects a strategic approach by communities to temporarily halt mining activities until specific conditions, often related to social packages, are met. These two approaches together indicate that the main purpose of protests is to close down extractive operations temporarily or permanently in certain cases. In occasional instances, protesting parties demanded a moratorium for up to 50 years, as observed in the case of the Jeruy mine site in Talas.

Pressures on compensation packages underscore the social dimension, with communities seeking reparation for the environmental harm caused by gold mining operations. Salary, agreement stipulations, and demands for more local employment directly address the challenges faced by the workforce, linking to concerns about work conditions and employment issues discussed earlier. Additionally, the calls for land conservation and impact assessment reflect the interconnectedness of environmental and social issues, emphasizing the significance of preserving natural landscapes integral to local communities.

The desire for nationalization falls under the governance issues, reflecting a tendency for increased control by the central government over resources. The release of arrested individuals mainly pertains to popular opposition leaders during the years 2010–2019 (nowadays in power), highlighting the legal implications surrounding protests and the efforts to safeguard activists involved. Other demands, such as the revision of production-sharing agreements (PSA) and legal inspections, further emphasize how the income accrued from the mines is shared between local communities, central government, and foreign investors. In this context, Kumtor's PSA revision has consistently been an issue between Centerra Gold and the Kyrgyz government.



Table 3. Demands of Mining Protests



In essence, the diverse demands voiced in gold mining protests reflect the multifaceted challenges faced by communities. Balancing investors' operations with local communities' needs as well as governmental policies emerges as a pivotal challenge, necessitating a nuanced approach for sustainable and mutually beneficial outcomes.

4.2. The Targets of Mining Protests

Mining protests in Kyrgyzstan primarily center around corporate entities, as supported by the collected data. Additionally, governmental institutions and local municipal authorities are singled out as targets to advocate for specific policy changes, including enhanced regulation, monitoring, and control of mining activities. The protests' multifaceted nature highlights dissatisfaction with extractive actions, workforce conditions, policies, and influences, primarily from corporate entities and occasionally from governmental bodies. A nuanced understanding of these specific targets provides valuable insights into the underlying forces driving public activism and unrest in the gold mining sector.

The dataset unveils a diverse array of corporate entities targeted by protests, citing instances of unfulfilled social packages, delayed salaries, poor working conditions, and employment-related issues. As highlighted earlier, in the village of Oruktu in Jalal-Abad, residents directed their grievances towards Kyrgyz Chinese KGM Ltd company, urging the settlement of past debts linked to a promised social package.³⁵ The local population insisted on resolving all outstanding debts before allowing any further work to proceed. This protest manifested as a response to unmet commitments by the extractive company, reflecting concerns about the economic impact on local communities and the workforce.

³⁵ Kalmatov, "Ala-Buka: pretenzii k zolotodobyvayushchemu predpriyatiyu."



Protests extend beyond corporate entities to encompass government actions and policies associated with the mining sector. In the same village of Oruktu in 2014, residents directed their voices toward governmental bodies along with the company to ensure the completion of the social package. A local expert explained the frequent occurrence of such rallies, stating, *“There is no unified policy on mineral resource development. Additionally, officials who make such decisions are corrupt. Such conflicts also arise due to a lack of trust among the people in mining companies. All of this leads to the inefficient use of natural resources.”*³⁶

Moreover, the protests primarily target foreign companies, especially Chinese extractive firms, highlighting environmental concerns associated with mining operations. For example, residents in the Katran village confronted a Russian company, emphasizing immediate health risks to the local population due to water pollution from the Aprel gold mine. This unresolved issue persisted for almost a decade, as discussed in subsection 2. In the case of the Shambesay mine, there were repeated calls to cease the operations of the Chinese company “Tiandy” in February 2012³⁷, twice in 2013,³⁸ twice in 2017, and three times in 2018. The frequency of these protests indicates the persistent ineffectiveness of government oversight and regulatory frameworks. The diverse targets of protests highlight the necessity for a comprehensive approach to tackle the distinct concerns driving public activism within the gold mining sector.

³⁶ Beishenbek kyzy, “Ala-Buka: Ne Pozvol'yayut Nachat' Rabotu Na Mestorozhdenii Solomo.”

³⁷ Dmitriy Denisenko, “Miting Protiv Razrabotki Zolotorudnogo Mestorozhdeniya Shambesay,” accessed December 2, 2023, https://www.vb.kg/doc/179493_miting_protiv_razrabotki_zolotorydnogo_mestorojdeniia_shambesay.html.

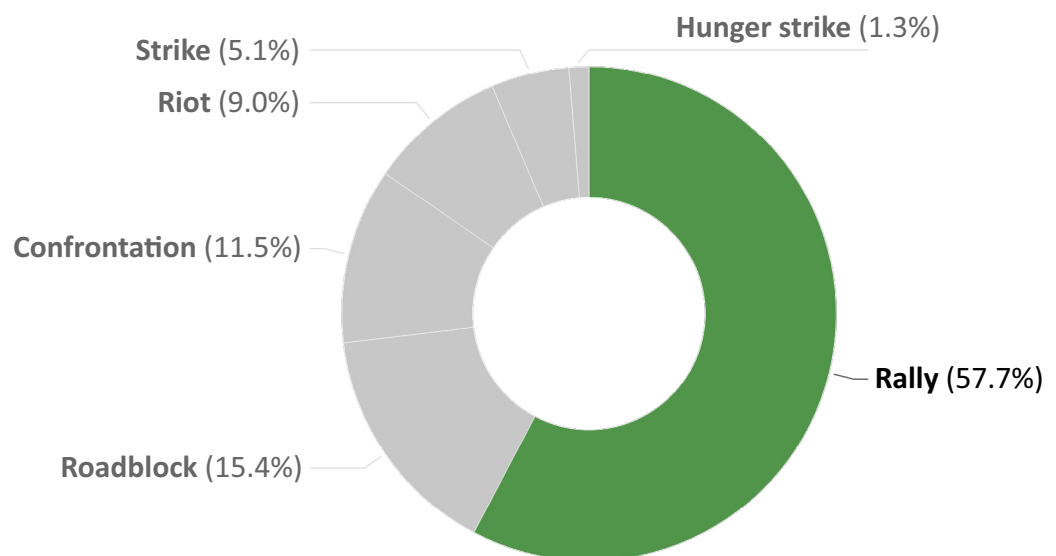
³⁸ Talas Alymov, “Trassa Osh-Batken byla perekryta na dva chasa iz-za nedovol'stva dobyvayushchey kompaniyey,” KLOOP.KG (blog), November 9, 2013, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2013/11/09/nedovol-ny-e-zolotodoby-vayushhej-kompaniej-perekry-li-trassu-osh-batken/>.

5. PROTESTOR ACTIONS AGAINST MINING COMPANIES

In examining the dynamics of gold mining protests, it is essential to delve into the specific forms these expressions of dissent take on the ground. The diverse actions employed by protestors underscore the depth of their grievances and the urgency with which they seek to address the challenges posed by mining operations. As revealed in the dataset, the predominant forms of protest include rallies, roadblocks, confrontations, riots, strikes, and even hunger strikes as indicated in Table 4. Each of these methods serves as a unique manifestation of discontent, reflecting the multifaceted nature of the issues at hand. In this regard, some protest examples are explained here to illustrate how protestors employ these methods in their endeavors to challenge the gold mining industry and achieve their desired outcomes. It is important to note that in certain cases if protests extended over several days and evolved from one type to another, I treated them as distinct protests, although such occurrences were rare.

Out of the 81 protests occurring in the past 13 years, nearly 60% were characterized by peaceful rallies. During these gatherings, individuals assembled in a unified space to articulate their opinions and demands. Additionally, some rallies involved marches toward specific locations, such as company premises, local government institutions, or, in the case of protests related to the Kumtor Mining Company, even central government offices due to its national significance transcending local significance. However, as noticed from news reports, peaceful rallies are not always effective in garnering the necessary attention of local authorities, extractive companies, or relevant ministries. In such cases, protestors resort to employing alternative methods.

Table 4. Types of protests



The second most used action by protestors is implementing roadblocks, particularly on roads leading to gold mines or strategic national highways. This type of action demands an immediate response from local authorities,



security forces, emergency departments, relevant ministries, and operating enterprises. An illustrative example of this occurred when young individuals blocked the road to the Kumtor mine, accusing the gold miners of corruption in their hiring practices. They even threatened to cut off the electricity supply to the mining company. The protestors stipulated a 20-day ultimatum for Kumtor to meet their demands, or the strike would persist.³⁹ One of their demands included the asphalt paving of the road from the main highway on the southern shore of Lake Issyk-Kul to the mine.

Another notable instance of roadblock protests took place when demonstrators obstructed the road leading to a mine, demanding the developer, 'Kazakhmys Gold Kyrgyzstan,' pave the road passing through the village to Bozymchak in the Jalal-Abad region.⁴⁰ Indeed roadblock was used in several incidents, including Kara-Kazyk in 2011 and 2013, Shyralzhyin in 2014, Shambesay in 2013, Ishtanberdi in 2011, and Katran in 2021, among many others.

In certain instances, protests escalated to extreme measures, including direct confrontations between local communities and extractive company workers. Some communities went even further, engaging in riots that led to the destruction of premises, technologies, and other assets belonging to extractive enterprises. Regrettably, such actions not only discourage potential investors from other countries but also force existing companies to exit the country. A striking example is the Zhong Ji gold mine, which faced closure due to community dissatisfaction, protests, and an attack on mine workers in 2019.⁴¹ This incident resulted in over 20 Chinese workers being hospitalized, the departure of workers, and the removal of mining equipment. The severe consequences highlight the potential drawbacks of confrontational and destructive protest tactics on both local economies and international investments.

In another incident, protests erupted at the Makmal mine in the Jalal-Abad region, where residents voiced their opposition to the construction of a gold processing plant in March 2018.⁴² Approximately a hundred people forcefully entered the premises of the Zhi El Makmal Developing Company, breaking through the barriers in protest. There were two waves of protests, with the initial demonstration leading to the suspension of the construction of the gold processing plant. In the second wave, residents demanded the complete dismantling of even the structures that had already been erected by the investor. Their primary concern was the perceived environmental damage that the construction would inflict on the region. These demonstrations exemplify the multifaceted nature of protests, highlighting the diverse rural grievances in each location.

³⁹ Dzyubenko, "Kyrgyz Protesters End Blockade of Gold Mine Road," Reuters, June 4, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/gold-kyrgyzstan/kyrgyz-protesters-end-blockade-of-gold-mine-road-idUKL5E8H48AG20120604/?edition-redirect=uk>.

⁴⁰ Kadyrbekov, "Zaderzhano neskol'ko mitinguyushchikh po mestorozhdeniyu Bozymchak," Sputnik Kyrgyzstan, July 27, 2015, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/20150727/1016991633.html>.

⁴¹ Kadyrbekov

⁴² Tatiana Kudryatseva, "Na Makmale snova miting. Zhiteli slomali ograzhdeniye i protestuyut protiv investora," 24.kg, March 1, 2018, https://24.kg/ekonomika/77432_namakmale_snova_miting_jiteli_slomali_ograjdenie_iprotestuyut_proтив_investora/.

A vertical aerial photograph of a mountain valley. In the foreground, a dirt road winds through a lush green valley. A river flows through the middle ground, surrounded by dense evergreen forests. In the background, majestic mountains with patches of snow rise against a clear sky. The overall scene is a beautiful natural landscape.

6. STRATEGIES FOR LOCAL ACCEPTANCE IN THE MINING SECTOR

To address the challenges arising from protests and potential criticism from local communities, particularly in the context of foreign companies, various strategies are employed to cultivate local acceptance. One prominent strategy involves financial engagement at both the local and central government levels, intending to garner support and minimize the risk of discontent. This financial commitment often takes the form of investments in infrastructure projects, community initiatives, and compensation packages.

An illustrative example is observed in the response of the Chinese company 'Kaidi' to numerous protests. To foster local goodwill, the company undertook initiatives such as laying asphalt on the roads in the neighboring villages of Chak and Altyn-Mazar.⁴³ Additionally, they constructed a pipeline to provide fresh water to these communities. As a demonstration of their commitment to local infrastructure, the company also pledged to build a bridge over the nearby river that flows through these villages. These strategic actions aim to mitigate potential discontent and enhance the company's standing within the local communities.

Collaboration with national enterprises emerges as another effective strategy, providing Chinese companies with a lower risk of local discontent and protests. For instance, the Taldy-Bulak gold deposit in the Chuy region is licensed to 'Altynken,' a company owned 40% by OJSC 'Kyrgyz Altyn' (with all shares owned by the government of Kyrgyzstan) and 60% by the Chinese company, Zijin Mining, a leading Chinese mineral resources developer.⁴⁴ Another example is the partnership on 'Eti Bakir Terek-Say,' a joint venture between 'Kyrgyz Altyn' (25%) and the Turkish company 'Eti Bakir' (75%).⁴⁵ These collaborations allow foreign companies to navigate the complex terrain of local interests, leveraging the influence and stability provided by their partnerships with national entities.

In addition, certain companies aimed to secure local acceptance and alleviate potential discontent by registering a Kyrgyz citizen as a founder and presenting the enterprise as locally owned. In 2014, the Chamber of Accounts of Kyrgyzstan initiated an audit of Fonta LLC, which held licenses for the "Sulu-Terek" and "Kuru-Terek" gold deposits, covering 23.9 and 34.9 hectares, respectively.⁴⁶ According to the company's documents, Sh. Boltabaev was listed as the director, but in reality, the entity was managed by a Chinese citizen, and all the workers were Chinese.⁴⁷ These strategic actions were taken to underscore the company's local identity and avoid potential dissent.

⁴³ Sanjar Eraliev, "Chon-Alayda 'Kaydini' ishtetpey jatishat," *Radio Liberty*, August 18, 2012, https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_economy_region/24681218.html.

⁴⁴ Radio Liberty, "Chinese Company Suspends Operations at Kyrgyz Gold Mine After Clashes."

⁴⁵ Makanbai kyzy, "Zhiteli sela Terek-Say s det'mi vyshli na miting protiv zolotodobyvayushchey kompanii."

⁴⁶ Zhakshylyk Berdibek uulu, "Korrupsiya v Agentstve Po Geologii i Mineral'nym Resursam, Ili Svoevoliye Kompanii 'Fonta,'" October 27, 2014, https://m.gezitter.org/society/34398_korrupsiya_v_agentstve_po_geologii_i_mineralnyim_resursam_ili_svoevolie_kompanii_fonta/.

⁴⁷ Berdibek uulu.

A vertical aerial photograph of a mountain valley. In the background, there are snow-capped mountains. The middle ground shows a winding river with a light-colored, possibly mineral-rich, flow. The foreground is a lush green valley with a dirt road and scattered trees.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To foster sustainable practices in the utilization of natural resources, the Kyrgyz government, specifically the **Ministry of Natural Resources, Ecology, and Technical Supervision**, should explore the following policy recommendations:

- **Encouraging Multilateral Partnerships in Gold Mining:** Currently, there is a tendency toward nationalization. However, the Kyrgyz government should also consider fostering collaborative efforts with international organizations, and other public and private sectors through joint exploration and development practices. Establishing public-private partnerships can leverage the strengths of both entities, promoting shared responsibility and accountability. This approach allows for a more balanced distribution of benefits and risks, ensuring that the interests of local communities, the government, and private investors are considered.
- **Comprehensive Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) Standards:** Addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by gold mining protests requires the implementation of robust ESG standards. This involves the development and enforcement of comprehensive regulatory frameworks by the government. Such standards should emphasize responsible and ethical practices within the mining industry, ensuring that extractive companies prioritize environmental conservation, uphold social responsibilities, and adhere to good governance principles.
- **Enhancing Transparency and Accountability:** The Ministry of Natural Resources can play a pivotal role in enhancing transparency and accountability in the natural resource management sector. Implementing measures such as regular audits, public disclosure of environmental impact assessments, and transparent reporting of revenues generated from mining activities can build trust among local communities for governmental institutions.

To promote effective local management of natural resources, especially gold and other critical raw minerals at the local level, **municipalities** may consider the following recommendations:

- **Establishing Oversight Commissions:** Local self-governance municipalities should establish oversight commissions comprising representatives from diverse stakeholder groups, including local council deputies, activist citizens, women, youth, and extractive company representatives. If feasible, a representative from the central government should also be included. These commissions would play



a crucial role in overseeing, monitoring, and controlling extractive operations. By providing a platform for dialogue, they facilitate discussions on emerging issues, explore potential opportunities, and address other relevant matters. This collaborative approach ensures an inclusive and transparent decision-making process that considers the concerns and perspectives of all stakeholders.

To enhance community engagement in natural resources management, non-governmental organizations, associations of journalists and lawyers, and others must equally contribute to the following policy.

- **Strengthening Community Education and Awareness:** To achieve sustainable practices in natural resource management, local NGOs should prioritize enhancing community education and awareness. This involves promoting a deeper understanding of the environmental impacts associated with gold mining, with a specific focus on addressing air pollution. Implementing targeted awareness campaigns, workshops, and educational programs can empower local communities with the knowledge needed to actively engage in discussions, make informed decisions, and advocate for their well-being. By fostering a more comprehensive understanding, NGOs can build a foundation for responsible and community-driven decision-making in the realm of gold mining activities.

An aerial photograph of a mountain valley. In the foreground, a dirt road winds through a lush green forest. A river flows through the middle ground, surrounded by more trees and a small pond. In the background, majestic mountains with patches of snow rise against a clear sky. The entire image has a green color overlay.

8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of gold mining protests in Kyrgyzstan over the past 13 years reveals a complex relationship of environmental, social, cultural, and governance issues that have fueled community dissent. Environmental concerns, prominently driven by water pollution, pasture degradation, and air pollution, have been a recurring theme in protests, reflecting the tangible impact of mining activities on local ecosystems and public health. These environmental concerns not only jeopardize the ecological balance but also pose threats to the human rights of local people, as highlighted by the UN's declaration that everyone on the planet has a right to a healthy environment, including clean air, water, and a stable climate.⁴⁸

Social issues, encompassing compensation disputes, employment dynamics, and the fulfillment of social packages, underscore the tensions between extractive companies and local communities. Cultural issues, particularly the prevailing distrust of foreign investors, especially Chinese companies, add another layer to the protests. The data illustrates a significant correlation between protests and Chinese companies, emphasizing the need for navigating cultural sensitivities. Governance challenges within extractive companies, such as labor rights violations, wage disputes, and internal governance problems, contribute to community dissatisfaction and shape the nature of protests. The various protest actions, including rallies, roadblocks, confrontations, and even riots, underscore the urgency and depth of grievances expressed by affected communities.

Considering these findings, policy recommendations are proposed, emphasizing the need for comprehensive environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards, enhanced transparency, public-private partnerships, and community engagement. These measures are aimed at fostering responsible and sustainable practices in the gold mining sector, ensuring a balance between economic benefits to local communities and environmental impact. Ultimately, addressing the root causes of protests requires a collaborative effort involving the government, extractive companies, local communities, and various stakeholders to achieve a more equitable and sustainable future for Kyrgyzstan's gold mining industry.

⁴⁸ UNEP, "In Historic Move, UN Declares Healthy Environment a Human Right," UNEP, July 28, 2022, <http://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/historic-move-un-declares-healthy-environment-human-right>.

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