

CONTENTIOUS DISCOURSES SURROUNDING SUPERMARKETS IN POST-SOVIET BISHKEK

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The 24th of March 2005 will probably remain in Kyrgyzstan inhabitants' memories as the most shocking day in the history of the capital city. By various estimations, around 10,000 people went to the main square to protest against the President of 15 years and against the results of the recently held parliamentary elections. The protest started with a peaceful demonstration, but rapidly took the form of an angry crowd breaking into the Government House. Right after the attack on the Government House, the President was reported to have disappeared from the building, and later from the country. He has not shown himself to the public since that day. Foreign and local journalists later reported that he settled in Moscow with his family. The opposition that came into power after the attack on the Government House demanded that he resign from the position of the Presidency.

The night of the March 24th was marked by unprecedented events, including the looting of the biggest supermarkets. Interestingly, it was specifically supermarkets, which became the main target of massive lootings, along with the destruction and burning of some of the buildings.

Mass Media sources variously depicted the events of the 24th of March: some viewed these events as a revolution that succeeded in overthrowing Akaev's regime; others were claiming that the massive protest and lootings showed the poor level of education and political awareness of Kyrgyzstani citizens. The massive upheaval challenged people's minds and was food for gossip and various assumptions on political issues, the lootings, and their organizers.

Prior to starting my fieldwork, I had already been exposed to these talks through virtual forums and news on the Internet. Talks, reflections, and assumptions seemed to get tossed around from one extreme to the other. Some assumed that the lootings were organized by the oppositional forces, while others claimed that it was Akaev's initiative in order to make black PR for the opposition. The lootings made me look at the economic institution of supermarkets from another angle—their politicized essence.

This paper focuses on discourses surrounding new shopping places in Bishkek. On the one hand, according to liberals and government officials, supermarkets represent the height of freedom, civilization and choice (Fleetwood 2005). On the other side of the discourse are scholars who argue that "fascination with consumption reinforces social inequalities and encourages social disappointment with political changes" (Zentai ND:2). The empirical findings of my research present similar contentious debates regarding Bishkek supermarkets: (1) they brought civilization and modernization into the infrastructure of the city; but (2) they reveal growing social inequality. Supermarkets were depicted as advantageous and beneficial by Mass Media sources, politicians and later by Bishkek habitants. Along with their civilizing mission, Bishkek supermarkets turned out to symbolize social inequality, and also demonstrate to the wide poor public that they are excluded from the circles of more affluent citizens through their shopping experiences. Bishkek supermarkets are indeed extensively politicized in nature, i.e. most of them are largely monopolized by the clique of politicians. And the economic success of politicians involved in the institutionalization of supermarkets has provoked contentious public debate. Massive lootings of supermarkets in the aftermath of the political upheaval in Bishkek in March 2005 became evidence of widespread negative public perception. These contestations suggest that new economic institutions in the postsocialist world raise large political disputes.

The fieldwork for this paper was conducted in April 2005, two weeks after the political upheaval and massive lootings. The research was based on qualitative methods, and engaged collection of newspaper articles (1990-2005) and in-depth interviews with ten respondents.

Establishment of Supermarkets

It is important to clarify what kind of shopping places are considered to be supermarkets in Bishkek. Similar to shopping malls as discussed by Miller (1998), supermarkets can be distinguished from other kinds of trading places by several characteristics. First of all, supermarkets occupy separate buildings with various sections. Large

supermarkets such as Beta, Goin, Dordoi Plaza and Silkway, which this work will discuss the most, are large, three to four story buildings. Bishkek supermarkets present a curious case as they resemble Western department stores or malls, due to their division into sections that are rented by autonomous retailers. For example, Dordoi Plaza and Silkway, which are owned by local entrepreneurs, are divided into many sections, so that each retailer has multiple roles crossing the whole prolific range of traders as described by Humphrey (as cited in Verdery 1999:7), that of supplier, manager, and seller. They are also similar to malls because they function not only as shopping places, but also as places for entertainment. Thus, Plaza hosts a cafe and a playground for kids, while Silkway is a venue for billiard rooms, a cinema, and a restaurant. Another similar trait of Plaza and Silkway to Western-style malls is in their circuit of ownership. When describing the work of malls in Britain, Miller et al claimed that the managerial circuit consisted of three main sets of actors. The first is the owners, usually property companies or institutional investors. The second set of actors is the managers, who are usually acting as agents of the owners. Then, finally, there are the retailers leasing space in malls (1998:42). In contrast to Silkway and Plaza, two other big supermarkets, Beta and Goin, owned by Turkish and Chinese companies respectively, operate as one single unit, with their managerial staff and workers employed by the administration and their commodities imported from Turkey and China.

All four shopping centres were indeed novelties, as they presented commodities and services never experienced before by Soviet people. Fancy men's and women's clothes, advanced technical equipment, office and home furniture, beauty care products, and food of all kinds were all in one place! Soviet shops never had such conveniences as security guards, public bathrooms, cafes, and billiard and cinema rooms. These all seemed a wonderland for people who were used to a deficiency of goods and traditional long lines at Soviet shops. Regardless of their similarity to Western-style malls and department stores in their operation, these shopping places continue to be peculiarly called supermarkets by both owners and Bishkek habitants. Following the general pattern of public reference, I shall use the word 'supermarket' in regard to these novel shopping places.

According to the report of local newspaper *AKIpress* (2000, No.5), in 1997 the

first supermarket "Europe" opened its doors "to affluent ambassadors, employees of international organizations and representatives of highest echelons of the nomenclatura" (ibid:24). As indicated in *AKIpress*, "Europe" was built with the credit of USD 400,000 from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. This supermarket was the first to introduce a large variety of imported goods, discount cards for regular customers, and high-level services. "Europe," however, did not attain wide popularity among habitants of Bishkek, since its consumer niche mainly consisted of wealthy foreigners and Kyrgyz elite.

In 1998, the second supermarket "Eridan" was opened and ready to deliver novel commodities and services. According to *AKIpress* (1998, No.17-18:7), this supermarket was owned by Daniyar Usenov—deputy of the legislative assembly and a member of the tax committee under the assembly. "Eridan" became the main competitor for "Europe," and they both became successful in the market, as their yearly trade turnover in 1998 equaled USD 2 million (*AKIpress* 2000, No.5:3). Two years after its opening, "Eridan" was sold by Usenov to his colleague—the deputy Baibolov (*Vecherniy Bishkek*, 5th of January, 1999).

After the emergence of the above-mentioned two supermarkets, such shopping places mushroomed at a rapid pace. By the year 2005, there were around 20 small and big supermarkets registered in the National Statistical committee. I would argue that the mushrooming of supermarkets was related, but not restricted to, expanding foreign direct investment. Foreign direct investment and the establishment of a free market economy with its inseparable constituents: liberalization, stabilization, and privatisation, named "the holy trinity of policies" (Rutland, 2001:5), paved the way for the emergence of malls and supermarkets in Bishkek.

The year 2000 was marked by the opening of the biggest supermarket in Bishkek—Beta-Stores, owned by a Turkish company. It was opened in a reconstructed formerly state-owned building, located downtown, on the main avenue of the city, *Chui*. According to the store's web-site,¹ Beta-Stores can be identified as a hypermarket due to its retail trade area of 4,000 square meters, warehouses of 400 square meters, parking area of 1,000 square meters and other facilities. The opening ceremony of Beta-Stores attained wide public interest and media coverage. The most well known newspaper, *Vecherniy Bishkek*, called this supermarket an "oasis situated in the heart of the capital" (*Vecherniy Bishkek* 2000, July 10:3).

In line with Zentai's (ND:3) remark about malls in Budapest, supermarkets in Bishkek became

of “primary importance in public policy agenda.” Thus, opening ceremonies of supermarkets were usually accompanied by speeches from prominent political figures. The opening of Beta-Stores, for instance, was honored by the visits of the well-known Kyrgyz writer and the ambassador of Kyrgyzstan in Belgium, Chingiz Aitmatov, along with the President of Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akaev. *Vechernyi Bishkek* described this pompous event as follows, “Aitmatov noted the high significance of the supermarket, and said, ‘trade has always been an indicator of civilization. Today we are adopting the new level of civilization with the help of the owner of Beta-Stores and his faithful commitment to the development of trade in Kyrgyzstan’” (*Vechernyi Bishkek* 2000, July 10:3). While Aitmatov’s words seem to be aimed at rationalizing the state’s cooperation with foreign entrepreneurs, President Akaev’s words were too illusory. He called the owner of the supermarket a “wizard whose magic is revealed through this supermarket, which resembles a palace” (*Vechernyi Bishkek*, 2000, July 10:3).

The active participation of prominent politicians in the opening ceremonies does not solely indicate the primary economic importance that was given to supermarkets. It also shows that supermarkets were not “without political dimension” (Matejowsky 2002). Bishkek supermarkets were viewed as enterprises worth large investments. Moreover, some politicians gained material profits through the establishment of supermarkets. The growing number of these shopping places demonstrated the success of the regime and those in power by showing the economic development of the city.

Besides their ownership of most private enterprises, politicians have also become key figures in the whole process of the modernization of cities. Humphrey’s (2002) findings provide a good illustration of key roles played by political figures in the economic sector. Politicians are involved in the reconstruction of cities through their regulations of market principles. While discussing the development of Moscow as a metropolitan city, Humphrey emphasizes the crucial role of state officials in city planning. She describes the role of the city mayor Iurii Luzhkov as having the authority to make decisions on the transformation of the city, where much attention is paid to the development of expensive shops and vast malls. According to Humphrey, “the showpiece shopping complexes are not banished to the outskirts but consciously constructed to make harmonious ensembles with potent

architectural symbols of Russian history in the centre” (Humphrey 2002:196). In line with Humphrey’s observations in Moscow, Kyrgyz politicians became the key figures in the whole process of implementing a market economy—the number one issue in the public policy agenda. Those in power thus monopolized the newly emerging commercial sphere that played a crucial role in developing the country’s economy.

The active participation of politicians in the establishment of supermarkets and wide mass media coverage should have played their role in the formation of public’s attitude towards these economic institutions. But what are these attitudes? How do Kyrgyzstani citizens view supermarkets? These questions are to be addressed in the following sections.

Supermarkets symbolizing civilization and modernization of the city

The centre of Bishkek city has been transformed in its appearance in the last several years. The appearance of bigger supermarkets made its significant contribution to these changes. Walking down the main avenue of Chui, one’s eyes will unintentionally be caught on the several story building of Dordoi Plaza shopping centre. Bright colors, big windows and modern façades of the building look attractive in front of greyish blocks of houses that remain from the Soviet era. At the entrance of the building flashy posters advertise the latest movies on the screen. Having entered the building, customers bump into several guys in dark blue uniforms, ceremoniously holding their hands on portable radio transmitters—these are security guards. The first floor of Dordoi Plaza is occupied by many small boutiques selling Bourgeois, Lancome, Avon cosmetics, Levi’s jeans and glitzy jewellery. Standing on the escalator that leads to the second floor, one gets to hear children’s voices coming from the playground, which is usually packed, since parents from the neighbouring blocks bring their kids regardless of their shopping intentions. Thus, the playground that is meant to keep kids busy while their parents are shopping has in fact become a place of entertainment for young visitors. The second floor hosts many other boutiques with brand clothes, collections of French wine, furs and coats. There is also a little café, the menu of which mostly includes “European” cuisine. Music playing on the background and the well-thought design of Dordoi Plaza’s interior add to all the pleasures of consumers who are considered to satisfy their exigent shopping desires here.

The growing number of supermarkets in the city seems to prove their increasing popularity among

people. However, from interviews and daily observations, I can say that supermarkets have not become conventional shopping places for the majority of Bishkek habitants yet. Despite this fact, respondents considered supermarkets to be carriers of “civilization” and “modernization” processes. According to the respondents, the buildings of supermarkets indicate urbanization of the city, development of small and medium businesses and economic growth.

In the aftermath of the political upheaval in March and looting of supermarkets, forums and chats were flourishing with hot issues. Members were expressing their concerns about looting and destructions of the buildings, complaining that the city has become more like a “big village now.” I find parallels between these concerns and Chodak’s (1973:256) idea that “modernization is a special, important instance of the development of societies, an instance where conscientious efforts are made to achieve higher chosen standards” (as cited in Sztompka 1993:132). Most of the respondents, did indeed believe that supermarkets became indicators of modernization and were steps towards higher standards in the sphere of trade. Moreover, in one of his interviews former President Akaev blamed marauders for “killing the motor engine of the capital city’s economy through the destruction of small and medium businesses.”² This statement demonstrates that supermarkets became the main pillars in the sphere of developing private business that was believed to make the city more “modern” and “civilized.”

Aisulu, a 48-year old doctor, while sharing her first experience of visiting a Bishkek supermarket said it brought only joy and delight: “I’d been to the US and had a clear idea of what a supermarket is like. When I first went to ‘Eridan’... I was so ... I could not help admiring that we finally have the same thing as abroad. And also when we were young students, we had trips to socialist countries like Poland and Czechoslovakia, and there we used to see their shops. We always had a dream of having such shops here, in our country.” Aisulu also expressed her preference for supermarkets, due to the “aesthetic pleasure from their interiors and the nice packaging of goods.”

When Amina, a 21-year old office-manager, was asked about the supermarkets’ functions, she said they became meeting points and also places to hang around for many youngsters. For Amina, the advantages were also in services, fresh food products, and in the

customer’s right to return defective goods. As customers, respondents pointed out some practicalities, such as clean, comfortable, and safe environments that guarantee high quality service, a large variety and control over commodities, and chances to return deficient goods. These were the main criteria upon which they based their judgments. Judgments have also been based on the comparison with local bazaars, which definitely lacked all the notions of “civilized consumption.”

It could be seen from the interviews that the public in Bishkek generally considers supermarkets to be beneficial. According to respondents, the budget of the government benefits from the supermarkets because of the taxes. Interviewees also admitted a contribution of supermarkets to the architectural design of the city. They all considered supermarkets to boost the image of Bishkek, thus indicating urbanization and gradual modernization processes. Kerim, a 48-year old scientist at the National Academy of Sciences, noted that “supermarkets are the next stage of civilization that trade succeeded to achieve.” He considered the emergence and establishment of supermarkets as a natural way of economic development. The claim about supermarkets bringing in the notion of civilization and modernity were further shared by most of the respondents, regardless of their shopping behaviour: “Just look at those beautiful buildings of big supermarkets like Plaza and Beta... don’t they show a civilization?” says Aisulu. Amina concurs that, “Supermarkets are the step towards modernity of our little mountainous country” (Amina, 21-year old female). Tatiana, a 47 year-old worker at City Hall, comments that, “Even though I personally do not visit supermarkets often, I think they are the image of our city. They present a new culture of consumption. Because people do not merely consume... but they get to adopt a new culture... somewhat urban culture.” Doolosbek, a 53-year old director of the local cinema, expressed his hope that there will be even more supermarkets in the city, “thus creating normal competitive conditions among them.” According to this respondent, the further development of supermarkets will signify a full-fledged market economy, which in turn makes the country prosper. He highlighted that supermarkets are the image of the city, because of their modern architecture and their contribution to the economic development.

Drawing from the results of the interviews it is possible to distinguish the use-value of supermarkets. (Table 1 presents the use-value i.e., their practicalities.) The consideration of the use-values is important in explaining respondents’

appreciation of supermarkets regardless of their shopping experiences. The use-values of supermarkets may serve as indicators of urbanization, capitalism and democratisation, which all in turn are described as components of the modernization process by Sztompka (1993:128).

Besides the practicalities, respondents also mentioned a new consumer culture that is being cultivated by supermarkets. As Aisulu said, "it turned out that shopping may be fun!" If in Soviet times, shopping was mostly stressful and tiring, now it has become fun, exciting, amusing process. Places of consumption do not only serve a function of delivering food products, clothes and other necessary goods as they used to before, but they also have various other functions, entertainment being the main one. Special discounts and small presents to customers aim at stimulating customers to purchase more and more. These all dramatically differ from what state-owned, Soviet shops could propose.

Respondents often referred to "Western standards" and "the West" while talking about civilization and modernization processes. Oftentimes, respondents pointed at specific material objects sold in supermarkets, which in their understanding were "Western." Melis, a 42 year-old government employee notes, "In the 1980s one of our colleagues traveled to some capitalist country. And guess what he brought to everyone of us at work as small gifts—disposable plastic cups! I still remember those red, plastic cups that we perceived as items of luxury. And now, I can buy tons of such disposable cups at any supermarket here!"

Melis' comments are indicative of Fehervary's (2002:369) discussion of postsocialist Hungarian citizens' perception of Western goods, "[they] became displaced metonyms of another world, as the opposition between the state-socialist system and the capitalist system became embodied in their products." Gradually, all the products that were novel to Bishkek shoppers came to be associated with the West. The availability of such commodities in local supermarkets was the indicator of Westernization, i.e. civilization and modernization. As Sztompka (1993:132) states, historical definitions of modernization are synonymous with Westernization or Americanization. As an example he quotes Shmuel Eisenstadt, "Historically, modernization is the process of change towards those types of social, economic and political systems that have

developed in Western Europe and North America..." (1966b:1 as cited in Sztompka 1993:132). Thus, client-oriented supermarkets as products of the market economy and capitalism have been largely accepted as carriers of modernization process.

However, the "civilizing mission" of supermarkets did not turn out to be the end result. Respondent's appreciation of supermarkets turned out to be only one side of the coin. Bishkek supermarkets are a good case for illustrating how new shopping places, when implemented in a post-Soviet milieu, may raise contentious debates. I further suggest that the contentious nature of supermarkets has been largely influenced by their politicisation. The findings showed that the association of supermarkets with the wealthy West and civilization is engaged with other associations, such as social inequality.

Western splendor in the middle of a glaring poverty

It turns out that only a small percentage of the population can enjoy the fruits of capitalism that are being represented by "civilized" and "modern" supermarkets. Despite the general consensus of respondents about the advantages of supermarkets, not all of them considered these stores as attainable. Some respondents did not hide the fact that their irregular shopping in supermarkets and preference for bazaars are conditioned by their low material status. 55-year old Dmitryi, who works at the Ministry of Culture, confessed that he does not shop in supermarkets due to significantly higher prices. He tried to rationalize his preference of bazaars over supermarkets, stating that customers perhaps prefer supermarkets out of mere prestige:

"If one drives a Mercedes, then it's not proper to go and shop at the bazaar. Whereas for normal people like us there is not much difference in commodities sold in supermarkets and bazaars, you know. They [the supermarkets] take the same thing as in bazaars, wrap it nicely, and put up a tag with a price as long as a telephone number." Dmitryi's opinion regarding higher prices in supermarkets was shared by other respondents. According to Aisulu, Bishkek supermarkets are still not affordable for many social strata. She pointed out several reasons for inaccessibility of supermarkets: "The living standard of people is very low, and prices in supermarkets are higher than in bazaars anyway, because at supermarkets the cost of the rent and other services is included in the price of a commodity."

Irregular supermarket shopper, Mariya (43-year old, economist), noted the disadvantages of supermarkets as follows, "supermarkets are simply

not for our lives. They are more for the rich.” Her first experience of shopping in a supermarket was in 1997, when she went with her husband “just to see what they’ve got.” As she later said: “We were astonished by the variety of wines and chocolates there, and we even bought something, since it was New Year’s Eve. But frankly, I didn’t want to go back to supermarkets after my first experience.” What discouraged Mariya from visiting supermarkets after her first experience were the high prices. To follow the general reflections of the interviewees, it can be concluded that the main disadvantages that raise most public concern are high prices unaffordable for most social groups. The results of interviews show that Bishkek supermarkets still are far from diffusion and extension from serving luxury high-end niches, to being mass merchandisers. In this way, they become as Aisulu notes, an “inducement of a beautiful life.”

According to the National Statistics Committee’s data, the average wage of a person in the republic for the year 2005 equalled 2569 soms per month (approximately USD 62). It should be noted that the average salaries provided by National Statistics Committee represent the range of wages in governmental organizations. In the business sector, and also in international non-profit organizations workers may earn much more, starting from USD 100 to USD 1500 and more. But the percentage of workers in these sectors is very small, approximately 15% of the population. According to the report of Governmental Committee on Migration and Labor in Kyrgyzstan, in February 2006 there were 101,000 registered unemployed people in the country. At the same time, the average price for a pair of jeans in local supermarkets is 1500 soms (approximately USD 36), average price for a pair of shoes is 2000 soms (approximately USD 48), whereas at the bazaar, a pair of Chinese (considered lower quality and lower status) manufactured jeans is available at the price of 500 soms (approximately USD 12). While supermarket prices may be affordable for those who earn several hundred dollars per month, for 85% (according to the National Statistics Committee) of the population living below the line of poverty, such shoes and jeans can only remain an unreachable dream.

As Zentai (ND:18) claimed in reference to Budapest malls, these new shopping places “actually generate and reinforce social inequalities, many times dividing society into the binary haves and have-nots.” Bishkek

supermarkets, similar to Budapest malls, lead to the bifurcation of consumers. The continued non-affordability of commodities in supermarkets is doubly negative due to the display of inaccessible things for the poor. Surely, increasing social inequality is not a direct cause of mushrooming supermarkets. However, I believe that supermarkets do explicate and demonstrate what is unreachable by many. Such a situation fuels contentious discourses around these economic institutions. Shopping malls and supermarkets in a Western country would not arouse such contentious public reflections due to a higher living standard and accessibility by wider social cohorts. However, in Bishkek it was impossible to avoid contentious debates, where “Western splendour” and “Western glamour”³ increasingly confront the poor with their glitzy appearances in the middle of a glaring poverty.

Furthermore, supermarkets symbolize unequal distribution of wealth that is largely believed to have developed after the collapse of the Soviet system. While in Soviet times social inequality was present, it was not as apparent as it is in the transition period, when a large portion of society remains in a disadvantaged situation in comparison to a small group of elite, and is not promised any “common wealth” as under the Socialist regime. Thus, it should not be surprising to see increasing public discontent with the new regime, who in fact gained power through establishing new economic institutions.

Politicised nature of supermarkets

While discussing the emergence of shopping malls in Budapest, Zentai (ND:2) claims that “fascination with consumption reinforces social inequalities and encourages social disappointment with political changes.” Moreover, her claim supports my point that new economic institutions in the post-socialist world raise large political disputes. Zentai’s argument is indeed a good illustration of the contentious political discourses surrounding supermarkets: “The dream world of consumption frequently turns into a political nightmare: political regimes legitimize themselves through erroneous promises of expanding consumption” (Zentai ND: 2). Politicization here should be understood as an active involvement of political agents in the establishment of supermarkets. Drawing from Rutland’s theory (2001) on the two waves of business formation in transition countries, there are two discernable categories of agents. Important actors connected to the shopping malls as producers represent the first wave, whereas, the second wave mostly involves retailers who lease space in shopping malls. Obviously, social judgments were different on the

agents of these two waves who stood at the forefront of institutionalizing supermarkets.

One might wonder how the public receives information about the owners. Local newspapers have always been one of the main sources of getting information about the 'big fish' in the sea of private business. There were many articles, which evidenced that most of the supermarkets are owned by the local politicians, i.e. by the elite: "One of the first supermarkets in Bishkek 'Eridan', which was opened by the deputy of the legislative assembly Usenov, was sold to his colleague Baibolov" (*Vecherniy Bishkek*, 5th of January, 1999); and "many people know Erkin Muratov, the former leader of the communist party of Kyrgyzstan, who further continued his career as a governor of Issyk-Kul region in the republic. The last year he stopped his work in the state, and became an entrepreneur and succeeded in founding a new trading complex. The owner claims that he could build this huge shopping place, with the help of credits, which he is going to pay back in 7 years" (*Vecherniy Bishkek*, August 16th, 1999).

When asked whether they know the owners of any particular supermarket, respondents showed their high 'knowledge' on that matter. Thus, Tatiana listed the names of supermarket owners: "Well, I know that Plaza belongs to Salymbekov. He somehow managed to accumulate the capital for the construction of such a huge building. The chain of 'Narodnyi' supermarkets belongs to Akaev as well as Silkway does." She confessed that, having heard that *Narodnyi* supermarkets belongs to President Akaev's family, she refused to shop there for a while, although she later continued shopping there due to the convenience and proximity to her house. Similar to Tatiana, each respondent knew the owners of bigger supermarkets by name. It should not be surprising due to the wide media coverage. In addition, the owners themselves, from the very beginning of supermarket establishment, did not seem to try to keep their businesses a secret. Furthermore, the small size of the city and its relatively small population with extensive kinship and friendship ties affect the immediate spread of such news. One might ubiquitously hear people talking about the owner of a newly opened dance club or a casino. Thus, supermarkets send an explicit message of who are the proprietors and beneficiaries. Ironically, the owners of supermarkets are often negatively viewed by public, even though they are the

founders of economic institutions that are claimed to bring civilization and modernity.

Thus, while interviewees expressed their sorrow about looted and destroyed supermarkets, they were not sympathetic towards supermarket owners, and did not consider them to be victims of the lootings. Aisulu, for instance, expressed her sorrow towards retailers "who were renting sections in large supermarkets and who really earned their starting capital and made their living by selling goods." However, when it came to the owners, Aisulu said, "The owners still have their buildings, destroyed or burned, and they can renovate them and continue to rip off the renters." Kerim also expressed his concern about retailers in supermarkets and apathy towards the owners' fate as he said, "The owners' buildings remained, and they will recover their losses from rents and sales, while most of the renters are in a disadvantaged position. My heart was tearing apart, when I saw one woman, a retailer in one of the supermarkets on TV... she was crying and complaining about her inability to return the credit now."

Interestingly, though the lootings were widely acknowledged among local habitants to be shocking, immoral and unexpected event, few felt sorrow to the owners. I believe that public indifference to the owners' loss from the lootings has been influenced by a durable discontent with the political regime, with the politicians and their unrestrained intervention into private business. Respondents shared their idea that it is impossible to be involved in the wave of private business without being a politician or at least having connections. As Melis notes, "Of course, there are entrepreneurs who earned their money by hard work in commerce. But most of them do have access to the officials anyway." Mariya comments that, "A big business has to involve both big money and useful ties." Kamilla further remarks, "In Russian, there is such a word like *krysha* [literally translated as a 'roof', here meaning useful connections], so you gotta have a *krysha* if you want to rent a building in a better part of the city. For instance Salymbekov, the owner of Plaza, he had a lot of money and also good connections."

All of these reflections apparently point to the link between politics and economic institutions. Dmitryi (55-year old, worker of the Ministry of Culture) even claimed that "money-politics-supermarkets" is a kind of logical chain, and as an example pointed to the *EuroAsia* supermarket that belonged to Shailieva (governor of Issyk-Kul oblast in Kyrgyzstan). Shailieva, one of the few prominent female politicians, also used to be known as the

owner of the *EuroAsia* supermarket in the center of the city.

The case of Bishkek supermarkets is indeed a good illustration of Szelenyi's (Eyal et al 1998) theory on newly created capitalisms in transitional countries. Supermarkets seem to exemplify his claim that former and new politicians are actively involved in building private businesses. As Szelenyi argued, a small group of politicians which possesses high social capital is in an advantageous situation; their social capital⁴ enables them to become beneficiaries of unfair privatisation.

According to Borocz (2000:351), in the early nineties, former state-socialist managers' informal social networks with the state authorities became "such a crucial feature of the transformation" that the structure of their informal ties has determined the organization of most economic organizations. Informality within the state system in Kyrgyzstan could probably be identified as "bourgeois order" in Borocz's terms, where an "essentially malign form of informality plagued the highest levels of government and big business" (2000:348-349). As reflecting Borocz's claims, the Kyrgyz state is oftentimes claimed to be over-corrupted, and people do not get surprised when another supermarket is opened by a local politician or another public building is sold to the private hands of a deputy's relatives. Newly emerging entrepreneurs who could open a supermarket in Bishkek were mostly state officials, and state officials acquire prestige, and profitable social connections. State officials can start businesses because they reconvert their social capital into material capital. In this case, power is money.

As Szelenyi claims "the main beneficiaries of market transition are the 'direct producers' and a class of new entrepreneurs is emerging from among them" (1995:3). Former communists and party leaders are the ones who benefit from market economy and the majority of current companies, firm owners are those who had both been involved in politics and those who had informal connections with them before and after the fall of Socialism: "On the highest levels of economic management there was substantial change in personnel—but most of the current key players of the economy were already in some decision making positions before the fall of communism" (Szelenyi 1995:5).

Szelenyi claims that post-communist society can be best described as a unique social structure within which social capital is the main

source of power, prestige and privilege. He argues that "possession of economic capital places actors only in the middle of the social hierarchy, and the conversion of former social capital into private wealth is more the exception than the rule" (1998:6). Thus, most of the newly opened supermarkets were owned by local entrepreneurs, namely by the 'elite,' people who either formerly worked in the state, or are currently working as deputies, ministers, etc. They privatize formerly state-owned buildings, purchased lands closer to the downtown and get long-time credits without interest rates. It is their informal ties that enable them to maximize profits.

Drawing from the results of the interviews, it can be seen that there is a general agreement that the owners of supermarkets are either politicians or those who have political connections and personal ties. Thus, supermarkets are viewed as products of the unfair and corrupt political regime, and often seen with resentment. Explication of the beautiful life of the rich through physical objects, not surprisingly, provokes public anger and dissatisfaction with the political regime, which is recognized as being responsible for growing social inequality.

Bishkek supermarkets suggest that in transitioning countries that are characterized by their high social inequality and low living standards, the commercial sphere becomes a tool of enrichment for the upper niche. For this reason, supermarkets became embodiments of the prosperity of the state officials, their unrestrained authority and power, and unequal access to capital goods and property, by which the political cliques turned out to be the large proprietors.

Conclusion

This study explored contentious discourses surrounding supermarkets that were viewed to be both carriers of modernization and civilization and at the same time embodiments of social inequality. While conducting the fieldwork, and more generally from the very beginning of the establishment of supermarkets, I observed a general acceptance of these new shopping places. The respondents agreed that they are proud of having such modern buildings, which decorate the architecture of the city and boost its image in the eyes of local dwellers and foreigners. These convenient facilities with all kinds of services have never been experienced by the local consumers in Soviet shops. Thus, not surprisingly, all of the respondents, regardless of their economic status and the regularity of their supermarket shopping, expressed their appreciation of the "civilizing mission" of supermarkets.

Despite the general appreciation of supermarkets, most of the respondents agreed that these are not conventional places to shop and are rather representations of unreachable wealth, luxury and beautiful life. Those who shop at bazaars do not choose them out of mere preference, but rather out of economic necessity. The political symbolism of supermarkets lends a bitter flavour to people's perceptions of this economic institution. Bishkek supermarkets turned out to symbolize social inequality, and demonstrate to the wide poor public that they are separated out from more affluent citizens through their shopping experiences. While supermarkets do not exactly cut the society in two, they still serve as a front between the relatively affluent group and the rest. I say front, because it is in supermarkets, more than anywhere else that the interests, abilities and social statuses of the poor and the wealthy clash.

Notes

- ¹ Web-site of Beta-Stores,
<http://www.betastores.elcat.kg/Pages/1E.htm>,
retrieved on December 20, 2004.
- ² Source: <http://www.gazeta.kg/view.php?i=11515>, retrieved April 2, 2005.
- ³ These expressions were borrowed from the interviewees
- ⁴ That is, in this case, their social networks and ties.

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Table 1.

Use-values for Customers	Good service
	Large variety of commodities
	Chances to return deficient goods
	Safety standards
	Control of the quality of goods
	Comfortable and clean environment
	Territorial proximity to home or a working place
Use-values for the city	Places to hang out - Meeting points
	Contribute to the landscape of the city with: - modern architecture
	-decorated interior
Use-values for the government	Support the implementation of the market economy
	Create competitive environment among shopping places, thus lowering the prices
	Contribute to the development of small and medium private businesses
	Reinforce gradual economic development of the city