

Political Iconography in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

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Introduction

- In general, in the post-Soviet world, governments and populations underwent massive transitions after independence.
- The decline of Soviet identity and rise of ethnic identity in former Soviet states can be observed in the development of symbols in the urban landscape of these states' capitals.
- As former constituent republics developed new, independent national identities, the symbolic landscape of their capital cities changed as well. In many cases, political elites in these cities constructed new monuments that represented a new, ethnically-based national identity.
- Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan is the only Soviet capital in which the city's central monument to Lenin was left untouched nearly a decade after independence. Moreover, it was moved only 100 meters from its original location and remains there today.



Lenin Monument facing Kyrgyz flag and Osh City Hall, Osh, Kyrgyzstan

Hypotheses

- Russian speakers will rank Soviet monuments more highly than primarily Kyrgyz-speaking respondents
- Kyrgyz ethnic symbols will be more popular choices for new monuments than civic symbols
- Overall, Kyrgyz ethnic symbols will be perceived as more important than Soviet symbols.

Methodology

- The participant population consisted of visitors to four main monument sites in Bishkek: Park Panfilov, Manas monument, Kurmanjan Datka monument, and Victory Park.
- **Manas** and **Kurmanjan Datka** represent a memory regime of specifically **Kyrgyz nationality**, while **Victory Park** and **Panfilov Park** represent Soviet contributions to Kyrgyz history.
- At each site, I surveyed approximately 40 people, for a total of 151 total participants. Questions regarded the following topics:
 - Age, city of residence, nationality, and native language
 - Self-reported knowledge about particular monuments
 - Opinion on value and physical location of particular monuments
 - What monument, if any, a participant would like to see constructed or taken down in Bishkek
 - Perspective on the current political, economic, and social situation in the Kyrgyz Republic.



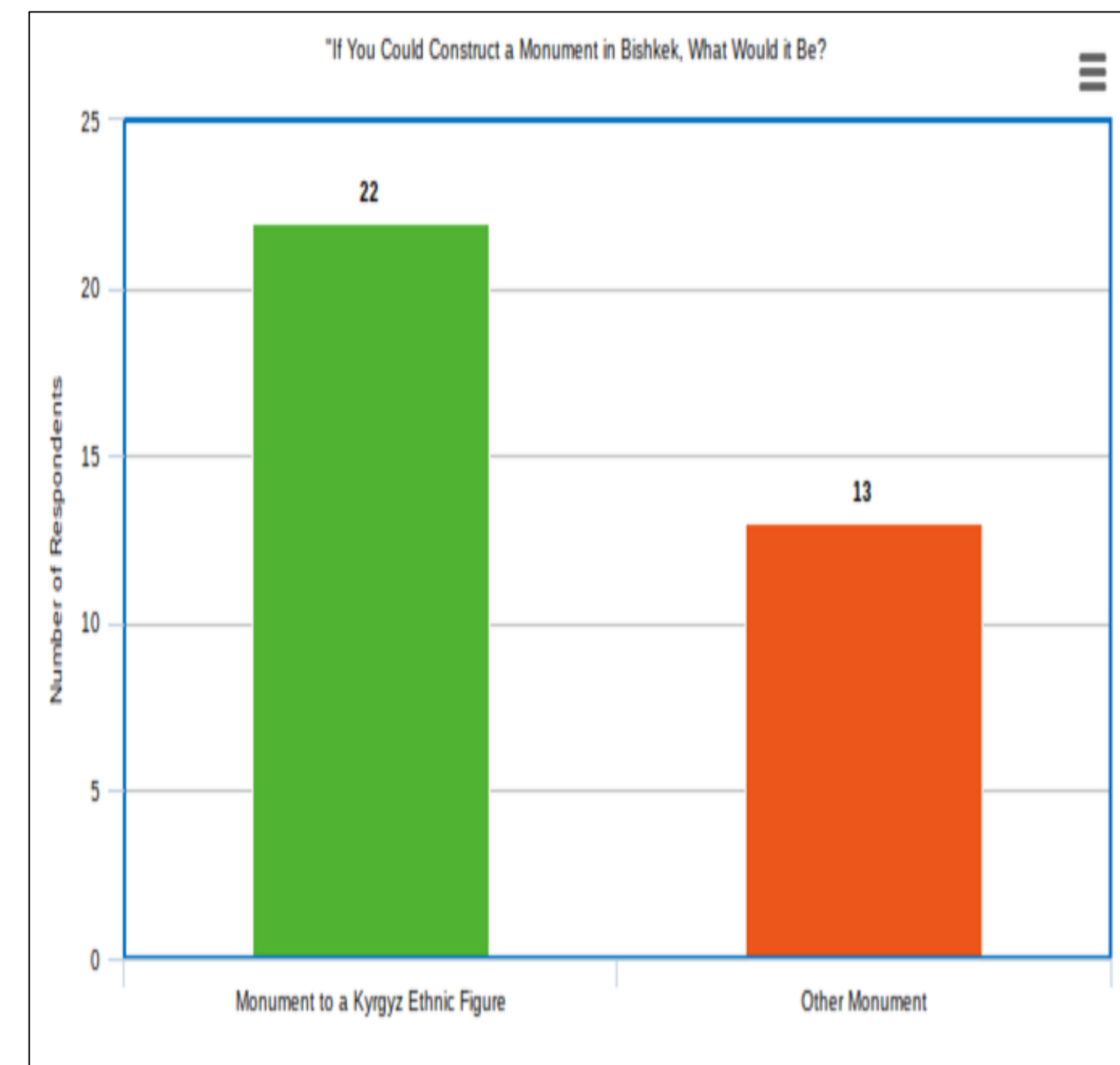
Manas Statue in Ala-Too Square, Bishkek



Lenin Monument behind the State History Museum, Bishkek

Results

Graph 1 Ethnic vs. Non-Ethnic Symbols



Graph 2: Perception of General Domestic Situation

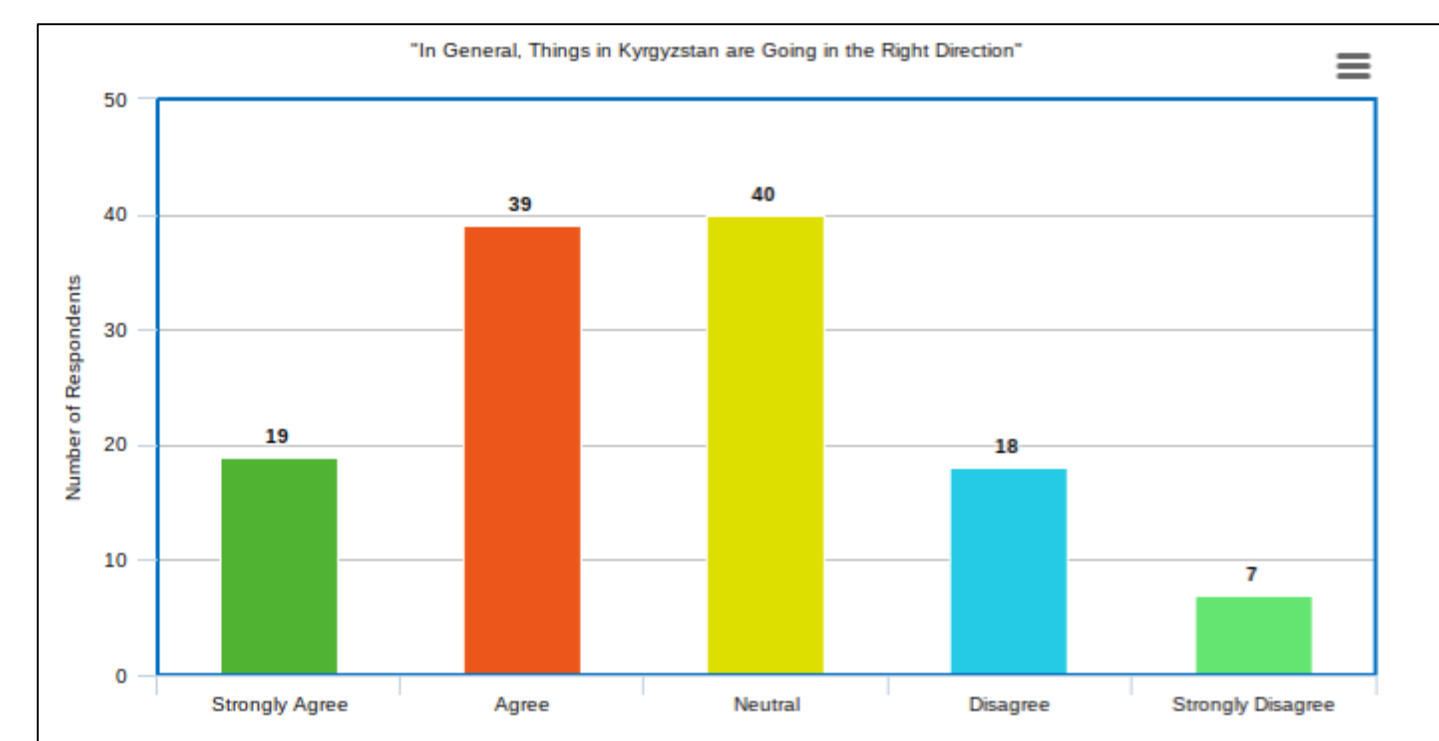


Table 2: Victory Park Ranking by Language Spoken at Home

	Number of Responses	Mean Value	Standard Deviation
Kyrgyz	22	3.36	1.09
Russian or Russian and another language	7	2.42	.53

t = 3.0317 (p = 0.0031)

Table 1: Average Ranking of Monuments (1 = Highest, 6 = Lowest)

Manas Statue	1.25
Chingiz Aitmatov	2.56
Victory Park	3.06
Monument to Those Killed in April 2010	4.38
Erkindik Statue	4.47
Lenin Statue	5.49



Ala-Too Square with view of Manas Monument and Kyrgyz Flag, Bishkek. Manas is the hero of a traditional Kyrgyz language epic poem dating from the 18th century. The exonerated of the poem and its hero is an example of the creation of an ethnic-based national identity narrative.

Graph 3: Victory Park Ranking by Language Spoken at Home

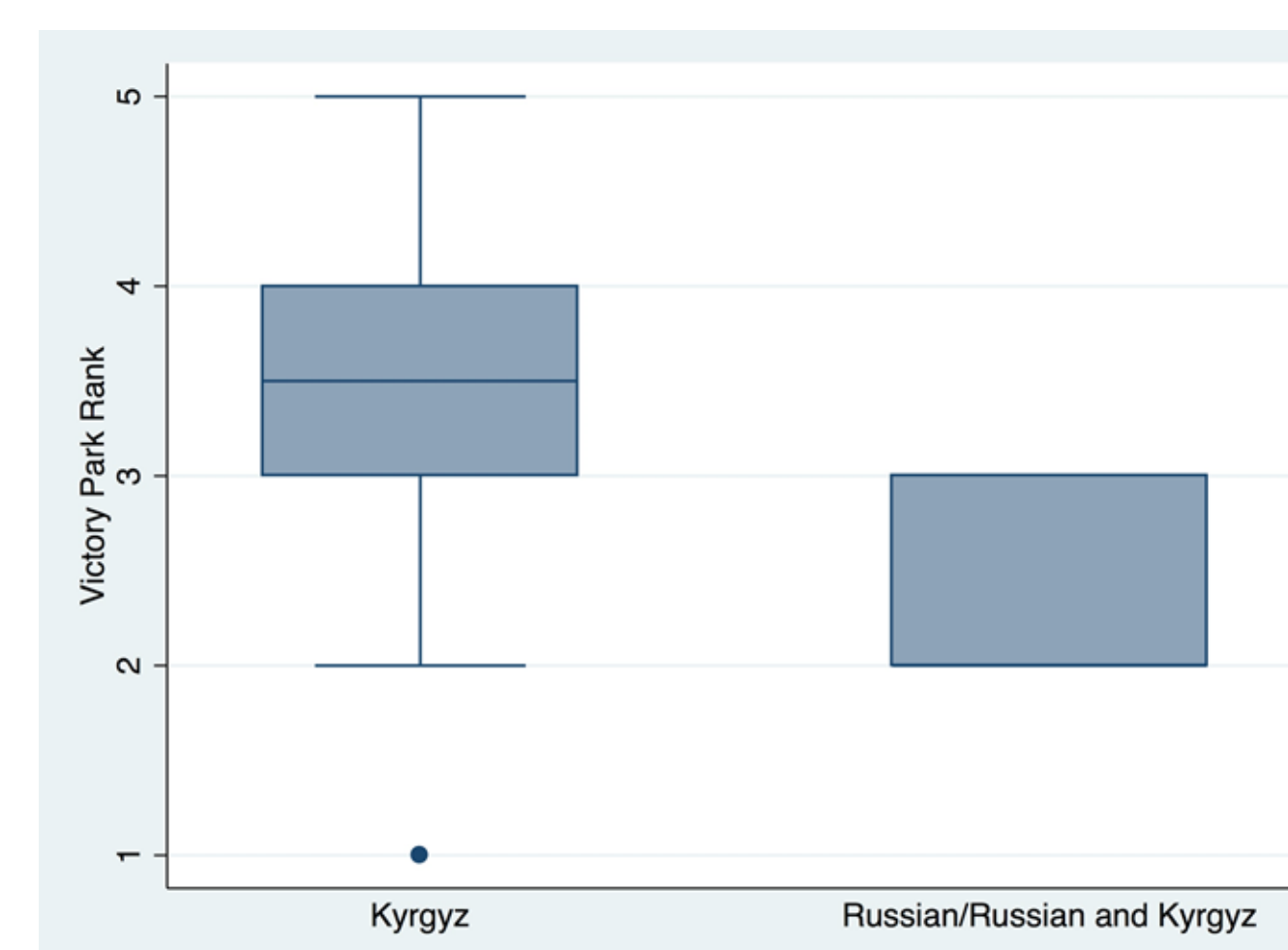


Table 3: Monuments to Victims of April 2010 Events Ranking by Language Spoken at Home

	Number of Responses	Mean Value	Standard Deviation
Kyrgyz	22	3.09	1.71
Russian or Russian and another language	7	5.14	.90

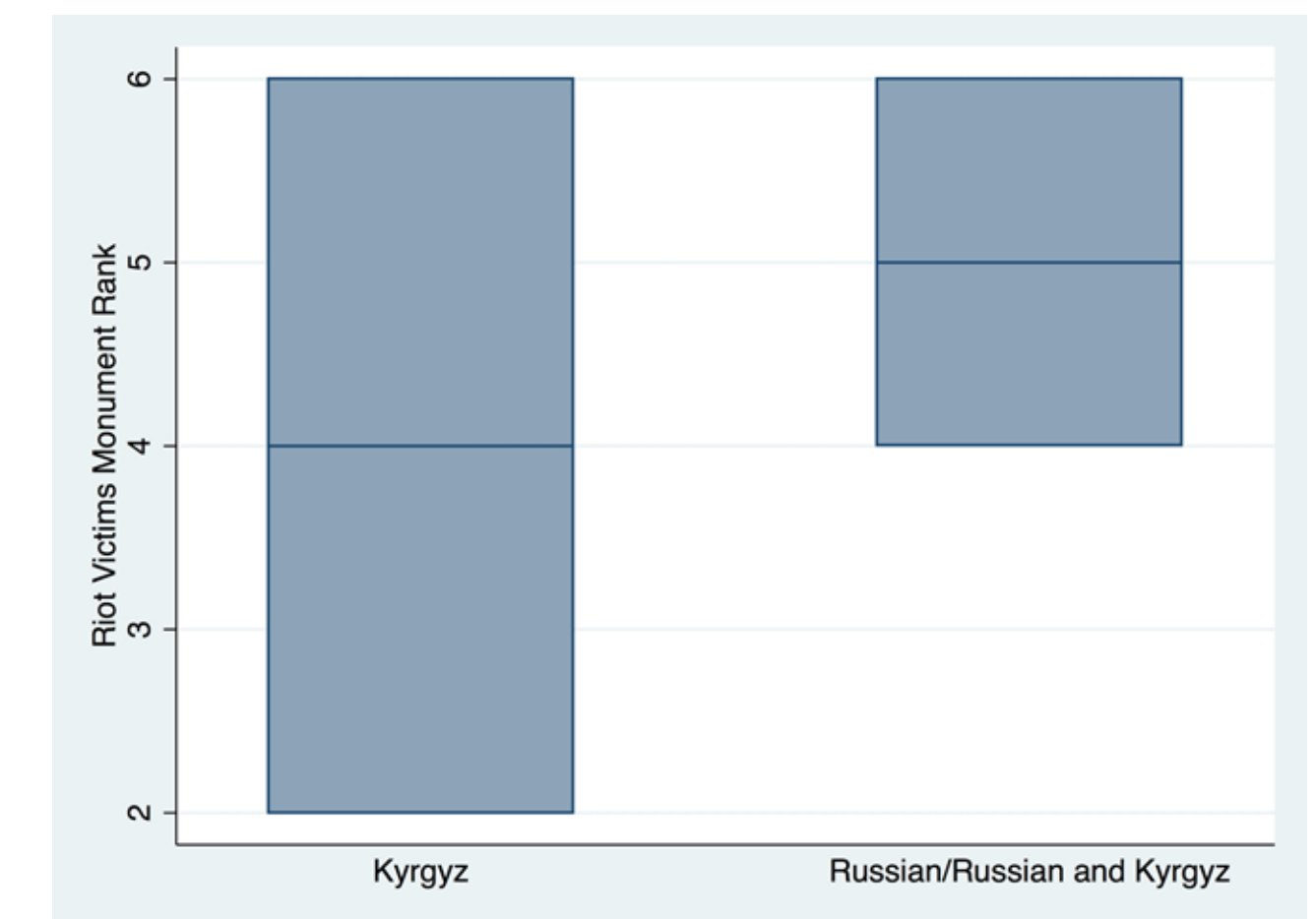
t = -2.1062 (p = 0.9761)

Table 4: *Erkindik* (“Freedom”) statue ranking by Gender

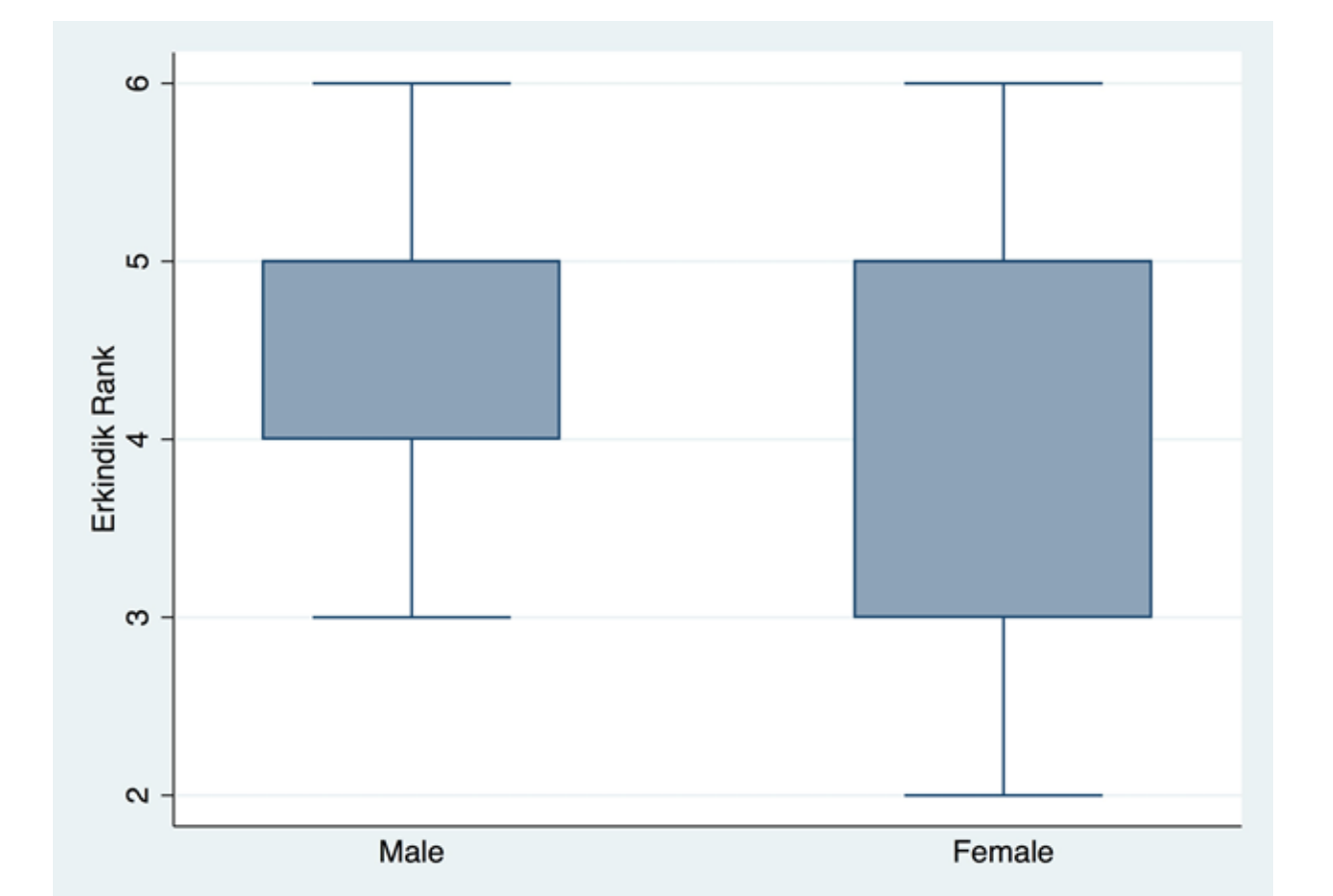
	Number of Responses	Mean Value	Standard Deviation
Men	17	4.76	.75
Women	17	4.18	.29

t = 1.7277 (p = 0.0477)

Graph 4: Monuments to Victims of April 2010 Events Ranking by Language Spoken at Home



Graph 5: *Erkindik* (“Freedom”) statue ranking by Gender



Discussion

- **Graph 1:** Overall, respondents suggested adding an ethnically-identified monument to Bishkek's symbolic landscape more often than a non-ethnic one.
- **Table 1:** The average overall ranking of 6 monuments among all respondents seems to confirm the hypothesis that the Soviet-era Lenin statue is the least important of monument, and that the ethnic Kyrgyz Manas statue is the most important.
- **Graph 2:** This data presents background information on the political orientation of the sample population. 85% of respondents agreed or were neutral towards the statement "In general, things in Kyrgyzstan are going in the right direction." In a separate survey of 1500 people in 2017, Central Asia Barometer found that 70% of respondents agreed to a similar statement.
- **Table 2 and Graph 3:** On average, Russian speakers rank Victory Park as more important than Kyrgyz speakers, suggesting that the Soviet memory regime remains more important for this group.
- **Table 3 and Graph 4:** On average, Kyrgyz speakers rank the Monument to the Victims of the Events of 2010 higher than Russian speakers, suggesting that post-Soviet symbols have more resonance with this group.
- **Table 4 and graph 5:** Women rank the only prominent statue of a Kyrgyz woman in Bishkek, *Erkindik* (freedom) Statue, higher than men, suggesting a gendered difference in the symbolic landscape.
- **General finding:** *These patterns show a shift since independence away from a civic- towards an ethnically-oriented concept of national identity.*