

Institutionalizing Projectification—The Case of Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract: The extent to which projects are established as an organizational form in society to cope with various challenges has been analyzed extensively in research under the term ‘projectification’. However, it remains unclear how the projectification at the level of society begins and which actors are involved in its institutionalization. Drawing on an explanatory case study in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, responses are provided to these questions and propositions for further research. The country is undertaking reforms as part of its ongoing transformation, which includes the professional implementation of projects, particularly in the public sector. These activities are, to some extent, based on the developments in project management in neighboring Kazakhstan, where a presidential decree also constituted a first step towards the institutionalization of projectification. It later found its way into relevant sectors and to key actors via the presidential administration, primarily through regulative and normative institutions. Because of increased international cooperation, the number and importance of projects in Kyrgyzstan will continue to increase in the coming years, requiring greater emphasis on projectification. The results are informative for research into projectification and for those involved in countries with comparable situations.

Keywords: projectification; institutionalization; institutional strategy; Kyrgyzstan



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1. Introduction

Projectification has developed into a prominent field of research and is currently being explored in a variety of directions worldwide. From initial publications around 30 years ago in the automotive industry, more and more research is now being devoted to aspects of projectification at the level of society [1]. This is not surprising, as a large number of challenges require solving at a societal level and projects appear to be a suitable approach. Therefore, public administration is currently at the center of attention in projectification research [2]. However, projectification has a serious impact on work in the public sector, as projects and established public sector routines are contradictory logics in a complex environment [3]. Particularly in countries that are still at the outset of projectification, the questions of how institutionalization begins, which actors are involved, and what activities are necessary become relevant. Part of this is, for example, the question of what role the project management associations play in the process of projectification [4].

The purpose of our research is to investigate the inception of projectification and to provide answers to the following questions: How does the projectification of society commence, which actors are involved in the institutionalization at the beginning, and what activities are undertaken at this early stage? These questions have not yet been analyzed in the research. We have examined these questions in the context of an explanatory case study in Kyrgyzstan. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan underwent a series of reforms to advance its political system, public administration, relations with other countries, and international organizations. The country’s projectification is still in its infancy, and larger projects have mainly been carried out within the framework of international cooperation. Starting in the year 2022, an initiative was taken to institutionalize

project management in the country, thus sparking the projectification. A newly founded project management association plays a central role in this, through which initial institutionalization activities have been undertaken towards the national government, public administration, and higher education.

This case study provides three contributions. Firstly, the early stage of the projectification is exemplified with the respective actors and institutionalization activities using the case of Kyrgyzstan. Secondly, research propositions are presented that can be used to undertake follow-up evaluations through other case studies. Finally, based on the insights of this case, an outlook is provided on future research needs.

These introductory remarks are followed by a summary of key concepts, a section with the methods and the materials used for conducting this case study. The results are subsequently presented, discussed, and, in the conclusion, recommendations for future research are given.

2. Key Concepts

2.1. Projectification of the Economy and Society

Research has been looking into projectification for almost 30 years. At the outset, research into the phenomenon focused primarily on the effects of a growing number of projects on permanent structures and processes and on the transformation organizations undergo as a result [5]. Later, projectification was also investigated at the micro level, i.e., the impact it may have on individuals in the affected organizations (“meso”). Similarly, developments were examined at the level of industries and sectors (“macro”), and of societies, countries, or supranational organizations (“mega”) [6]. Projectification is driven, on the one hand, by the fact that projects are presented in education as a means of solving problems or complex challenges; therefore, they are being used more and more frequently in practice. On the other hand, the implementation of projects is also associated with the achievement of objectives and the generation of benefits across various levels. Finally, pooling expertise and resources in a project also promises synergy potential.

However, for a long period of time, it remained unclear how far projectification had progressed and what economic impact the respective project activities had. Only a macroeconomic evaluation of project activity in the German economy (and later in other countries) shed light on the situation [7]. At the time of the survey (2013), the gross value added by projects in Germany already amounted to a value of nearly EUR 900 billion, whereas the figure in a more recent study (2022) already exceeded EUR 1200 billion [8]. However, it is also worth noting that in addition to the predominantly positive effects of projectification on the economy, above all in terms of innovation, growth, or employment, negative developments can also occur in some economic sectors [9]. The projectification varies in countries with different economic structures, stages of development, or political systems [10]. Lagging projectification, such as in the German public sector, may have serious implications for the successful or otherwise unsuccessful execution of projects [11].

As recently as a decade ago, there were calls among researchers to broaden the view of projectification from a narrow conceptualization of the economic activities pursued by private organizations to also include the broader social, institutional, and societal aspects [12]. Jacobsson and Jalocha [13] divided the research into projectification into three successive phases. The first phase of research (from 1995 to 2008) was dominated by the study of projectification at the organizational level, and since 2015 it has been primarily at the societal level. The latter is primarily concerned with examining the impact of an embeddedness of project-related practices in a society’s social, cultural, and institutional structures. However, if it is possible to work more and more on projects in the economy, it becomes self-evident that the public sector will also gradually become more and more involved in projects through the financing of public projects [14]. Project management practices are also playing an increasingly important role in public administration and social as well as welfare-oriented projects, meaning projectification is becoming more and more

widespread [15]. Meanwhile, leading philosophers and sociologists have contributed their own perspectives on the projectification of society [16].

2.2. Institutional Strategy and Institutionalization in the Context of Projectification

The management of projects emerged in the 1950s based on mathematical models, methods, and tools primarily aimed at efficiently planning and controlling complex tasks. It was only gradually that research began to focus on influencing and shaping the social and institutional environment in which projects take place [17]. Projects take place almost exclusively in a social ecosystem in which people work together with other people to realize a benefit for a specific target group of people. “This relational space encompasses social layers on multiple scales, from the micro level of interpersonal networks to the meso level of intra- and inter-organizational collaboration to the macro level of wider institutional settings” [18]. Those involved in projects are not only influenced by the existing institutions, but also have an influence on these institutions through their actions [19]. Existing regulative, normative, and cultural–cognitive institutions of the surrounding social system influence the behavior of those involved and ensure that projects proceed in an orderly fashion and according to proven practices. As long as projects are successful in this way, these practices are repeated, and the organizational principle spreads accordingly. This could explain the spread of projectification in the economy and beyond [20].

Should the framework conditions or challenges of project activities change, it is time to re-create, maintain, or disrupt the existing institutions [21]. These changes can be initiated, mediated, or implemented by various actors. These include government organizations such as ministries or authorities, professional associations, trade unions, exemplary firms, entrepreneurs, educators, or consultants [22]. The regulative institutions, reinforced through sanctions, are more likely influenced by government actors, whereas the normative institutions are typically promulgated by authorized standards bodies or professional associations. The cultural–cognitive institutions belong to the sphere of influence of educators, consultants, exemplary enterprises, or entrepreneurs, whose narrative affects such institutions. In this context, the literature repeatedly refers to the important role of professionals as institutional agents [23] and stresses the special role of project management associations for the development of project activities and projectification [24]. However, our studies have shown that the project management association in Germany only indirectly influences cultural–cognitive institutions. Up until now, their strategy has focused on providing businesses with a competitive advantage through the most professional project management possible, for example, through standards for the execution of projects and for the qualification and certification of project personnel. Other areas of society (at least in Germany) have received insufficient support [25].

If institutionalization means that norms, values, roles, perceptions, and ways of interaction are realigned, then in the context of projectification, this entails changing previously permanent forms of organizing and collaborating into temporary ones. New power relations are established, and existing regulations, norms, and values are readjusted [26]. This is particularly relevant in the context of public administration, for example, where projectification turns a proven and well-established way of working on its head [27]. According to Lawrence (1999), one potential strategy for institutionalization is to standardize, by which technical, legal, or market standards are defined that reflect the “normal” processes for delivering products or services [28]. The professional associations are one of the actors in connection with standardization. “As normative agents they provide the norms, standards, principles, and benchmarks that guide human actions in particular situations” [29]. This can be commissioned by a government authority, at the initiative of associated members, or on the basis of their own strategic considerations. However, the example of Germany and Italy raises doubts as to whether a standardization strategy is the right one [30,31]. Another potential strategy is to influence the institutional setting through membership. This can be illustrated in the example of the European Union, which influences the projectification of the member states primarily through regulative as well as normative institutions [32].

However, the choice of strategy for institutionalization will certainly depend on the state capacity and the political infrastructure for development [33], which will be elaborated on in the case of Kyrgyzstan in the following sections.

3. Materials and Methods

As the phenomenon of the nascent institutionalization of projectification has not yet been investigated at a societal level, it seemed appropriate for use as an initial case study. The choice of an explanatory case study promotes an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon. Researchers assume an objective stance when evaluating the information gained through a case study [34]. A case study builds on research questions, which in our case, were the following: How does the projectification of society commence? Which actors are involved in this process? What kinds of institutionalization activities are involved? As case studies are often used to prepare subsequent and in-depth investigations, they should preferably formulate one or several research propositions that can then be assessed by subsequent qualitative and quantitative research [35]. “Its emphasis on developing constructs, measures, and testable theoretical propositions makes inductive case research consistent with the emphasis on testable theory within mainstream deductive research” [36].

The opportunity to carry out the case study resulted from an invitation extended by the president of the newly founded project management association in Kyrgyzstan. During a visit to Kyrgyzstan in the period from 29 October to 2 November 2023, we were able to speak with a total of 25 carefully selected representatives of the Presidential Administration, the Government, Public Administration, a university, and other institutions and to access fundamental information on the institutionalization of projectification. When selecting the interview partners, emphasis was placed on ensuring that they had adequate influence on the institutionalization of projectification and that they were covering diverse perspectives related to the research questions. Based on the experiences of a previous, comparable research mission to neighboring Kazakhstan, all of the interview partners were spoken to for between one and two hours about the role projects play in their area of responsibility in the past, present, and future; about their activities concerning the institutionalization; and about their requirements for other actors in support of the projectification in Kyrgyzstan. All of the interview statements were thoroughly documented, transcribed, and analyzed. The analysis primarily looked at discernible patterns in the interviewees’ statements, comparing these with the insights gained from the analysis of the available documents Kyrgyzstan and developments in neighboring Kazakhstan.

For a better comprehension of the statements made during the interviews, a context analysis of the Kyrgyz case was prepared based on scientific articles, publicly available government documents, and analyses of organizations such as the World Bank [37]. For an explanatory case study, it is important to identify the connections between the phenomenon at hand and the relevant context to avoid drawing inadequate generalizations or false conclusions from the research results [38]. Research propositions help focus the findings of an explanatory case study and to prepare more extensive, possibly also quantitative research work [39]. “Propositions demonstrate to quantitatively oriented researchers that qualitative findings can offer good guidance in developing emergent concepts into measurable constructs” [40]. Finally, the findings were checked for their validity, credibility, reliability, and generalizability, and any limitations, restrictions, and assumptions were explained in the Section 5 [41].

4. Results

4.1. The Context of Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan is located in the eastern part of Central Asia and borders on China. More than 90% of the country lies above 1500 m and it is characterized by mountains. The approximately 7 million inhabitants are concentrated in a few cities, mainly in the capital Bishkek, and in several valleys. Kyrgyzstan has a young population, with more than 50% under the age of 30. However, almost 700,000 Kyrgyz live and work abroad, mainly in

Russia and Kazakhstan. Remittances from these people make up a significant proportion of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Kyrgyzstan [42]. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, Kyrgyzstan gained its independence; since then, it has established a new political system as an independent state based on the earlier traditions of a council of elders or a large assembly. Since the beginning of its independence, the political system has been changed several times. In particular, the president's position of power compared with parliament and the shaping of democracy have been at issue [43]. At the same time, efforts were made to strengthen the country's international network. Kyrgyzstan is now a member of the United Nations (UN) and other multi-national organizations, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). While the president represents the country internally and externally, signs and promulgates laws, and appoints or dismisses the government, the latter assumes a significant role in the state as an executive power. Although the administration covers national, regional, and municipal levels, the presidential administration and national government, with its authorities, continue to play a pivotal role [44]. Whereas at the beginning the focus was primarily on questions of the executive's own role in the state [45], the administration is currently more concerned with questions of building state capacity, which can be described as the "ability of the state bureaucracy to implement government's policy choices" [46].

The economic development of Kyrgyzstan is closely linked to political developments in the country. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and its independence, the economy initially suffered from a sharp decline, followed by significant growth in the second half of the 1990s, with the nominal GDP increasing from around 2 billion to around USD 13 billion to date. Industrialization was mainly focused on the garment industry, agricultural products, mining, and minerals, as well as energy production [47]. However, economic development is still constrained by a number of issues, such as a shortage of skilled labor and uneven access to high-quality education, a lack of good governance, political stability, and regulatory standards, as well as an attractive environment for entrepreneurship [48]. Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan's geographical location in Central Asia plays a key role in its economic development. Neighboring Kazakhstan has taken over Russia's role as the main export destination, and China now accounts for more than half of all imports. Kyrgyzstan is also trying to further expand its economic relations with other countries in the region, in the Middle East, and also increasingly with Europe [49]. In this context, the "Belt and Road Initiative" launched by China also plays a central role in the development of the economy in Kyrgyzstan, including the development of infrastructure between the two neighboring countries and the import and export of ores, minerals, and energy, as well as other products and services [50].

Although the government has initiated a number of reforms in recent years to accelerate economic development, a lack of transparency and accountability persists. "Since institutions are slow to change and the most pressing problems are often left untouched until a massive crisis erupts, the likelihood is high that the current governance problems will prevail in the short- and medium-term. A prudent and realistic assumption is that the industrial development strategy has to be designed for and implemented within the current institutional confinements" [51]. Improving the institutional setting in the country is seen as a prerequisite for modernization and future growth [52]. This includes the internationalization and enhancement of higher education institutions [53].

4.2. Research Findings and Propositions

To date, there are no significant institutions for project work in Kyrgyzstan. Many projects are initiated by foreign donors and implemented in the country, e.g., by the World Bank or the Asia Development Bank (ADB). In addition, neighboring countries are also implementing projects in Kyrgyzstan, China, Kazakhstan, and Russia. In doing so, however, foreign project managers are often deployed. In the context of international exchange in digitalization, the development of governance systems, and project management, there

have been isolated stimuli for professionalizing project-based work over the past few years, particularly in the field of public administration, but no institutionalization campaign has been noteworthy. The institutionalization of project management in Kyrgyzstan commenced in 2022 with the creation of a national project management association by an executive with IT responsibilities in the presidential administration. This was inspired by a series of contacts and trips abroad to take up the cause.

Our first research proposition therefore reads: Institutionalizing projectification is sparked by external events or actors.

The idea of founding the Kyrgyz Project Management Association emerged from discussions with the Project Management (PM) Association in Azerbaijan, a member of the International Project Management Association (IPMA). The PM association in neighboring Kazakhstan is also a member of the IPMA. Founded in 2003, it has had a major influence on projectification in Kazakhstan. The institutionalization of projectification in this country began with a presidential decree and has since been systematically implemented in society and the economy via the presidential administration and the various levels of public administration. In addition, education plays a central role in Kazakhstan in acquiring the necessary skills for the realization of projects [54]. The PM Association in Kazakhstan supports the activities of the administration by qualifying and certifying project managers in line with IPMA standards. At the same time, the association supports charities, pre-schools, primary and secondary schools as well as universities by offering content for professional competence development. This provided an ideal blueprint for institutionalizing the projectification in Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyz PM Association first drafted a decree to be signed by the country's president, under which a National Project Office was to be set up—comparable to that in Kazakhstan—to develop the necessary regulative and normative provisions for project management in the country. The standards for project management should be based on internationally recognized standards, e.g., the standards of International Standards Organisation (ISO), the European Union (EU) Commission, or the North American Project Management Institute (PMI). Education at selected universities, the Academy for Public Administration, and other types of schools, on the other hand, are to be based on IPMA's Individual Competence Baseline (ICB) for project, program, and portfolio management. Furthermore, the roadmap foresees an expansion of project work over the next few years into the most important industrial sectors, including the agro-industrial complex, trade, fuel and energy, transport and logistics, education, health-care, and tourism, as well as innovation. The diffusion of the projectification to rural areas, municipal administrations, and social work will take place through multipliers, so-called "project coaches". At the beginning of the institutionalization efforts, the President of the Kyrgyz PM Association had to answer many questions about the why and wherefore, the what, who, and how. In these advocacy efforts, it was particularly important to focus the argumentation on the specific requirements of Kyrgyzstan.

The second research proposition is: Commencing the institutionalization of the projectification requires deliberate advocacy measures to contextualize and clarify the intent, purpose, approach, and responsibilities.

In Kyrgyzstan, the initial institutionalization efforts for the projectification are primarily driven by actors within the presidential administration and public institutions instead of the private sector, as in other countries. Therefore, it is no surprise that the president and founder of the National Project Management Association of Kyrgyzstan is an IT executive working in the presidential administration and, therefore, directly influences key players at the top of the political and administrative levels. On the one hand, the President of the Republic aims to institutionalize project management in the country by means of a decree (e.g., through a national office with corresponding standards); on the other hand, the top administration officials at the national, regional, and local levels are to be briefed on project management by the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic. This serves as a blueprint for the education sector, where selected universities are to include project management in their curricula and thus drive forward competence

development in the country from a top-down perspective. Finally, further training and consulting institutes are to transfer know-how to the economy and society.

The third research proposition states: In a presidential system, the institutionalization of projectification proceeds predominantly top-down via the administrative institutions.

The national PM association acts as an intermediary for all of the initial activities, leveraging its international contacts (to other countries and the IPMA, among others) to bring the necessary know-how, proposals for standards, training material, etc., into the country and introducing them as best practice approaches. In Kyrgyzstan, business associations, chambers of commerce or similar institutions are not involved in this process.

The fourth research proposition, therefore, reads: A national PM association serves as an intermediary for the institutionalization of projectification.

The institutionalization of projectification in Kyrgyzstan primarily pursues the strategy of promoting projectification through regulative institutions (e.g., a presidential decree), and normative guidelines (e.g., project management standards). It is only on this basis that knowledge transfer and the shaping of cultural–cognitive institutions takes place via the academy for public administration and universities. To this end, experts from outside Kyrgyzstan are consulted and best practices and success stories from foreign projects are communicated. Knowledge transfer and the shaping of the cultural–cognitive institutions only happen on this basis through the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic together with selected universities. This involves consulting experts from abroad and sharing international best practices and success stories. In a further expansion stage, a regional exchange forum is envisaged, in which issues relating to projectification can be discussed with other Central Asian governments and administration experts.

The fifth research proposition follows: In a presidential system, the focus during the institutionalization of projectification focuses on regulative and normative activities.

5. Discussion

With our explanatory case study in Kyrgyzstan, we first illustrate how the institutionalization of projectification begins in a country. Research has not yet addressed this issue, but it is important for countries that would like to become involved in the subject. The case study demonstrates that the institutionalization of projectification strongly depends on the country's context and on exemplary (international) role models followed by the actors in the country. The example of Kyrgyzstan shows that after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of a presidential political system, the institutionalization of projectification follows a top-down approach via a presidential decree and the presidential administration to the education of civil servants and officers. Although Kyrgyzstan has a comparable political system to its neighbor Kazakhstan, it only began projectification 25 years later, but it is following a similar path. Both countries have a national project management association that plays a mediating role by bringing relevant project management knowledge into their own country via its international contacts (e.g., via the IPMA). Although the impetus for projectification originated from the creation of the Kyrgyz Project Management Association, its president is an executive from the presidential administration and was, therefore, in a position to instigate the projectification process. As a result, the key players are the President of the Republic, the Presidential Administration, other government administrative bodies, the Academy of Public Administration, and selected universities for knowledge transfer. Unlike in Germany, where projectification occurs in a bottom-up manner via the private sector and specialized consulting and training institutes, this does not yet play a role in Kyrgyzstan.

The top-down approach in Kyrgyzstan entails that the institutionalization of projectification primarily happens via regulative and normative institutions and corresponding activities, with little cultural–cognitive institution building taking place. Nevertheless, activities in this direction are also planned. It remains unclear how successful this approach will be. A Central Asian forum for the exchange of experience on projectification will be es-

tablished, where countries such as Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan can share their achievements and best practices with countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, which are still at the very beginning of the projectification process and can adopt these practices.

We are aware that the findings of this research are limited to the specific circumstances and the context of the exemplary case and cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, we are convinced they provide a sound basis for further qualitative and quantitative research. Furthermore, it provides a snapshot of a longer-term development only. In this respect, follow-up studies should analyze further development in Kyrgyzstan and compare it with the institutionalization of projectification in other countries. The immediate neighboring countries suit this because the context here is comparable. It would also be interesting to evaluate the effectiveness of implementing projects and project management in public administration and thereby challenge the approach. There is certainly also merit in comparing the situation with that of countries with different political systems, where other actors are active and different institutionalization strategies are adopted.

6. Conclusions

With our case study in Kyrgyzstan, we were the first to shed light on the early phase of projectification. We identified the main actors, their activities to institutionalize projectification, and the strategies behind them. In addition, we were both able to answer important research questions and contribute to expanding the literature; our research propositions also point the way for further research. This research should look at further developments in Kyrgyzstan and carry out comparative studies with the more projectified countries in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, as well as the neighboring countries, which are also still in the early stages. Furthermore, there is a need to conduct a longitudinal study on the evolution of projectification in a given context, examining critical incidents, decision making, and the effectiveness of the institutionalization strategies and activities. Beyond the scientific implications, the case study offers valuable insights into how institutionalizing projectification can be put into practice. In particular, the actors involved in the process can learn lessons from the case in a comparable situation and take a similar path. In this way, they can make a valuable contribution to the development of their society through projects and project management.

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