

Going Viral During a Pandemic:
Civil Society and Social Media in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

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Social Media as a Tool of Civil Society in Kazakhstan

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The covid-19 pandemic forged a more intensely digital world, complicating civil society actors' menu of options for channeling and framing their advocacy goals. As both a product and study of pandemic-era politics, this dissertation is concerned with understanding how the internet and social media shape associational life in Kazakhstan. I draw on three forms of ethnographic data collected online between October 2020 and February 2022, including semi-structured interviews, visual analysis of social media posts, and digital participant observation. I demonstrate how Kazakhstani civil society actors devise strategies to pursue reform, how they debate theories of political change, and how they exercise agency in a political system that seeks to control the public sphere. I argue that civil society groups use social media platforms to leverage power differentials across levels of administration to advance rights claims and negotiate for reform. Activists and rights defenders flock to various social media platforms because of each site's unique technological infrastructure. They leverage different logics of visibility and bridge physical and digital forms of contentious politics to demand accountability from an authoritarian government. In addition to providing a more complete understanding of civil society dynamics in Kazakhstan, this study suggests that, in repressive contexts, civil society actors who opt for within-system engagement have not necessarily been coopted and activists do not always take dissent underground. This dissertation is an example of digital political ethnography, which stands to grow

not only as a standalone method, but also a bridge to big data analysis in political science. I demonstrate the importance of an ethnographic sensibility while approaching the internet as a site of inquiry to understand political subjectivity.

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Chapter 1: Studying Pandemic-Era Politics from Afar

I fell asleep on January 4, 2022, after having spent several hours scrolling through social media updates about protests in cities across Kazakhstan. My eyes were glued to the screen, taking in photographs and short video clips that showed demonstrators pushing through police lines to gather in front of Almaty's city hall, where columns of smoke rose from the center of the building that protesters had set on fire. Groups of men toppled statues of Nursultan Nazarbayev, the country's first president who ruled from 1989 until 2019, and in Taldykorgan, a regional city about three hours northeast of Almaty, angry residents strung up the statue by the neck and hung it from the regional administration building.¹ I had been following from New York as protests spread across Kazakhstan in solidarity with demonstrators from the western oil town of Zhanaozen who were frustrated with rising fuel prices. I woke up expecting to find updates about clashes between protesters and police and whether the government had made any concessions, but as I thumbed down on my screen to refresh Instagram, the avatars of activists, non-governmental organizations, and politicians remained grayed out. I tapped to watch the posts that autodelete after 24 hours and saw that they had not been updated in some 15 hours. Clicking through to other apps, I saw that WhatsApp and Telegram messages I had sent the night before remained undelivered. Kazakhstani authorities had blocked individual platforms before, but internet censorship had never lasted so long or been all-encompassing like this.

¹ Koom jana Madaniyat [Society and Culture], "Pamyatnik Nazarbaevu raspili i povesili pryamo u zdaniya Akimata vo vremya besporjadkov [A statue of Nazarbaev was broken and hung in front of the akimat building during unrest]," YouTube, 19 January 2022, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1LK6eGF2U>.

After five days of this telecommunications blackout, authorities turned the internet back on for a few hours on January 10. Telegram, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook were flooded with “I’m okay” posts, but also memes about struggling with the internet outages, demands that the government announce the number of casualties from police violence, and a photograph of men carrying a massive banner reading “We are not terrorists” that had gone viral.

Telecommunications went dark again, but the next day, I clicked through to an Instagram post documenting an activists’ arrest. The activist had been arrested while hanging a banner that called for the resignation of Almaty’s mayor over a busy road.² The action was meant to be anonymous, with no name or symbol affiliating the message with a civic group. The post explained that the activist and his companions expected that authorities would remove the banner quickly, as they had done in the past, and the real goal was for people to share photos of the banner to social media to perpetuate the message.

I kept scrolling and saw that two registered non-governmental organizations had posted sharp critiques of the government’s silence on the number of casualties from police violence during the communications blackout. Almaty’s Public Council³ filled its Instagram page with hourly updates informing those in the city about the location of vehicle checkpoints, which business districts were open, and where shelves were stocked with bread. The president called for the creation of a commission that would unite state and society. Much like the pandemic forced people inside, martial law in the first few weeks of 2022 kept human rights lawyers, artists, activists, and cartoonists shut up in their homes. The telecommunications blackout

² MISK [@misk_kz]. *Instagram*. 14 January 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CYvL9M-q_nL/.

³ Public Councils are intermediary organizations that advise government officials in the process of making policy decisions. There are more than 249 Public Councils in Kazakhstan that operate at the local and regional levels of administration.

prevented people from communicating and organizing, and after martial law was lifted and internet access restored, it seemed the stakes for dissent had been raised significantly. Even so, people came together in different institutional forms to work together toward various advocacy goals. This is an example of civil society at work, insofar as individuals and collective organizations can use the internet to engage in associational life as well as to record it.

I had been observing and writing about associational life in Kazakhstan – including civil society organizations, social movements, and bigger protest cycles – since 2018, but I did not originally set out to write a dissertation about civil society or Kazakhstan. While scholarly norms call for a streamlined, linear explanation of one’s findings, the work of clarifying a research question, developing a plan to collect and analyze data, and actually going about gathering that data was a very messy process. This process was not unlike construction, and in New York – where I spent the last five semesters of graduate school, despite my initial plans and hopes for long-term, in-person fieldwork – one is bound to see many installations of metal scaffolding that hugs century-old apartment buildings and sleek towers alike. The scaffolding shapes the way I interact with the city, sending me under its protective covering on rainy days to avoid getting wet and weaving between the bars to get around slow walkers.

In cities across Eurasia, though, there is a different aesthetic to the attempts to hide the unruliness of construction work. During my first visit to St. Petersburg in 2011, I was struck by stories-tall sheets of fabric depicting palatial balconies in pastel yellows and pinks. On a long walk in Dushanbe in 2019, I stuck to the side of the road shaded by trees and read the canvases that stretched for avenues which been printed with photographs of mountainscapes and portraits of the president that were framed with bold declarations about the future of the city and the importance of family. On my last trip to Almaty in March 2020, I passed blocks-long canvases

during long walks from my apartment to the city center. These were adorned with maps of Kazakhstan and logos for Kazakhstan 2050, an ambitious long-term development plan to secure the country a spot among the 30 most developed economies in the world.

I contend that different conceptions of scaffolding can extend beyond urban planning to the field of academic research. In line with Cheng (2018), I see the work of unveiling this scaffolding as an important “standalone contribution to understanding the subject matter” (286). While some may not want to know the tangled history of how this project came about, I believe that a written reflection on the evolution of my research questions and methods is critical for understanding the project. Cheng argues that discussing the research scaffolding offers an opportunity to make internalized ideas and assumptions explicit. Paths not taken (or paths tried and abandoned) offer generative lessons for future research, and laying out these “discarded tangents and diversions” makes research more transparent (290). This is especially important for scholars-in-training. Without guiding readers through the scaffolding – including the limitations and privileges that made this project possible – I risk perpetuating the myth of the massive tarps in post-Soviet capitals, that there is only beauty in a finished product, and we do not need to see the way in which a building goes up.

In this chapter, after introducing my primary research questions, I trace the critical junctures that fragmented the process of researching and writing this dissertation. I then explain the methods of data generation and analysis, drawing on literature from qualitative methods scholarship to explain how digital interviews, visual analysis of social media posts, and participant-observation work in tandem. I preview the argument, situate the substantive and methodological contributions, and provide an outline of the remaining chapters.

Critical Junctures in Articulating a Research Question

The harsh repression that Kazakhstan's authorities displayed in the early days of 2022 must be situated in the broader context of reform efforts to undo the consolidation of power under the first president in the 2000s and 2010s. After president Tokayev declared protesters to be terrorists and called for assistance from the Collective Security Treaty Organization to return order to the country, he quickly backtracked to a message of dialogue and reform that have defined his presidency.⁴ After assuming power in March 2019, he created the National Council for Public Trust to facilitate dialogue between state and society. In addition to several government officials, the Council for Public Trust is made up of political scientists, journalists, human rights activists, and entrepreneurs. The Council for Public Trust is just one institutional channel for advocating policy change; many other within-system and external channels exist. How do civil society actors understand the opportunities and drawbacks of working with the state, as opposed to organizing outside it? What types of principled claims can Kazakhstani civil society actors make, and what is the process for making those claims?

In addition to recent initiatives to direct dissent through government channels, the covid-19 pandemic has affected associational life. Kazakhstan imposed harsh lockdown rules in the spring and summer of 2020, forcing citizens and NGOs alike to adapt to a more intensely digital world. One informant told me, "The internet became the sole platform for communication among

⁴ Contrast the language in his televised speech on January 7 with his address to the Mazhilis on January 11. In the January 7 "Address of the Head of State Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to the People of Kazakhstan," Tokayev sneers at the "so-called 'human rights defenders' and 'activists' [that] put themselves above the law and believe that they have the right to gather wherever they want and say whatever they want." Just four days later, he promises to introduce immediate corrective reforms of the justice system, to create a council to investigate the January events, and to address growing inequality. For the full text of the January 7 speech, see <https://www.akorda.kz/ru/obrashchenie-glavy-gosudarstva-kasym-zhomarta-tokaeva-k-narodu-kazahstana-70412>. For his speech to the Mazhilis, see "Tokayev's Reforms: The Entire Text of His Address to the Mazhilis," *Forbes.kz*, 11 January 2022, https://forbes.kz/process/reformyi_tokaeva_polnyiy_tekst_vyistupleniya_v_majilise/.

people, for securing government services, for running a business, for going to school – well, basically, for everything.”⁵ “Everything” also spans associational life. As both a product and study of pandemic-era politics, this dissertation is concerned with understanding how the internet and social media platforms inform Kazakhstani civil society actors’ advocacy approaches. In what ways do the internet and social media facilitate or undermine associational life in an autocratic context? When and how do activists pursue visibility as a strategy for achieving their advocacy goals? What digital spaces are different activists and organizations drawn to in pursuit of advocacy goals, and what implications do differences in apps’ technological infrastructures have for reaching those goals?

These questions look much different from the project I proposed in April 2020, which would have explored the role of education in authoritarian stability. In addition to changing the scope and framing of my research questions, over the course of the three years between writing a prospectus and defending this dissertation, my ability to carry out research was shaped by forces beyond my control. In specifying the epidemiological, financial, and bodily factors that affected my work, I strive to offer insight to future readers who struggle to manage the boundaries between personal and professional lives while crafting a research project. I draw inspiration from anthropologists who have thought deeply about “patchwork ethnography,” which describes an effort to rethink the process of generating ethnographic findings by “using fragmentary yet rigorous data, and other innovations that resist the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process” (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020).

Five concrete moments imposed constraints and invited opportunities that changed the way I approached this project. Next, I describe these critical junctures – a nod to the method of

⁵ Author interview, 3 May 2021.

process tracing that social science graduate students are taught to analyze mechanisms of political outcomes – to identify the very real forces that constrain and support the evolution of research questions and methodologies.

April 8, 2019

I lay awake at 4am in a hotel room in Moscow, unable to sleep because of jetlag. I try to resist the pull of my phone, knowing I won't get any more rest if I let myself scroll mindlessly, but type in my passcode anyway. I check my email and, seeing a subject line with results of my National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship application, do a double take when I read the first line of the email: "Congratulations!" Winning this three-year fellowship radically changed both the arc of my graduate career and my quality of living. The fellowship freed me from teaching assistant responsibilities, which opened up ten to twenty hours a week to read and write that would have been occupied with leading discussion section or grading. I accepted the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences' offer to exchange a guarantee for a sixth year of funding to "top off" my stipend – matching my pay to that of graduate students in the hard sciences, who are hired on a 12-month contract and make almost \$10,000 more each year than their social science colleagues. Though my income was still below the calculated cost of living in New York, in absolute terms I was making more than fellow Columbia students and nearly double what my peers at state institutions across the country earned. This was key in alleviating some of the financial precarity that causes a massive strain on academics, especially graduate students and adjunct instructors (Thorkelsen 2016). This money meant I could afford a room of my own.

March 13, 2020

I cut a month-long trip to Kazakhstan short, buying a plane ticket back to New York with six hours' notice. The eeriness of sirens and empty grocery shelves pushed me westward to Minnesota, where my family lives. By the time I made it to Minneapolis, Kazakhstan had locked down its borders, blocking travel both in and out. I was holed up at home, taking breaks from watching the news to finish my dissertation prospectus about education and authoritarian legitimization. When I presented this project to my committee, we were all optimistic that life would return to some semblance of normalcy by summer, and I stubbornly held onto the idea of a full year of in-person ethnographic research on international influences on public schooling in Central Asia.

May 27, 2020

I tuned in to a Zoom panel hosted by the Ethnography Collective at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, which intended to create space for qualitative scholars unmoored from the field. As I listened to a scholar who was long-ago grounded by bureaucratic limbo, having lost citizenship in his home country and not yet receiving paperwork in the United States, I was struck by the way he described working *with* – rather than *in spite of* – restricted global mobility to conduct impressive, impactful ethnographic research. Hearing this forced a change in perspective. I knew I had to revamp my project, though I was not sure exactly how to approach ethnography mediated by screens and wi-fi networks.

October 4, 2020

I mindlessly retweeted an image of a crowd that had gathered in Bishkek's main square in protest of the results of parliamentary elections. Photographs and video clips flooded Twitter, Instagram,

and Facebook, showing a group of men that took over government buildings and clashes between protesters and security forces. Bishkek buzzed with protests calling for respect for the rule of law as competing factions tried to fill the power vacuum that emerged when the Central Election Commission annulled the election results. For a week, I hardly slept, waking up before dawn each morning to “go to Bishkek” via live stream. I was not marching with crowds in Bishkek – indeed, if I had been in Kyrgyzstan, it would have been imprudent to join the rallies at the risk of attracting criticism of western-funded spies’ role in destabilizing the country. Even so, my experience of the events was *real* and physically embodied. My eyes hurt from staring at screens all day; my body hummed with adrenaline as I tried to keep up with the rotating cast of characters making a play for top positions in the government; my neck ached from hunching over at my desk; my mind wobbled with whiplash from stretching across social media platforms, languages, and time zones. I felt disoriented coming up for air after closing my laptop to realize that I was not actually in Bishkek, but in my apartment in Manhattan. Having attuned my ears to code-switching between Kyrgyz and Russian chants on Instagram Live videos of rallies, it was jarring to hear the Caribbean lilt of my neighbors’ Spanish and the ambulance sirens reminding me of the ongoing pandemic. The work of watching and processing Kyrgyzstan’s political crisis in October 2020 was a crash course in digital ethnography, which I embraced as a sensibility that would guide my dissertation research.

The pandemic had disrupted the education systems I originally wanted to observe. I knew I needed not only to change my methodological approach, but also to find an object of study that was observable with digital means. The work of following the political vacuum that opened in Kyrgyzstan after the October 2020 parliamentary elections pushed me to reapproach the years of notes and links I had amassed as a regular contributor to *The Diplomat* since 2018. I did not

report from the ground but used social media to make connections and observe trends in pop culture and politics alike. I realized that civil society was an especially appropriate object of study, given that it is a form of political participation that happens online. Individuals and collective groups use the internet both to “*do*” contentious politics (for example, off-stage organization of events or goals, sending out digital petitions) and to *record* contentious politics (through photos and videos of in-person speeches, rallies, protests, marches, etc.). This meant that civil society could be observed and analyzed with digitally mediated methods.

I originally intended for the project to be comparative, building on my extensive field experience in Kyrgyzstan and growing network in Kazakhstan. In aggregate, I have spent almost 3 years since 2015 living and working in Central Asia, first serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kyrgyzstan for two and a half years and returning to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan for a two month-long research trip in 2018, three months in 2019, and one month in 2020. However, in the wake of Kyrgyzstan’s political crisis in the fall of 2020, I struggled to get the proverbial snowball rolling for interviews with civil society actors in the country where I had spent considerably more time. In the same time it took to connect with and interview 20 people in Kazakhstan, I struggled to conduct 4 interviews with Kyrgyzstani civil society leaders.⁶ Given that I developed many of my initial ideas about the relationship between civil society, the internet, and institutional channels for reform while observing associational life in Kyrgyzstan since 2015, I leaned into analyzing Kazakhstan as a single country case study. In using digital methods to study the ways contentious politics and civil society play out online in Kazakhstan, I was keenly aware of assumptions of low digital connectivity that perpetuate discourses of

⁶ Though not certain, my hunch is that civil society leaders were overwhelmed with the instability that followed the October 2020 elections. I managed to get responses from many people, and we went back and forth for weeks (in one case, for months) trying to find time to talk, but we did not manage to make concrete plans.

Central Asia's isolation (Wood 2023). As recently as 2015, scholars argued that social media in Kazakhstan was marginal and not a site with potential for political organizing (Anceschi 2015: 7). However, by 2019 more than 70 percent of Kazakhstan's population was connected to the internet (United Nations Human Development Reports, 2018), largely through wider access to smartphones and mobile data, and social media has become an intensely political space. One interlocutor explained, "Look, the Internet in Kazakhstan plays a huge role, because in Kazakhstan most of the media are controlled. ... There is practically no independent press in Kazakhstan, so the Internet plays a big role in terms of obtaining alternative information."⁷ In addition to alternative journalism, the expansion of access to the web has created space for creative use of social media platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, and even an app for directions popular in the Russian-speaking world called 2GIS.

April 9, 2021

After spending the winter reworking my dissertation to focus on civil society and reading across disciplines to hone the techniques of digital ethnography, I woke up one morning unable to stand straight or walk freely around my apartment. Dismissed by a doctor at my university's student health center, I waited two months before seeking out further medical attention. Even with physical therapy, the pain was intense enough that it was difficult to concentrate. Some days, reading and writing were a challenge, but I pushed through it to conduct interviews and attend virtual events. In late summer, after a brief two-week window without pain, I was hit again with blinding pain. This time, I pushed for a referral to an outside doctor, who diagnosed me with a severely herniated disc, necessitating multiple procedures to heal. For the entirety of my ninth

⁷ Author interview, 26 April 2021.

semester of graduate school, my body set the rhythm of daily life – intense pain that distracted from academic writing, missing workshops and writing time for trips to physical therapy and specialists’ offices each week, and administrative burnout from spending hours on the phone to figure out insurance and hospital appointments. When I scheduled back surgery in December 2021, I let go of the tiny hope that I would be able to make it to Kazakhstan for a short field visit. I could barely bear to sit long enough for a subway ride to physical therapy, let alone make it through a 24-hour journey to Central Asia. It was an important lesson to realize that I was not just a researcher with a mind, but a researcher with a *body*. Struggling to think, write, and stay on top of data collection laid bare the “ableist assumptions [that] undergird productivity in academia” (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020).

Fieldwork guides warn of surprises and subversion that upend graduate students’ plans for gathering data, calling for flexibility and a multitude of backup plans. While ethnography is particularly celebratory of serendipity as a method, expectations of what constitutes “real” or “rigorous” ethnographic research reward those whom circumstances allow to immerse for a single extended period. In recognizing that personal and structural challenges make it difficult to complete ethnographic research projects according to traditional standards of fieldwork, patchwork ethnography calls for the creative cobbling together of resources and data at hand. The chapters that follow do not look like they could have or might have without the pandemic, without political crises in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, without the freedom enabled by the NSF fellowship, and without Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Despite the uncertainty of external forces, I crafted a three-pronged approach to data collection and analysis which I outline in the next section.

Developing a Digital Ethnographic Sensibility

To study civil society and contentious politics in Kazakhstan, I maneuvered between three methods of data collection – semi-structured interviews, visual analysis of social media posts, and digital participant observation – to generate data without needing to travel to Kazakhstan, which could have brought undue risk to myself and my interlocutors, given vaccination rates and lockdown policies. Each of these techniques are guided by an ethnographic sensibility, which is marked by three pillars: the elucidation of meaning, immersion, and reflexivity of the researcher’s positionality.⁸

First, I sought to better understand how civil society actors make sense of and experience their political and social world. We can study a word’s meaning and how it is used to contextualize the mechanisms and variables we study (Fu and Simmons 2021). I was focused on understanding the topic of associational life and organizing campaigns and projects online in line with the language my interlocutors used to describe it. This necessitated taking a critical eye to academic jargon, listening to interlocutors during interviews to see how their word choice followed mine, sensing when answers to a question didn’t match what I’d intended when I asked. For example, my original interview guide asked about “formal” versus “informal” channels for achieving advocacy goals. Two interlocutors took this to mean the difference between official correspondence and backdoor dealing. Since this was not quite what I was getting at, I asked them to help me think of a better way to phrase the question in Russian. Additionally, I paid attention to the way words translate (and the way they don’t). The range of types of non-government organizations are difficult to capture in English; for example, I still struggle with the

⁸ Methodological texts about ethnography emphasize the elucidation of meaning, immersion, and reflections on the researcher’s positionality as key steps to data generation. See Schatz (2013), Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2012), Pachirat (2017), Schaffer (2015), Fujii (2017).

best way to translate “public fund,” which is how most of the groups I spoke with are registered. My interlocutors frequently used the term “GONGO,” even though they might call an NGO “NPO” from the Russian acronym for non-government organization.

Second, immersion involves becoming intimately familiar with people, communities, and concepts over extended periods of time. Digital ethnographic immersion is quite different from the traditional understanding of immersive fieldwork, which implies the necessity of first-hand experience to understand cultural phenomena. If a researcher cannot be in “the field” for an extended period of time, but instead can only watch it through a screen, can the project really be considered ethnographic? Two decades of research in communications studies and anthropology would say yes.⁹ Given that my interlocutors had already been using digital spaces to document and promote their work and adapted to a more intensely digital world during the pandemic, I made every effort to immerse myself from 10,000 miles away. Admittedly, this is the weakest side of my ethnographic sensibility for this project, as even the most deeply immersed digital ethnographer – one who is glued to the screen, awake at odd hours to attend events and take notes, actively texting interlocutors – misses out on in-person dynamics. However, I was able to draw on language skills and immersive experiences I’d developed during previous trips to the field – including a two-year contract as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kyrgyzstan and a collective three months of research in Kazakhstan between 2018-2019. Having studied Russian since I was a teenager and working with a tutor to translate my proficiency in Kyrgyz to workable Kazakh (which has given my Kyrgyz a strange lilt, as Kazakh “e”s are pronounced with a much more

⁹ For a chronology of the method, see Elisenda Ardévol and Edgar Gómez-Cruz, (2014), “Digital Ethnography and Media Practices.” *The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies*, ed. Fabienne Darlin-Wolf (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.)

https://www.upf.edu/documents/237797533/238831346/Digital_ethnography_and_media_practices.pdf/a6427a17-72cb-2629-0b46-cce0df93e33f

prominent “yeh”) meant I could consume news reports and social media content in local languages. The years I spent steeped in local media and conversations (both in-person and over text) about the relationship between state and society contributed to my ability to develop a strong interview guide. The work of writing journalistically about Kazakhstani politics since 2018 meant I was familiar with references to political elites and social movements. I was also in a stronger position to recognize when I had collected sufficient interview data and to contextualize my findings. Without this background, the lower level of immersion of digital ethnography may have weakened my findings and interpretations. This is not to say that any project conducted with digital ethnographic findings would lack credibility without prior in-person field experience, but in the case of writing a covid-era dissertation with limited data, my years of experience bolster the strength of my analysis.

Third, positionality is the “stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study” (Rowe 2014: 628). A researcher’s social identities shape access to the field and affect relationships with friends and colleagues who assist in the knowledge production process (Fujii 2017; Sirnate 2014). Being attuned to the shifting dynamics of one’s positionality is important for an ethnography because of the recognition that “research involves more than just “collect[ing] data as if data were like so many rocks lying about in a field, but rather ... confront[s] the question of how we as researchers are implicated in the social worlds we study, to confront the ways we actually co-generate rather than simply collect data, and to confront the ways the knowledge we produce with these data travels back and alters the very social worlds it purports to explain” (Pachirat 2017: 18).

The ethnographer’s primary research instrument is her body, and this fact is true both online and off. Many have written about the challenges unique to being a young woman

conducting research in patriarchal contexts (see, for example, Kapiszewski MacLean and Read 2015; Nilan 2002; Johansson 2015), and many more have discussed the ways race, ethnic presentation, sexuality, and disability complicate this work even more (Ortbals and Rincker 2009; Behl 2019). When speaking with someone in person, my social body – a function of my gender, age, nationality, ethnic presentation, and mannerisms – shapes the way others interact with me (Falconer al-Hindi and Kawabata 2002; Ackerly and True 2008; Moss 2002). We do not lose our social body entirely when online, as women and minorities suffer more from trolls and digital harassment (Are 2020; Veletsianos et al. 2018). A rich literature speaks to the ways virtual interactions are still embodied and embedded in social structures.¹⁰

I felt the impact of my social identities more keenly when I was living and working in Central Asia, but while conducting digital ethnography, I strove to stay attuned to the ways my embodied position in networks of power. This included both micro – the relationship between interviewer and interviewee – and macro – such as the ways academic disciplines have been tools of colonial power and passport mobility – dynamics. Positionality most affected the data generation process in semi-structured interviews, where even through screens, interactions were shaped by my social identities. My whiteness, my gender, my age, my status as a native English speaker, my accent in Russian and my ability to switch briefly into Kazakh shaped the interactions that generated data for this project. The primary effect of positionality stemmed from my not being in Kazakhstan. Without unstructured meetings, chance run-ins in cafes or on the street, and serendipitous introductions, the data I collected is relatively less rich – but nevertheless, contributes to incredibly detailed micro-case studies that help us understand patterns of associational life online and off.

¹⁰ See the edited volume by Sanjek and Tratner on eFieldnotes (2016).

I now turn to explain the three-pronged approach to data collection, including semi-structured interviews, visual analysis of social media data, and digital participant observation. In addition to weaving fields, as de Seta (2020) describes, I also wove forms of data. The interviews led to invitations to virtual events; I met new people to interview at these events; I went down rabbit holes on Facebook and Instagram, following new groups and pages, which in turn opened up opportunities to attend events. In the next section, I discuss the three methods of data generation separately, but they were not so siloed in the research process.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Fujii's relational approach to interviewing was the main inspiration for my approach to data generation. The purpose of relational interviewing is to learn how interlocutors make sense of the world through dialogue, which she says is distinct from interviewing in the positivist tradition, which has tended to regard the method as a way to extract information and remain detached from the humanity of participants in the name of maintaining objectivity. Her methodological guide to relational interviewing lays out strategies for conducting interviews and interpreting patterns from notes and transcripts in a way that respects the interviewees while also having empathy for the researcher's mistakes (2017: 48, 55). In contrast to ethnographic interviewing, there is no expectation that a researcher will be in the field for a sustained period of time, and – depending on the needs of the research question – may interview a small number of people and only spend a short time in the field (7).

Between April 2021 and February 2022, I conducted 28 semi-structured interviews with 27 civil society actors in Kazakhstan.¹¹ To identify participants, I used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. I began with a purposive selection strategy, reaching out to relevant organizations' social media accounts or following up with activists I had interviewed for journalistic pieces in my work as a writer for *The Diplomat*. I used Instagram, Facebook, and email to establish contact; depending on the interlocutor's preference, we moved to Telegram or WhatsApp to maintain communication. Given a 10-hour time difference between New York City and Central Asia, it frequently took multiple offers of time and date to settle on an interview time.

I did not set out to interview a specific number of individuals. In line with LaDonna, Artino, and Balmer (2021), I prioritized sufficiency over saturation, the more commonly used measure to judge the rigor of qualitative research. They argue that the saturation metaphor “likens a dataset to a sponge with an objective saturation point” and instead call for evaluating the sufficiency of qualitative data.¹² Sufficiency is not a number, and the authors contend that interview length is a better indicator of rigor than sample size. They argue, “6 in-depth

¹¹ In addition, I conducted four interviews with four civil society actors in Kyrgyzstan. The project was originally a comparative look at how state capacity drives differences in associational life, but I could not get the snowball sampling to work beyond these four actors. I think the reverberations of the October 2020 parliamentary elections and the power vacuum that followed raised the stakes for many civil society actors' work. Despite repeated messaging to agree on a time to speak, potential interlocutors asked for rain checks or simply stopped messaging. In the summer of 2021, I decided to focus solely on Kazakhstan for the project.

¹² For readers who are interested in how the pure *number* of interviews relates to other studies, is. Deterding and Waters (2021) reviewed 96 articles that used semi-structured interviewing and found that the number of interviews ranged from 12 to 208 with the following distribution:

20% <30 interviews

30% 30-55

25% 55-100

25% >100 interviews

interviews with open-ended questions lasting an hour or more will likely yield richer data than twenty 10-minute interviews that elicit only surface-level responses” (2021: 608). In my case, 10 of the 28 interviews I conducted were between 45-59 minutes long; the shortest interview took 20 minutes, and the longest lasted 1 and a half hours. The work of coding and revisiting the transcripts and notes from these interviews yielded rich enough insight that I felt comfortable stopping when I did. Ideally, future research will involve interviews with groups that are more closely affiliated with the government; despite my persistence in getting in touch with these civil society actors, including batches of emails, Facebook messages, and Instagram direct messages, I could not secure interviews with them and relied on materials available online.

Just as the research questions shifted slightly over time, the language of the interview guide also evolved as I learned more. I began trying to translate my ideas about channels of contentious politics from English to Russian, struggling to land on how locals might describe working “inside” or “outside” the state. Bryman encourages researchers to think about the order of questions, to avoid asking leading questions, and to use easy language (2016: 472).

Before interviews, I offered my interlocutors their choice of platform. 25 of 27 chose Zoom, 1 opted for WhatsApp, and 1 wanted to speak on Telegram. The interview protocol was straightforward: I explained the project up front, asked for verbal consent to conduct the interview, and whether it was okay to record the conversation. Before recording, I asked whether my interlocutor wanted to remain anonymous. I noticed that I approached the interviews with more caution than my interlocutors. In an authoritarian regime, there were expected security risks to talking to a Western academic. With the Kazakhstani government’s use of spyware Pegasus to track the digital activity of opposition politicians and civil society actors, there could have been a heightened risk for these conversations happening on digital platforms. I was

somewhat surprised that every person asked to have their name on the record. Informants said they would let me know if they didn't want to answer particular questions or wanted their answers anonymized, but all but one told me something along the lines of: "I have nothing to hide."

In political science research that uses interviews, concern for interlocutors' personal and professional safety is of the utmost importance. But what are the ethical obligations for a researcher whose interview partners explicitly state that they want their words attributed to them? Writing on the study of online groups in China, Wang and Liu (2021) acknowledge that it is a tough question to engage with research subjects via social media in an era of internet censorship; they point to the backlashes and legal consequences for researchers (Greitens and Truex 2018) and informants (Fujii 2017: 22-24). When should the researcher override the wishes of their interlocutors? Is it patronizing to do so, or respectful? This concern about anonymizing or respecting interviewees' wishes speaks to the importance of centering the dignity of those contributing to research, which requires "treat[ing] everyone as 'ends' in themselves and not as a 'means' to some other end, such as a book or dissertation" (Fujii 2017: 6). Many of the people I spoke with openly promote their advocacy, indeed leaning on media attention in Kazakhstan and beyond for support in achieving their goals. Even so, I opted to anonymize interview data based on feedback from conference discussants and my academic mentors.

Some researchers have written about the challenges of building rapport, establishing trust, and developing "real" bonds during digital interviews (Seitz 2015). However, Struges and Hanrahan (2004) compared telephone and face-to-face qualitative interviewing and found that the mode of interview did not influence responses in terms of the length and content of answers. I do not claim that there is *no difference* between virtual and in-person interviews, but my

ethnographic sensibility has equipped me to think through the implications of relying solely on virtual interviews.

Location matters for interviews, insofar as the micro-context of an interview site – such as the room where conversations are conducted, or clothes the interviewer wears – can affect the shape and tone of conversation (Koch 2013; Megoran 2005). Some have argued that interviews conducted in participants' homes, for example, can disrupt power hierarchies between researchers and participants (Elwood and Martin 2000). In my work, interviews took place in a range of locations. I was always in my living room at my apartment in uptown New York City, but my interlocutors spoke to me from many different locations – at their desk in their organization's office (with frequent phone calls or interruptions from bosses and visitors), having tea at a cafe (pausing to order another chainik), walking home from work, in their kitchen (with cats howling in the background), and from their bedroom. Beyond the multi-sited nature of virtual interviews, time played a major role. When setting up interviews, I always tried to schedule for late afternoon in Kazakhstan, which necessitated waking up at 5 or 6 in the morning to log into Zoom. The 3 interviews I conducted when it was morning in Kazakhstan and midnight in New York were more difficult to conduct. I was tired, which affected my ability to speak Russian; these three interviews were 10 minutes shorter on average than those I conducted in the morning my time.

Additionally, the work of building relationships with interlocutors looked much different during the pandemic than if I had been able to spend the academic year in Kazakhstan as planned. Rather than meeting up for coffee, sharing informal moments, or taking taxis together, relationship-building looked like following each other on Instagram and a flicker of excitement when recognizing someone's name in the participants list panel, sending private notes in the chat

bar. I was struck by the range of vibes, for lack of a better word, with my interlocutors. I felt more at ease in some interviews than others, not unlike in-person conversations with strangers. Some interviews lasted 20 minutes, and at times it felt like pulling teeth to get my interlocutor to talk. Other interviews segued into jokes, random asides, and questions about our favorite bars in Almaty. LeeAnn Fujii wrote that “the most fundamental privilege that all researchers enjoy is gaining entrée into people’s worlds,” and I am extremely grateful for those who shared their time and expertise with me throughout the research process (2017: 16). I deeply hope that sometime soon I can return to Kazakhstan to follow through on promises to take each other out for chai and bes barmak exchanged at the end of interviews.

Visual Analysis of Social Media Data

I built and analyzed a dataset of social media posts to understand how collective organizations document and promote their work. Recognizing that images are important insofar as they reflect “political actors’ ideologies and choices” (Loken 2021: 1), I treated posts as political artifacts. Symbols contained within images construct purposes and motivate people to join a cause (Kharroub and Bas 2015: 7), and messages with images attract more attention and recruit participants better than purely text-based ones (Casas and Webb Williams 2019).

Between October 2020 and April 2022, I developed a corpus of social media posts in two ways. First, through algorithm-driven lurking,¹³ I took screenshots from Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and organizations’ websites that I could return to and analyze. This involved writing descriptions of what was contained in the post’s image as well as written reflections of why I captured that screenshot. Screenshots are useful because users and platforms

¹³ “Lurking” is netspeak for browsing social media sites without engaging through comments, likes, or resharing (de Seta 2020: 85).

can delete old threads, posts, or images (Kraemer 2016; Trainer 2016). Second, I conducted systematic visual analysis of several civil society groups' Instagram accounts. I opted for Instagram as a 'field site' for systematic analysis because of the centrality of visuals to the app (Ekman and Widholm 2017: 18; McCrow-Young 2020) and because it is the most popular app in Kazakhstan (Kudaibergenova 2019).¹⁴

In June 2021, I used the programming language Python to scrape the Instagram feeds of three groups with differing ties to the state: Oyan Qazaqstan is an unregistered civic movement that is critical of the country's political system; Youth Information Service of Kazakhstan (MISK in Russian) is a registered public fund that maintains autonomy from the state; and Civil Alliance is an umbrella NGO that is closely aligned with the Ministry of Information and Social Development. I asked consent before scraping the groups' posts and did not scrape any content from individuals' personal accounts. In total, this resulted in a spreadsheet of 2803 posts that included the URL, the caption, and the number of likes or views.

Digital Participant Observation

Finally, I also conducted digital participant observation. There are many "degrees" of participant observation, as Schwartz-Shea and Yanow have argued: a researcher can be present and merely watch from the corner, or they may actively participate in a process (2012: 63). This extends to the digital sphere, as much of the digital experience involves observing in a way that is not directly participatory – something called "lurking" in English netspeak (de Seta 2020:

¹⁴ For more on digital field sites, see Bonilla and Rosa (2015) and Pietrobruno (2013). Bonilla and Rosa examine how #ferguson overlapped with and diverged from the actual city of Ferguson, Missouri during mass protests in 2014. Pietrobruno studies how those in Turkey who want to preserve cultural heritage use YouTube to document religious ceremonies.

85).¹⁵ For this project, digital participant observation involved attending virtual events such as livestreamed marches, speeches, and workshops related to human rights. To find these events, I relied on snowball sampling, following further invitations and algorithmically pushed links and accounts to gain ethnographic access.

I shifted the logic of participant observation from “where” to “when” (Gray 2016). Beaulieu describes this as moving from “co-location to co-presence” (2010: 454), in which I need not be physically present to meet my interlocutors, but merely online at the same time. The stretching of both geographic and temporal notions of presence across time zones and continents mirrors the newfound salience of *(a)synchronous* meetings, panels, and courses that had not meant much before the pandemic. This affected the temporal dynamics of participant observation. While lurking on a Telegram channel thread, watching a Zoom event with my camera off, or following up on a video of a protest, I could take a minute to translate and double-check I understood all the words used, something not possible in a face-to-face interview where I would have had to interrupt to ask about a word’s meaning if I couldn’t guess it from context.

I opted to conduct digital participant observation as myself, rather than creating a standalone academic profile, as some have called for (Dieter et al., 2019). In line with Kraemer, who argued that creating a separate profile exaggerates the binary between field and home (2016: page 124), I thought that having a history of my posts would boost credibility in the eyes of my interlocutors, which was a challenge given that I could not meet with them in person to build a relationship. One potential impact of opting to interact online as “myself” without a separate

¹⁵ Early experiences with digital ethnography in 2018 was largely dependent on lurking. For a course on the alt-right in New York City, I watched livestreams and followed several Telegram channels where members of the Proud Boys discussed their beliefs. Despite my efforts to conduct interviews, I was rebuffed with sexist comments by email and stuck to observation of digital spaces where I had access.

account was that I was surfing these platforms with algorithms that were attuned to my everyday activity. The proliferation of machine learning and algorithmic decision-making (Pietrobruno 2013) pushed me to reflect on the algorithm's role in my research. Before beginning dissertation research, I followed many independent NGOs and activist collectives on Instagram and interacted with posts from opposition politicians and journalists on Twitter and Facebook. Did the algorithm feed me posts that align with this political view? To what extent could I successfully overcome that by seeking out digital spaces where people praise the government and political elites? Although this is a difficult counterfactual, reflecting on how the algorithm contributes to selection bias is a useful exercise.

Data from participant observation was generated through the practice of writing field notes and memos. The first step to generating field notes was taking jottings – small notes to remind myself of dialogue or details – in notebooks. Since October 2020, I have filled three notebooks with jottings from synchronous and asynchronous events alike; jottings include quotes, time stamps, and short descriptions of visually striking or analytically interesting moments. I drew on these handwritten jottings while writing field notes and analytic memos in Scrivener. I followed the instruction I received at the Institute for Qualitative and Mixed-Method Research to write fieldnotes. This involved a three-column table, with one column for description, one for reflection, and one for analysis. In the description column, I tried to write with as much detail as possible about who was speaking, what they said, and how others interacted or responded to them. I limited my editorializing to the reflection column (for example, rather than writing that a speaker “seemed frustrated,” I wrote in the description column that they stumbled over words and their voice rose when describing a failed grant application, keeping the interpretation of their being frustrated for the reflection column). The

analysis column was the sparsest of the three; I kept this column empty while writing fieldnotes and would return to a day's notes after some time to apply analytic codes.

Why Kazakhstan?

I opted to study civil society in Kazakhstan for two reasons. First, I have spent many years studying local languages, conducting fieldwork, and building a network of friends and colleagues in the country. This kind of prior exposure is not a prerequisite for ethnography, but in a context where I was accessing the field only through a screen, this command over language and awareness of political context facilitated digital ethnography.

Second, Kazakhstan is an ideal case to understand how civil society actors navigate structural constraints and incentives in an authoritarian context. Much of the literature on state-society relations in autocracies use Russia and China as case studies, and as global powers, these cases are of course generative for understanding how and why authorities try to control associational life. However, Kazakhstan is arguably more similar to a broader universe of cases. For example, findings from Kazakhstan could inform studies of countries in Eastern Europe that share institutional histories from Soviet rule. Countries in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus have straddled the line between democracy and authoritarianism in 30 years of independence, and civil society actors have played major roles in reform and revolution.¹⁶ Kazakhstan is a petrostate, and my findings on state-society dynamics potentially speak to the Gulf states that also leverage natural resource wealth to buy society's compliance. This dissertation's examination of social media as a platform for social mobilization depends on widespread access

¹⁶ For example, see Kuzio's 2006 comparative study of youth and social mobilization in Serbia, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan.

to cheap internet in Kazakhstan, making the analytical framework useful for studies of countries in northern Africa and South Asia where mobile data is inexpensive.

Analyzing and Interpreting Digital Data

The three forms of data collection above resulted in multiple forms of data, including interview transcripts, a spreadsheet of social media data, a folder of screenshots, two paper notebooks, and several megabytes of text files with notes about events, videos, news articles. I now turn to explain how I worked with these data to develop analytical insights.

The traditional approach to analyzing qualitative data has been grounded theory, which is characterized by simultaneous data collection and analysis, inductive construction of abstract categories that explain social processes expressed in the data, and building a theoretical framework that specifies the causes, conditions, and consequences of these processes (Charmaz 2011, 6). However, researchers' projects and analysis are rarely – if ever – wholly inductive (Timmermans and Tavory 2012; Deterding and Waters 2021). Deterding and Waters advocate for an abductive approach to coding, in which qualitative researchers come to the data with theoretical ideas and concepts they plan to apply, but that they remain open to surprising and unexpected findings. They specify a coding procedure that is similar to grounded theory coding, but where the set of codes that can be applied to the entire set of data are generated beforehand (with additional codes added over time as unexpected findings emerge).

I came to the research questions with assumptions about what I would find and what topics would be most important; these assumptions come from reading across literatures in political science, but also my previous field experience in Central Asia. While reading and rereading interview transcripts and field notes, I applied these codes (within-system versus outside, registration, authoritarian government) and also generated new codes when I noticed that

interlocutors made similar references even without being asked directly (for example, differentiating between local, national, and international authorities). Selecting new codes called for going back through transcripts I had already coded and re-reading.

For the social media visuals, I iteratively developed a coding schema with a research assistant, a student at Nazarbayev University. Having followed Kazakhstani politics and civil society on Instagram closely since 2018, I had several images and themes in mind before beginning the coding. My research assistant and I each coded three small batches of 20 posts (not included in the 450 posts that were coded and analyzed for Chapter 4) over two weeks to account for intercoder variability, but primarily with the goal of revising the code book to combine redundant themes or expand the scope of a code. With a complete code book, my research assistant coded the 450 selected posts, and I checked her work to capture the following information:

- The **language** of the post (whether it is in Russian, Kazakh/Kyrgyz, English, or some combination)
- The **iconography** of the post (whether it includes any patriotic symbols, whether there is text in the post, whether a politician, historical figure, or celebrity is pictured, whether the police or organization team members are pictured, whether a protest sign is pictured, and whether there is a map)
- The **theme** of the post (civil society; human rights; elections/politics; law; a holiday; a “safe” topic such as women, ecology, or volunteering; international solidarity)
- The **tactic**. Social media is both an instrument of collective action and a way to record collective action. I looked for whether the post included (a “flashmob” or unified hashtag; an example of public art, including graffiti, performance art, or mural; single-person picket; large-group picket; social project; crowdfunding/fundraising; letter-writing or submitting complaints to government; sharing information about how to attend protests; specifying demands; legitimating the Nur-Otan party; building community; recording police brutality or government misconduct)
- Whether the post has **references to law**, including the Constitution, the legal code, or international law
- Whether the post references **funding**, including state coffers, international donors, and grassroots fundraising

The Argument in Brief

I use data from interviews, visual analysis of social media, and participant observation to answer questions about associational life in Kazakhstan. How do civil society actors understand the opportunities and drawbacks of working with the state, as opposed to organizing outside it? What types of principled claims can Kazakhstani civil society actors make, and what is the process for making those claims? How have mobility consequences of the pandemic shaped the repertoires of associational life in autocratic contexts? What spaces are different activists and organizations drawn to in pursuit of advocacy goals, and what implications do differences in apps' technological infrastructures have for reaching those goals? My goal is to give careful attention to how civil society actors devise strategies to achieve their advocacy goals, how they argue about theories of political change, and how they exercise agency in a political system that seeks to control the public sphere.

I argue that activists, rights defenders, and even staff of government-affiliated NGOs are making creative, tactical choices to achieve their advocacy goals in an autocratic setting. These choices stem from strategic calculations about how to achieve their goals and avoid coercion, but also principles about the right way to organize associational life in an authoritarian regime. Although at times they may overreach – perhaps by framing a cause in a way that officials find threatening and respond to with force, or pursuing a cause that becomes taboo as geopolitical winds shift – civil society actors are pursuing advocacy goals with incredible tactical awareness and nimbleness.

Structural accounts of associational life emphasize political opportunity structures, in which access to a political system, intra-elite competition, decline in the state's repressive capability, and international pressure facilitate mobilization (Bunce and Wolchik 2009;

Beissinger 2002). Structural accounts are often state centric, which Mamdani et al. has argued obscured instances of claims-making and resistance in authoritarian contexts (via LeBas 2007: 229). Even the phrasing of “political opportunity structure” makes these windows of opportunity seem to stem from some combination of top-down mechanisms, which overlooks how civil society actors make their own opportunities for mobilization (Rivetti 2017: 1181). My line of inquiry is agentic, while recognizing that constraints are present and often stem from the state.

This contributes to scholarship that explores the link between ideas and tactics, principle, and strategy in a variety of global contexts. Sell and Prakash (2004) argue that NGOs are not so different from businesses, despite the assumption that NGOs are unique in pursuing solely principled beliefs. They compare business-driven and NGO-driven campaigns aimed at international organizations and treaties and find that normative frameworks and instrumental objectives inform both types of actors. Erin Pineda’s study of the American civil rights movement finds intense disagreement over the best course of action to achieve racial justice. While activists in CORE and SNCC pushed hard for “jail, no bail,” clogging up jailhouses in Alabama and Florida as a way to challenge the meanings associated with incarceration, many others in the broader movement disagreed with the tactic. Some criticized “jail, no bail” on the grounds that it broke the rules of “civility” in civil disobedience. Others who considered themselves aligned with the cause disagreed with civil disobedience and protest altogether (Pineda 2021: 149). In the following chapters, I am not so much concerned with producing a neatly articulated answer to a puzzle as I strive to describe the tactics and symbols that civil society actors in Kazakhstan draw on to make advocacy claims. In the interpretivist tradition, description *is* analysis, and laying out the terms of the debate about tactics and framing offers important insight to the drivers of associational life.

Overview of Chapters

In Chapter 2, I interrogate the concept of civil society as an object of scholarly inquiry and a policy goal in Kazakhstan. While the dissertation is primarily concerned with activists' agency in an authoritarian context, it is analytically necessary to describe that context and evaluate how specific features of Kazakhstan's state apparatus how civil society actors make decisions, where certain strategies are feasible, and which different framings are persuasive. I draw from scholarship in political science and development studies to present expectations of top-down mechanisms through which associational life operates, including (extra)legal constraints, financing, dependency relations with the Global North, professionalization, and the socio-political context. I find that Kazakhstan's authorities use laws criminalizing extremism and proliferating fake news to target dissent, in addition to surveillance and sporadic detention. Since 2008, flows of foreign development funding to Kazakhstan have dropped; the government has leveraged Kazakhstan's natural resource wealth to offer funding to civil society. Informants are widely skeptical about accepting government funds, however, and reported that the dip in international support has pushed civil society groups to reimagine their activities and missions in a creative way. Many described using crowdfunding through a mobile banking app to support projects.

Although the development studies literature frames professionalization as a counterproductive, depoliticizing process, respondents described formal institutionalization and expertise as tools to achieve their advocacy goals. Extensive education required for expertise is one reason that civil society is largely concentrated in Kazakhstan's biggest cities. The urban-rural divide of Kazakhstan's civil society resembles the siloing of associational life by language-speaking communities. Although leaders of large NGOs and social movements strive to translate

materials from Russian to Kazakh and to be proactive in reaching the Kazakh-speaking population, it remains a struggle to overcome the language barrier.

Chapter 3 examines the institutional channels through which independent civil society actors pursue their advocacy goals. Different types of civil society actors prefer different methods. As one of my interlocutors put it, rights defenders are like experts, sitting in offices and monitoring elections or protests. They use soft advocacy to protect human rights. Activists, on the other hand, show up to the city center and stand in front of the mayor's office with posters, shouting that their rights must be defended. In Chapter 3, I focus on debates among rights defenders and activists about the tactical and ethical elements of within-system engagement. I consider the choice to register as an NGO, to organize a protest, to participate in legislation by drafting bills and running in elections, and to conduct strategic litigation in Kazakhstan's court system and the international legal sphere. I argue that civil society groups leverage power differentials across levels of administration to advance rights claims and negotiate for reform. This is notably different than the "boomerang effect" that Keck and Sikkink advanced because Kazakhstani civil society actors are not petitioning their government via a transnational community of activists; rather, they exploit loopholes and authorities' concern for Kazakhstan's international reputation to use the language and institutions of the law as instruments of reform.

The next two chapters dive into digital nooks of associational life in Kazakhstan. In chapter 4, I explore the politics of visibility. Why would civil society actors want their campaigns to go viral, given that restrictive laws come with severe consequences for critical speech and illegal assemblies? I develop three metaphors to complicate the concept of visibility: pixelization, palimpsest, and virality. I apply these metaphors to interpret how Kazakhstani activists use social media to advance advocacy goals. I do this by presenting three digital

ethnographic case studies: a workshop on making memes, social media posts documenting the evolution of a movement defined by overlapping hashtags, and an Instagram channel and hashtag that advocated for the release of a political prisoner.

Next, I turn my attention to the ways associational life plays out across social media platforms in Kazakhstan. While working on this project between October 2020 and August 2022, my only window into civil society was my computer screen. I observed how many groups use multiple social media platforms in different ways. Political science scholarship often treats “technology” or “social media” as umbrella concepts. For example, Tucker et. al (2018) claim that their “simple theoretical framework” explains that social media can facilitate social movements while undermining democracy. They make passing reference just to Twitter and Facebook, overlooking the vast diversity in websites, networks, platforms, and apps where people engage in politics online. However, as I demonstrate in chapter 5, politics happens beyond the primary platforms of analysis in political science research. In this chapter, I analyze three campaigns conducted across different social media platforms: YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. I consider the configuration of the technological infrastructure and audiences using each platform to understand how digital spaces offer activists different opportunities or pitfalls in their advocacy campaigns. Journalistic vlogging is popular in Kazakhstan, and civil society actors whose work has an investigatory bent skirt regulations for mass media by using YouTube. Instagram is the most widely used app in Kazakhstan, and it has been a crucial tool for bottom-up social movement mobilization. Kazakhstani government officials are active on Facebook, and the platform’s “groups” feature gives citizens a chance to communicate directly with authorities.

Finally, I conclude by exploring the implications of my findings for scholarly writing and policymakers. I situate my contribution in literatures on state-society relations in autocracies and

digital politics, and I describe how my methodological approach could be used to study associational life in other contexts. I explain the policy implications of my findings for US funding for civil society and digital literacy – specifically, the several million dollars spent on projects about microblogging in Central Asia alone. I consider the role social media platforms play in supporting (or undermining) civil society’s advocacy goals and draw on several global cases to illustrate how these platforms could boost accountability and transparency.

Contributions

In addition to providing a more complete understanding of civil society dynamics in Kazakhstan, this dissertation contributes to several theoretical debates about the internet’s role in mobilizing dissent and state-society relations in authoritarian regimes. As populations around the world have gained access to the internet, there has been an immense focus on the effect of the internet and social media – broadly construed – on political outcomes. I argue that by treating the internet and social media as umbrella concepts, without considering how features of different platforms in specific contexts can shape beliefs or behavior, we are ill equipped to understand the microdynamics that shape political subjectivity online.

This project is a detailed case study of civil society in Kazakhstan, a superpresidential authoritarian regime that has persisted with the help of immense resource wealth and relative stability. Although I am committed to the study of Central Asia, my analysis contributes to the broader literature on state-society relations in authoritarian regimes. Description of debates among civil society actors about the stakes of working through government channels to accomplish their goals contributes to our understanding of cooptation. I challenge the assumption that any within-system engagement reflects cooptation or acquiescence by showing that rights defenders and activists see law and courts as instruments to challenge the state. Civil society actors engage with

government institutions at multiple levels of administration, from local to national and international, to pursue their advocacy goals. In contrast with the predominant interpretation of cross-level advocacy, drawn from Keck and Sikkink's boomerang theory, I show that Kazakhstani civil society does not outsource the work of pressuring governments to resource-rich peer NGOs or foreign governments; rather, they leverage legal expertise and awareness of authorities' concern with Kazakhstan's international reputation to make rights claims. This subtle but theoretically significant distinction in the mechanism of transnational advocacy affords stronger agency to political actors working in closed regimes.

Much of the literature on the nature of contentious politics in closed regimes emphasizes the need to hide activism or couch dissent, with evidence from rural Malaysia (Scott 1985), pro-regime spectacles in Syria (Wedeen 2015) and underground labor organizing in China (Fu 2018). Contrary to the expectations of this research agenda, some activists in authoritarian regimes sometimes seek out visibility as a way to build community, to preserve and extend public performances of contention, and to circulate criticism of the regime. I break down the visible/invisible binary by theorizing three metaphors that represent different logics of visibility. These metaphor-mechanisms – virality, palimpsest, and pixelization – open up channels of inquiry about the strategic tradeoffs of visible contention in repressive contexts.

Finally, my methodological approach speaks to concerns about the expectations of what constitutes “good” or “productive” fieldwork from ethnographers and the potential differences between digital and in-person ethnography. Research conducted primarily or exclusive through digital means should be weighed against a scholar's previous field experience. With constrained opportunities relative to in-person immersion, prior relationships, language study, and on-the-ground experience are all the more important to successful digital fieldwork. Even so, a primary

benefit of patchwork ethnography with some or all conducted online is the reduced cost of conducting fieldwork. While ethnographic research can be less expensive than conducting massive survey experiments, it is still costly – both in terms of money, but also time – to do ethnography. Scholars who have relatively less funding, who have teaching obligations, or who have families to care for may not have the luxury of traveling to a far-away place to spend a year.

But digital ethnography need not be deemed “ethnography lite,” a cheaper and more convenient option for less advantaged scholars. Conducting research entirely online can compel a scholar to think more deeply about the tenets of ethnographic research, for example, what constitutes digital immersion? How do relationships built on messaging apps differ from those developed in offices, coffee shops, and living rooms? Additionally, a purely digital ethnographic approach can result in unique insights that may not surface during in-person ethnography. I wonder whether the theories of visibility and platform politics I develop in Chapters 4 and 5 would have crystallized if I were living in Almaty. Of course, I would have still used social media and messaging apps to conduct my work, but I might not have thought of them as concrete spaces where politics happens. As an example of rigorous digital ethnography, my dissertation could be a pedagogical tool for advisors and graduate students alike.

Chapter 2: Civil Society as an Object of Study/Subject of Political Control

The central questions of this dissertation focus on the tactical choices of actors working in Kazakhstan's civil society. Civil society is somewhat of a buzzword among Kazakhstan's political elite, and the government has boldly claimed that civil society is the "locomotive of state development." However, one of my interlocutors interrupted my line of questioning to argue that there is *no such thing* as a systematized civil society in Kazakhstan beyond a few watchdog organizations like his own.¹⁷ Given the multiplicity of definitions and the normative stakes of each, I opted to frame this dissertation in terms of civil society. What is civil society as an object of both western academic inquiry and governance in Kazakhstan? How do scholars, development workers, and political elites approach civil society?

In this chapter, I set a backdrop for conceptual definitions and sociopolitical context that inform the rest of the dissertation. I begin by tracing three broad conceptual camps and situate my own definition within these bodies of research. My definition is much more expansive than other political scientists, accounting for unregistered organizations, grassroots movements, government-affiliated organizations, and volunteer associations. Such a wide view of civil society offers better analytical leverage to account for institutional traits of different types of collective organizations and how they relate to the state. Next, I identify five top-down mechanisms and structural features of authoritarian regimes and the political economy of international aid that affect associational life. This includes the regulatory regime and extralegal restrictions on CSOs' activities, financial flows from the Global North to the Global South, legal constraints on CSO financing, incentives to

¹⁷ Author interview, 12 May 2021.

professionalize, and the socio-political context. Finally, I draw on interview data and primary documents including government reports and the Legal Code to examine whether and how these theorized mechanisms impact civil society in Kazakhstan. In contrast to the development studies literature on professionalization, interlocutors working in the human rights field spoke of their education and expertise as resources to fully leverage the law for progress. While Kazakhstan's government does not openly vilify civil society actors to the degree that neighboring countries' leaders do, the socio-political climate – specifically the siloing of language communities and grassroots retraditionalization efforts – presents challenges for activists.

What is civil society, and how is it studied?

Civil society should be understood as a “contested political symbol [rather] than as an objective descriptor” (Verdery 1996 237). Disagreements over the meaning of civil society reflect the normative connotation that has been appended to scholarship and policy related to associational life. As Krishan Kumar wrote in his genealogy of the concept, “Civil society' sounds good; it has a good feel to it; it has the look of a fine old wine, full of depth and complexity. Who could possibly object to it, who could not wish for its fulfillment?” (1993: 376).¹⁸ Civil society's conceptual origins lie in the work of 18th century theorists like Locke, Hegel, Marx, and de Tocqueville, but it became cemented as a Western policy priority with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. Kumar argues that the Solidarity movement in Poland renewed scholarly interest in civil

¹⁸ Several scholars have pushed through the normative fog of the concept and analyzed how associational life can contribute to problematic – even violent – political outcomes. See the following articles: Sheri Berman, "Civil society and the collapse of the Weimar Republic." *World politics* 49, no. 3 (1997): 401-429 and

Andreas Umland, "The far right in pre-and post-Euromaidan Ukraine: From ultra-nationalist party politics to ethno-centric uncivil society." *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 28, no. 2 (2020): 247-268.

society (386), after which civil society became a focus of the development industry. Western governments and international NGOs allocating massive sums of money from the 1990s onwards to building a robust civil society in post-socialist and post-colonial contexts across the world (Blair 1998; Hearn 2000; Verdery 1996; Hartblay and Klepikova 2021).

Despite the fuzziness of the term, there are three broad camps of analytical frames applied to understand and explain what civil society is and does. The functionalist view sees civil society as a sphere that is independent from the government and markets. Another frame emphasizes the deliberative nature of associational life. Finally, the hybrid model links theories of civil society to the study of social movements. I review the three frameworks before explaining my reasoning for using the hybrid model to study civil society in contemporary Kazakhstan.

First, the functionalist view understands civil society as a third sector that is autonomous from the market and the state (Diamond 1994; Fukuyama 1995). This is the most predominant frame in political science, and it expects that more civil society leads to a better-functioning and more responsive state. This is because civil society contributes to the development of cultural capital (Putnam 1994) and gives citizens more opportunities to neutralize corruption, institutionalize human rights, solve sociopolitical problems, and keep governments and markets in check (Hulme and Edwards 1997, cited in Alvarez et al 2017: 9). Oxhorn (2006) identifies an “implicit (and sometimes quite explicit) parallel with the teleology associated with modernization theories of the 1960s” (63-64). Others have articulated that this teleological understanding of the democratizing force of developing and expanding the third sector became baked into discussions about democracy promotion worldwide (Kumar 1993: 386; Jamal 2009: 1; Hartblay and Klepikova 2021).

Although many have asserted the normative importance that civil society be entirely separate from the government in order to best be positioned to resist government rhetoric on acceptable forms of civic identity and engagement (Ost 2010), others recognize that such a rigid conceptual separation of state and civil society does not reflect political reality (Oxhorn 2006; Uphoff and Krishna 2004). Functionalist scholarship recognizes that state and civil society can engage in mutually beneficial cooperation. For example, in China, leaders of environmental NGOs see the state as a resource-rich ally, and the state tolerates collective organizations working on this acceptably political issue because they produce public services that people want (Hsu 2010, Spires 2011, see discussion by Lewis 2013).

A second conceptualization emphasizes the importance of deliberation to associational life. Some political theorists have focused on the ideal conditions for deliberation, as well as the institutions and procedures that can make it most effective (Cohen 1999). As Jeffrey Alexander argued, "The structure of civil society may rest upon a cultural structure, but it is hardly merely discursive in its shape and form. It is filled with institutions, organizations of communication and regulation" (2006: 4).

A third model emphasizes the hybridity between civil society and informal social movements. Deliberation is also key to this model, though in contrast to theories of the formal institutions and procedures that govern deliberation, the hybrid frame emphasizes informal and unstructured forms of deliberation (Benhabib 2021). This draws on the Habermasian conceptualization of the public sphere, which Habermas described as "a network for communicating information and points of view" (1996: 360). Values and identities are contested in public discourse, which "encompasses a range of communicative spaces from small face-to-face discussions through to action by social movements and the media" (Hendriks 2006: 494).

DellaPorta – a central thinker in the study of civil society – argued for examining the dual processes of “NGOization of social movements” and “SMOization of civil society” (2020: 939). DellaPorta sees a tension between the normative claims and empirical reality of the first two conceptualizations of civil society I describe above. While we might expect civil society to be, well, *civil* in addressing issues through consensus and compromise, social movements represent emotion-driven disruption to draw attention to issues and put pressure on decision-makers to address them (939-941). Social movements have become more like civil society organizations, with movements acquiring material resources and becoming embedded in local, national, and transnational political processes (Della Porta 2020, Schulman 2021). Some NGOs have adopted direct action and other disruptive forms of collective protest; their discourse is politicized, with NGOs aiming to influence the politics of both material interest and identity (Cohen and Arato 1992).

In this dissertation, I take a wide view of civil society that aligns most closely with the hybrid model. In line with Edwards (2011), when I talk about civil society, I mean “community or grassroots associations, social movements, labor unions, professional groups, advocacy and developmental NGOs, formally registered nonprofits, social enterprises, and many others” (2011: 7). This framework allows for the most expansive definition of the types of collective organizations that count as civil society. Some definitions preclude political parties (DeMattee 2020), while others include them (Berman 2021); some block volunteer associations, such as the Girl Scouts or Parent-Teacher Associations, because they “do not project communicative judgments” (Alexander 2006, 5), while others accept the huge range of entities with different purposes and levels of formality and politicization. Taking such a broad definition of civil society is in line with the way my interlocutors described the ecosystem of associational life. Interlocutors spoke of the need to

consider activists engaging in social movements and looser advocacy campaigns, as well opposition political parties.¹⁹

Conceptualizing civil society as broadly as I do enables me to skirt the normative lean of setting bounds on the universe of acceptable organizational forms. This conceptualization is also analytically productive. Limiting my study to formally registered nonprofits would leave significant blind spots for studying associational life, especially in an authoritarian context. Mercer warned against conflating formally registered NGOs with civil society (2002: 10). A group that is unregistered could be so because they did not pursue registration or because they were denied, and I gain analytic leverage by examining the reasons that unregistered groups remain unregistered. Furthermore, it is imperative to include volunteer associations and government-affiliated organizations (GONGOs). While the literature says these groups are depoliticized because they have been co-opted and do not project normative judgments, Yevgeny Zhovtis – one of Kazakhstan’s most prominent human rights advocates and the director of Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law – argued that in regimes like the Soviet Union and contemporary Kazakhstan, “GONGOs” exist within the framework of the established system and are extensions of state power.²⁰ But these associations work to solve the problems of their constituency and their own bureaucracy, and they do so through direct contact with the state. Finally, given that I am studying civil society in an autocratic context, it is valuable to include political parties in my definition. Opposition political parties exist, though they are either not registered (and so cannot compete in elections) or are the targets of repression. These parties do not have a meaningful chance at winning power, which opens up questions about strategy and

¹⁹ Author interviews: 5 May 2021, 12 May 2021, 14 May 2021, 25 May 2021.

²⁰ Author interview 12 May 2021.

principle in deciding to take this form of political organizing. Whether or not collective organizations seek to participate in formal politics or engage with the state in the "political sphere" is central to the research questions driving this dissertation, and by taking such a wide view of civil society, I position myself to answer without pre-imposing expectations about organizational form or action onto groups or campaigns. This is in line with Laruelle's critique of the excessive focus on institutional structure in the study of civil society; this is because an institutional focus ignores or overlooks social mobilization (2015: 126). By adopting a wide view of civil society, I am positioned to account for the institutional traits of collective organizations as well as their role and goals in social mobilization.

Theorizing How and Why Autocrats Manage Civil Society

A key turn in the study of civil society and state-society relations was the recognition that some regimes adopt ostensibly democratic institutions – such as elections – but tweak the rules of the game enough to tip the playing field in the ruling elites' favor (Levitsky and Way 2010). Scholars have recognized that leaders of hybrid autocratic states do not and cannot rely on the outright coercive measures that hold up dictatorships. Rather, they build regulatory regimes that structure civil society both to limit potentially disruptive collective organizing and to reap the legitimated benefits of civil society (Lorch and Bunk 2017). Indeed, autocrats have gotten savvy with dissent management. They pay attention to the techniques their peers use to manage civil society. Tansey et al. find that geographic proximity to other autocratic regimes – in addition to migration flows and trade – is linked with the duration of autocratic rule (2017). In his study of autocratic innovation in nine Southeast Asian regimes, Morgenbesser finds that "similar and neighboring autocratic regimes can more easily gain information about successful techniques of political control" (2020: 1067). This is further illustrated by Eurasian parliaments copy-pasting the

language of NGO laws from Russian legislation on foreign agents, “gay propaganda,” and funding for civil society.

I now turn to synthesize literature from political science and development studies to lay out the top-down mechanisms and structural features of authoritarian regimes that can shape the ecosystem of associational life. This includes the regulatory regime and extralegal restrictions on CSOs’ activities, financial flows from the Global North to the Global South, legal constraints on CSO financing, incentives to professionalize, and the socio-political context.

(Extra)legal constraints

Regulatory regimes that govern civil society organizations need not only be restrictive; they can also be permissive. Indeed, rather than completely restricting associational life, autocrats have developed complex regulatory regimes. Laws constraining civil society sideline or silence potentially threatening groups (Gilbert 2016; Gilbert and Mohseni 2018) while encouraging “acceptable” groups to organize (Hemment 2012; Paley 2001). Many of the legal restrictions on civil society constrain the registration and operation of collective organizations; these laws include “restrictive legal provisions ... used to discourage, burden and, at times, prevent the formation of civil society organizations” (Gilbert and Mohseni 2018: 457). Leeway in the description of procedures to grant registration give authorities leverage over denying NGOs’ registrations and banning or de-registering NGOs.

Governments can become threatened by civil society organizations that provide public services that the government relies on for its justification for holding onto power (Bratton 1989). In response, state authorities sometimes restrict the autonomy of NGOs by granting state control over NGO management. Autocrats have several institutional options beyond violent coercion to control civil society. Gilbert’s research on NGO legislation in Armenia, Russia, and Belarus shows

that autocrats use legal measures to restrict associational life based on civil society's perceived threat to the regime, which stems from both domestic and international factors.

It is also common for autocrats to allow extralegal repression of dissenting voices in the form of police brutality, unauthorized surveillance, and strategic lawsuits against public participation (Tepliakova 2021: 7, 32). Civil society actors and organizations do not experience equal levels or forms of pressure, however. With evidence from Russia and China, Plantan (2022) demonstrated that autocratic regimes engage in *selective repression* to adjudicate risks from civil society.²¹

Constraints on CSO financing

Civil society was heralded as a magic bullet for governance and democratization in the 1990s (Diamond 1999). Billions of dollars in aid have been channeled through NGOs, with a preference for a neoliberal, privatized approach to development that coincided with a decentralization and hollowing out of the state (Reimann 2017: 38). Where state bureaucracies once oversaw the provision of public services, now some third sector actor – a consulting firm or an NGO – is expected to do that work more cheaply and effectively, if not volunteered for free.²² Despite the responsibility placed on civil society to fill gaps in service provision, many NGOs struggle with financial constraints. These constraints are exacerbated by regulatory regimes that govern how civil society organizations should record and report their financial assets. Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash (2016) found that increased foreign aid flows to developing countries correspond with

²¹ Also see Alisha Holland, "Forbearance," *American political science review* 110.2 (2016): 232-246.

²² Case studies of NGOs in Turkey and India demonstrate how this service provision-as-voluntarism looks in practice. Ezgi Kan, "Weaving subjectivity at the crossroads of volunteerism and professionalism: coping with precarity in a health care NGO," (PhD diss., Sabanci University, 2020). 7-8. Pranjali Das, "Profiting off the 'Doing Good' Narrative: The Case of Women's Under-compensated Labour in Indian NGOs" (Master's thesis, Central European University, 2019), 35-46.

the adoption of restrictions on funding for NGOs around the world. These laws target different aspects of civil society's finances, such as whether it is legal to access funding from abroad, how these funds should be recorded and shared with the government, and how civil society organizations should pay taxes. Restrictive laws can impede the ability to raise funds through domestic and/or foreign means.

Cooptation – the exchange of rewards for acquiescence – is a central pillar in authoritarian resilience strategies. Research on cooptation has largely focused on the co-optation of elites, parliaments, or political parties (Brownlee 2007; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Magaloni 2006; Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014). Scholars have recently sought to understand patterns of cooptation among non-elite political actors, including graffiti artists in Russia (Lerner 2021) and social movement actors in China and Egypt (Chen 2012, Sika 2019). Sika argues that cooptation fragments social movements by sowing distrust and giving the regime leverage to deter future protests (2019: 676). One core but often unstated assumption of the political science literature on civil society – particularly in Eurasian autocracies – is that restrictive regulatory regimes replace “real” civil society with “virtual” politics. Wilson argues that Russian civil society under Putin has been defined by “Potemkin NGOs,” which are merely simulacra of real democratic counterparts (2005: 235). Certainly, autocratic regimes encourage high numbers of registered NGOs for purposes of international legitimation (Lorch and Bunk 2017), but many of these so-called “virtual” groups are not actually fake. It is striking, though, that this assumption does not extend to scholarship that focuses on other regions, especially Latin America. For example, Rich's study of AIDS activism in Brazil argues that the AIDS movement was able to endure and expand *because* it was cultivated by national bureaucrats who in turn depended on activists for achieving their

policy goals.²³ Yashar (2005) and Chartock (2013) explore Latin American governments' partnership with NGOs to develop ethnic identities and suggest that ethnodevelopment is model of corporatism that skirts the normative anxieties embedded in theories of cooptation.

Financial flows from the Global North to the South

There are massive flows of development aid and funding for civil society sent from the Global North to the South (Horner and Hulme 2019). Some development studies scholars have theorized that one consequence of this funding is a redirection of accountability away from local communities and constituents to international donors (Zaidi 1999; Mercer 2002; Bayalieva-Jailobaeva 2018). Empirical studies of civil society actors in Cyprus and Nicaragua found that the availability of foreign funding affected the way civil society groups approach social change (Vogel 2016; Chahim and Prakash 2014). This is because foreign funding shifted NGOs' influence in relation to unformalized grassroots organizations. Additionally, NGOs face an incentive to commercialize their projects in a way that keeps them attractive and interesting to international audiences (Moreau and Currier 2018). This is heightened given that pots of international funding are finite, which Jalali (2013) has argued can induce competition among NGOs, thus distracting groups from working toward similar goals. On the other hand, competition for finite funding could encourage NGOs to hone their skills and improve their activities.

²³ Jessica Rich, *State-sponsored activism: Bureaucrats and social movements in democratic Brazil* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). Interestingly, even though her book was published well after the establishment of a research agenda on cooptation of political elites, Rich only offers two citations in her discussion of cooptation: Michel's 1949 book on political parties and oligarchy in democracy and a book published in 1979 by Piven and Cloward on "poor people's movements." To me, this speaks to the cleavages of regional studies in gathering texts for literature reviews more than it does to a limited understanding of the concept.

In shifting the locus of accountability from local communities to international donors, flows of funding can reproduce global inequalities by creating dependency relations.²⁴ Over time, donor-funded NGOs have become instruments for maintaining the interests of global and domestic elites over the needs of communities (Jalali 2013: 58). Moreover, the universalizing Northern conceptualization of the purpose and goals of civil society contributes to affective precarity among NGO workers.²⁵

Professionalization

Development scholars have warned of “professionalization” as an unintended consequence of streams of international development aid. As an analytic concept, professionalization does not just connote competence, but rather is defined as a process of pivoting from grassroots mobilization to formal entities participating in mainstream politics.²⁶ This pivot can be incentivized by top-down pressures. Formalization emphasizes expertise based largely on technical, managerial frameworks. Empirical studies from across the world have demonstrated how many local NGO workers experience a sense of isolation that they see as a result of their working with the international development industry.²⁷ Mackie argued that this isolation stems

²⁴ Lisa Markowitz and Karen W. Tice. "Paradoxes of professionalization: Parallel dilemmas in women's organizations in the Americas," *Gender & Society* 16, no. 6 (2002): 950-955. Moreau and Currier, "Queer dilemmas," 224.

²⁵ This can include the practice of adopting indigenous terms for cosmetic effect to convey Western-centric goals. See Theron, McAllister, Armisen (2016).

²⁶ The distinction between professionalization and the positive effects of epistemic communities has been explored by several scholars: Jim Igoe, "Scaling up civil society: donor money, NGOs and the pastoralist land rights movement in Tanzania," *Development and change* 34, no. 5 (2003): 877. Matt Baillie Smith and Katy Jenkins. "Disconnections and exclusions: professionalization, cosmopolitanism and (global?) civil society," *Global Networks* 11, no. 2 (2011): 161. Das, "Profiting off the 'Doing Good' Narrative," 9.

²⁷ Elena Kim, "International Development and Research in Central Asia: Exploring the Knowledge-Based Social Organization of Gender," PhD diss., University of Bonn, 2014. Birte Vogel, "Civil society capture: Top-down interventions from below?," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 10, no. 4 (2016). Dean Chahim and Aseem Prakash, "NGOization, foreign funding, and the Nicaraguan civil society," *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of*

from the existence of “hierarchies based on linguistic and cultural competence, access to more or less privileged languages and access to the technologies which facilitate transnational communication” (2001: 188). In the case of global civil society, English is the lingua franca, and international donors have their own jargon and buzzwords to be learned.²⁸

Professionalization can also have material consequences for civil society actors. While donors may claim to support a variety of organizational structures, “the ‘tools’ used by donors – application processes, due diligence forms (including monitoring and evaluation requirements), the whole reporting cycle – do not, in practice, allow for innovative alternative structures.”²⁹ The tidy-looking series of documents for application forms and monitoring policies is closely related to a second mechanism, the timeline of aid projects. Funding for activists and civil society actors is normally project-based, which means it is short term. Working up new funding proposals is a frequent task, which burdens activists and rights defenders with paperwork (Pallotta 2009; Theron, McAllister, and Armisen 2016).

Scholars of international organizations have also critiqued the assumed “goodness” of bureaucracy (Barnett and Finnemore 1999: 709). Findings about the pathologies of international organizations’ operations can be interpolated to non-governmental organizations operating at the local level, especially those who are funded in part from international donors. The literature emphasizes civil society actors’ coordination with international donors as a mechanism of

Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations 25, no. 2 (2014): 487. Mona Atia and Catherine E. Herrold. "Governing through patronage: The rise of NGOs and the fall of civil society in Palestine and Morocco." *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 29, no. 5 (2018): 1044-1054.

²⁸ Janet G. Townsend, Gina Porter, and Emma Mawdsley call this ‘donorspeak’ in "The role of the transnational community of non-government organizations: governance or poverty reduction?" *Journal of international development* 14, no. 6 (2002): 836. Also see Baillie Smith and Jenkins, “Disconnections and Exclusions,” 172.

²⁹ Liesl Theron, John McAllister, and Mariam Armisen, "Where do we go from here? A call for critical reflection on queer/LGBTIA+ activism in Africa," *Pambazuka News* 12 (2016).

professionalization, but authoritarian states can also expect a certain degree of legibility from CSOs that can lead to professionalization. Both are organizations seeking to create order and enforce legibility, though their ostensible reasons for wanting this differ in their political and social agenda.

Socio-political context

Whether civil society actors can successfully pursue their advocacy depends on buy-in from state actors and local communities alike. The factors I presented above reflect institutionalized constraints from state actors, but the broader socio-political context can also undermine or support civil society's efforts. McCready likens socio-political context to a "micro-weather system with currents and pressures and constantly changing internal structures" (2009: 129). I take socio-political context to encompass the central values of society and political culture; this could be shaped by geographical, ideological, linguistic, or historical cleaves. As civil society has become more visible in politics, it has faced ideological backlash, often in the form of accusations of being agents of the West (Reimann 2017: 46). This can be the result of governments' intentional counter-mobilization or vilification of foreign aid and NGOs (Hintz 2016; Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014). Indeed, lack of public trust in NGOs is evident in many countries worldwide,³⁰ and skepticism can undermine NGOs' efforts and ostracize civil society actors.

Civil Society in Kazakhstan

In this section, I trace the genealogy of civil society in Kazakhstan, including how the term has been used by state officials and non-governmental organizations and the evolution of social

³⁰ McMahan, "What went wrong," 186.

movements and issues that have driven associational life. Some have theorized that Kazakhstan's relative prosperity underlies an "unwritten social contract between the ruler and the ruled," in which the regime's persistence is exchanged for higher standards of living and sociopolitical stability (Tutumlu and Rustemov 2021: 129). Indeed, the regime has carefully tweaked the terms of the social contract, which has marginally relaxed constraints while preserving the state's ability to restrict expression, assembly, and association.

Until December 1991, Kazakhstan was a constituent republic of the Soviet Union; the USSR's statist model of governance did not leave room for autonomous collective organization (Grzymala and Jones Luong 2002). The state encourages those organizations that implement "useful" activities by providing funding, grants, or other support, while restricting those organizations that might challenge the state's priorities or its leaders (Sharipova 2019, 142). Studies of associational life in the Soviet era often emphasize mass youth organizations. Kazakhstan's iteration of the Komsomol (Russian for The Communist Youth Union) was created in July 1921. Sixty years after its founding, there were more than 2,270,000 members spread across 24,986 local branches (Sharipova 2019: 143, footnote 1).

In contrast to views that there were no independent organizations in Soviet Union, historians and sociologists have studied the "embryonic" civil society that grew in the expanding pluralism of the perestroika years.³¹ A 1985 law that allowed discussion clubs and interest-based organizing, which facilitated the development of several ecological groups (Kabdiyeva and Dixon 2014:32; Niyazbekov 2018: 18-22; Laruelle 2016: 164). On June 27, 1991, the Kazakh SSR adopted the law "On public associations in the Kazakh SSR." Before Kazakhstan declared independence, citizens formed several political parties, civic movements called *Azat* (Kazakh for

³¹ See Evans (2016) for a discussion on both views.

Freedom) and *Azamat* (Kazakh for Citizen), as well as nationalist groups for ethnic Kazakhs like *Ana Tili Qogami* (Kazakh for Mother Tongue Society) and *Memlekettik Til* (Kazakh for State Language)³² One informant described the “wave” of the early 90s, when protests and demonstrations were not banned, “and it felt like freedom, with glasnost’ and so on.”³³

After declaring independence, Kazakhstani lawmakers set to the task of building a regulatory regime for civil society. Leaders adopted a new constitution in 1993 that was “not sufficient to guarantee the parliament would be subservient to presidential rule” (Isaacs 2010 15). In 1995, President Nazarbayev pushed through a new constitution that secured his power. The 1995 constitution guarantees citizens’ freedoms of assembly, free speech, and association, but it acknowledges that these rights and freedoms may be limited or restricted “to the extent necessary for the protection of the constitutional system, defense of public order, human rights and freedoms, and the health and morality of the population” (Article 39). The 1994 Criminal Code, established a typology of organizational forms recognized by law, including public associations, foundations, and religious associations. A 1995 law on State Registration of Public Entities established the procedure and requirements for CSO registration. Citizens who organize public associations but do not register them with the state are subject to administrative penalties.

1995 also saw the foundation of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan (APK), a body that unites 818 ethnocultural associations from across the country. In 2008, the APK was made a formal body of Kazakhstan’s political system and was given the power to elect 9 deputies to the lower body of parliament. As an umbrella organization, the APK has local branches across the

³² For more on *Azat*, see Kenzhebek Nurkhasenuly, “Nedostignutaya tsel’ dvizheniya ‘Azat’” Radio Azattyk, 1 July 2016, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kuanyshtalin-dvizhenie-azat/27831989.html>.

³³ Author interview 18 May 2021.

country that allow minority communities to build network ties, which Alexandrov (2018) argues makes them a core component of Kazakhstan's civil society (2018: 3-4).

Although youth have been characterized as apolitical in studies of Kazakhstan in the 2000s-10s, young Kazakhstanis have been active in associational life in various institutional forms. The youth branch of the Nur-Otan ruling party is another example of a state-affiliated organization that plays a large role in civil society. In 2008, Nazarbayev announced the creation of Zhas Otan (Kazakh for "Young Homeland") as a "movement that unites thousands of active educated patriots, who support all my initiatives, strategic plans and are the conductors of my policies" (cited in Sharipova 2019: 146). The Youth Information Service of Kazakhstan (in Russian, Molodyozhnaya Informatsionnaya Sluzhba Kazakhstan; hereafter, MISK) started in 1998 as a campaign for discounted public transport for university students and grew into one of the country's most prominent NGOs working in the sphere of civic participation.

Kazakhstan's non-profit sector has grown substantially since independence. As of 2014, some 27,000 non-governmental organizations had been registered in Kazakhstan, though only about 8400 were active.³⁴ Authorities see civil society as a "locomotive of development" and have worked to encourage growth in the sector over the past 20 years. In October 2003, the government-affiliated NGO Civil Alliance organized the first Civic Forum in Astana. President Nazarbayev attended the Forum and gave a speech calling for stronger partnership between state and society. This goal was codified in the Conception of Civil Society Development for 2006-2011, which

³⁴ Anna Gusarova, "Reglamentatsiya gosudarstvennoj podderzhki NPO v Kazakhstane: D'yavol kroetsya v detalyakh [Regulation of state support for NGOs in Kazakhstan: The devil is in the details]," (Public Policy Initiative of the Soros Foundation, 2016): 25.

provided a framework for developing civil society organizations and facilitating their consultation with government bodies at the national and local level.³⁵

In 2015, Nazarbayev unveiled the National Action Plan on Developing Interaction between the Government and CSOs for 2016-2020.³⁶ This plan called for further regulation of the activities and funding of NGOs, with government officials arguing that such regulation is necessary to ensure transparency and to minimize corruption and fraudulent behavior among NGOs. In an op-ed published in November 2015 in *The Diplomat*, Kazakhstan's Ambassador-at-Large in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote, "Fears have been raised that the intention is to muzzle the work of the NGOs within our country or to prevent them continue to receive support from international bodies or partners. This is simply not the case."³⁷ This strategic document emphasized the development of public councils – explain – but independent civil society organizations expressed concern with the document's call for more regulation on financing.

The shuffling of bureaucratic structures that oversee civil society offers insights into the state's priorities. Kazakhstan's government continued to develop bureaucratic mechanisms to monitor and control civil society. In 2016, president Nazarbayev established a new government agency: the Ministry for Religious and Civil Society Affairs (cite). The Ministry got its authority from the Ministry of Culture and Sport, which had previously overseen the relationship between

³⁵ "O kontseptsii razvitiya grazhdanskogo obshchestva v Respublike Kazakhstan na 2006-2011 gody [About the Concept of development of civil society in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2006-2011]," 25 July 2006, <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/U060000154>

³⁶ "Ob utverzhdenii Natsional'nogo plana po razvitiyu vzaimodejstviya nepravitel'stvennykh organizatsij i gosudarstva v Respublike Kazakhstan na 2016-2020 gody [On approval of the National plan for the development of interaction between non-governmental organizations and the state in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2016 – 2020]," 28 December 2015, <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/R1500000159>.

³⁷ Usen Suleimen, "Kazakhstan's New NGO Law: Facts and Speculation," *The Diplomat*, 15 November 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/11/kazakhstans-new-ngo-law-facts-and-speculation/>

state and non-state actors. The new Ministry was tasked with three responsibilities: first, ensuring secular values of Kazakhstan's government; second, strengthening civil society and improving the legal framework to counter extremism and terrorism through civil society; and third, to develop policy that supports youth such that they "feel they belong to Kazakhstan's society and do not fall prey to extremist ideologies," as per a November 2016 op-ed published by Nurlan Yermekbayev, the first Minister for Religious and Civil Society Affairs.³⁸ The Ministry for Religious and Civil Society Affairs was reconfigured in June 2018, renamed as the Ministry of Social Development. In February 2019, the Ministry was reorganized again, this time named the Ministry of Information and Social Development. Powers were transferred from the Ministry of Information and Communications, which was founded in 2016 following a spate of protests organized against amendments to the Land Code that would have allowed the sale of Kazakhstani territory to foreigners (Kudaibergenova 2016).

In November 2018, a new Concept of Civil Society Development for 2019-2025 was unveiled at the December 2018 Civic Forum. President Nazarbayev called for forum participants, which included NGO representatives along with government officials, to discuss the proposal drafted by the Ministry of Information and Civic Development. Nazarbayev did not see the Concept through, as he resigned in March 2019. His successor, President Kassym Jomart-Tokayev, formally issued a new Concept of Civil Society Development in June 2020, one year after his election.³⁹ This Concept was in line with Tokayev's goals of making Kazakhstan a "listening

³⁸ Nurlan Yermekbayev, "Why Kazakhstan Created the Ministry for Religious and Civil Society Affairs," *The Diplomat*, 11 November 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/11/why-kazakhstan-created-the-ministry-for-religious-and-civil-society-affairs/>.

³⁹ "Ukaz Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan: Ob utverzhdenii Natsional'nogo plana po razvitiyu grazhdanskogo obshchestva v Respublike Kazakhstan do 2025 goda [Presidential Order: On approval of the Concept for the development of civil society in the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2025]," 2 June 2020, https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=33708514.

state,” which was meant to encourage open dialogue and cooperation between state and society. In June 2021, Tokayev signed a decree to improve the country’s human rights record, with a specific focus on ensuring citizens’ right to freedom of association. In addition, Tokayev has continued efforts started under Nazarbayev to strengthen local governance, specifically by giving villages and small towns the right to elect local representation. However, as I have argued in an analytical essay for the Foreign Policy Centre, these reform efforts have been largely superficial changes without a meaningful shift in the concentration of power under the president.⁴⁰ In June 2022, just six months after the violent events in January, Tokayev again tried to signal a transition to a “New Kazakhstan” with a referendum on constitutional amendments. The amendments, which were accepted by a wide margin in the referendum, did not materially change the relationship between state and society so much as they reinstituted limited checks on presidential power and undermined Nazarbayev’s cult of personality.⁴¹

I now turn to explore the five mechanisms laid out in the previous section to illustrate whether and how they apply to the Kazakhstani case. I draw on data from interviews, primary news sources, speeches from Kazakhstani officials, and government reports.

(Extra)legal constraints

Although Kazakhstan’s constitution guarantees the right to free assembly and expression, myriad rules in the Criminal Code restrict these rights in the name of law and order. Depending on the nature of a collective organization’s mission, they should apply as to become a legal entity (*yuridicheskoe litso*). The government differentiates between several types of legal entities,

⁴⁰ Colleen Wood, “Human rights and civil liberties in Kazakhstan: A matter of efficiency?” *Foreign Policy Centre*, 22 July 2021, <https://fpc.org.uk/human-rights-and-civil-liberties-in-kazakhstan-a-matter-of-efficiency/>.

⁴¹ Colleen Wood, “What’s in Kazakhstan’s Constitutional Referendum?” *The Diplomat*, 9 May 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/whats-in-kazakhstans-constitutional-referendum/>.

including public and religious associations, foundations and charitable organizations, non-commercial joint stock companies, and cooperatives or unions that bring together several organizations with similar goals or functions. Registration is required for collective organizations to conduct any activities, open a bank account, or establish an office. Unregistered entities risk administrative and criminal liability. Participation in unregistered public organizations may result in administrative or criminal penalties, such as fines, imprisonment, the closure of an organization, or suspension of its activities.

Registration is a multi-step process,⁴² requiring organization founders to gather includes the organization's charter and memorandum of association, the individual identification numbers and signatures of at least 10 Kazakhstanis that are willing to serve as citizen-initiators of the organization, and a receipt for having paid a state duty (*gosposhlina*).⁴³ This packet should be delivered to the appropriate government body – for public associations, that is the regional branch of the Department of Justice – which examines the documents and either approves or denies registration. Going through the steps of gathering all the proper documents and submitting the state duty does not guarantee an organization registration, however. It is not uncommon for a group to be initially denied registration over small mistakes in their paperwork. Civil society actors working in the sphere of civil liberties and human rights understand the denial of their registration as a government tactic to slow their advocacy efforts.⁴⁴

⁴² G.M. Kuzhukeeva, “Rukovodstvo po registratsii nekommercheskikh organizatsij v Respublike Kazakhstana (poshagovaya instruktsiya) [Guidelines for registration of non-profit organizations in the Republic of Kazakhstan (step-by-step instruction),” International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2014, https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=39853315&pos=76;186#pos=76;186.

⁴³ The price depends on what type of organization you're founding, anywhere from 1 to 6.5 “monthly calculation index” (3063 tenge in 2022). The monthly calculation index is used to calculate pensions, social payments, and fines in Kazakhstan.

⁴⁴ Author interviews 4 May 2021, 20 May 2021.

In addition to requiring registration, Kazakhstan's national government has adopted several laws that constrain CSOs' activities. One interlocutor explained, "[The government] goes to great lengths to keep civil society to be manageable, so that civil society can't exercise independence from the state."⁴⁵ In December 2015, the president adopted the National Action Plan for state-society relations from 2016-2020, which called for further regulation of the activities and funding of NGOs.

Authorities use laws not directly related to civil society to target dissent. Authorities draw on anti-terror rhetoric to silence dissent. The link between civil society and extremism was codified in 2016, when president Nazarbayev established the Ministry for Religious and Civil Society Affairs. The new Ministry was tasked with strengthening civil society and improving the legal framework to counter extremism and terrorism through civil society. In addition to targeting activists with extremism charges, the government often accuses civil society actors of inciting social unrest and spreading false information. These charges come with prison time, heavy fines, probationary periods of "restricted freedom" that make it difficult to find work, and bans on social and political activism.

The expansion of telecommunications infrastructure and access to internet and cellular data has been a swift process in Kazakhstan. The speed of these developments has meant rapidly shifting possibilities for political mobilization, which the regime has leveraged to target civil society actors. What constitutes false information can easily be politicized, as in the case of activist Alnur Ilyashev who was sentenced to three years of restricted freedom and a ban on involvement in social or political activism for five years for Facebook posts criticizing Kazakhstan's ruling

⁴⁵ Author interview 20 May 2021.

party during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁶ Throughout the pandemic, the government has pursued stricter laws on social media. In May 2022, Tokayev signed into law a bill that requires foreign social media companies to set up local offices and register to operate in Kazakhstan. The bill, which was first proposed in September 2021, frames this move as a way to combat cyberbullying and harmful content for children. Civil society actors see it as a way for authorities to restrict communication and get more leverage from foreign social media companies in censoring content deemed problematic for the regime.⁴⁷

Civil society actors navigate legal constraints on their activities, but they also face surveillance and extralegal pressure from security forces. Multiple informants spoke of experiencing surveillance. One woman recounted being pulled aside for “random inspection” during the 2017 EXPO, but she did not see anyone else in the massive crowds get the same attention from police. She said that “it seemed like they have some kind of database, like, who’s in the opposition.”⁴⁸ This was echoed by Evgeny Zhovtis, a seasoned human rights lawyer who was active in civil society in the late Soviet era and has been a central figure of independent Kazakhstan’s human rights community. “The power structures, especially the security agencies, act in the same way they would have in Soviet times, except they do not imprison people. It’s exactly the same surveillance and observation, and in some cases intimidation too,” he explained.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Bagdat Asylbek, “‘Zashit’ rot’ i svyazat’ po rukam i nogam. Odin den’ bezrabortnogo aktivista [‘Shut your mouth’ and tied up by the hands and feet. A day in the life of an unemployed activist],” *Radio Azattyk*, May 20, 2021, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-activist-alnur-ilyashev-employment-problems/31253618.html>.

⁴⁷ Catherine Putz, “Kazakh President Signs Controversial Law Aiming to Control Social Media Companies,” *The Diplomat*, 4 May 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/kazakh-president-signs-controversial-law-aiming-to-control-social-media-companies/>.

⁴⁸ Author interview 18 May 2021.

⁴⁹ Author interview 12 May 2021.

Technological advances have enabled new methods of surveillance, but these developments do not guarantee that surveillance goes unnoticed. One interlocutor whose Instagram account is private posted about a slurry of new follow requests following a protest; the accounts had few followers or identical bios, leading the activist to understand that they were somehow affiliated with the regime. In December 2021, Amnesty International announced that it had amassed sufficient evidence to prove that Kazakhstan's government had used spyware to surveil some 2000 people, including prominent activists.⁵⁰

Authorities often use harsher extralegal methods to pressure civil society actors into silence. Interlocutors described their offices being burned down, having drugs planted on them, and arbitrary detention several days before an election or planned protest. "They detain you under some pretext, like, 'Oh, you broke a rule,' or 'Oh, you don't have a mask on. ... Of course, they can't say, 'We are detaining you because you are an [independent] election observer.'"⁵¹ Two young men who had been active in opposition protests in April and May 2019 were called in to enlistment offices and sent to rural parts of Kazakhstan to complete one year of military service, despite having documented medical exemptions.⁵² Pressure on civil society actors has led to tragic

⁵⁰ Amnesty International Eurasia (2021) "Amnesty International ustanovila, chto na telefonakh kak minimum chetyryokh aktivistov iz Kazakhstana bylo ustanovleno shpionskoe PO Pegasus ['Amnesty International found that Pegasus spyware was installed on the phones of at least four Kazakh activists']" Amnesty International,

9 December 2021, <https://eurasia.amnesty.org/2021/12/09/amnesty-international-ustanovila-chto-na-telefonah-kak-minimum-chetyryoh-aktivistov-iz-kazahstana-bylo-ustanovleno-shpionskoe-po-pegasus/>.

⁵¹ Author interview 18 May 2021.

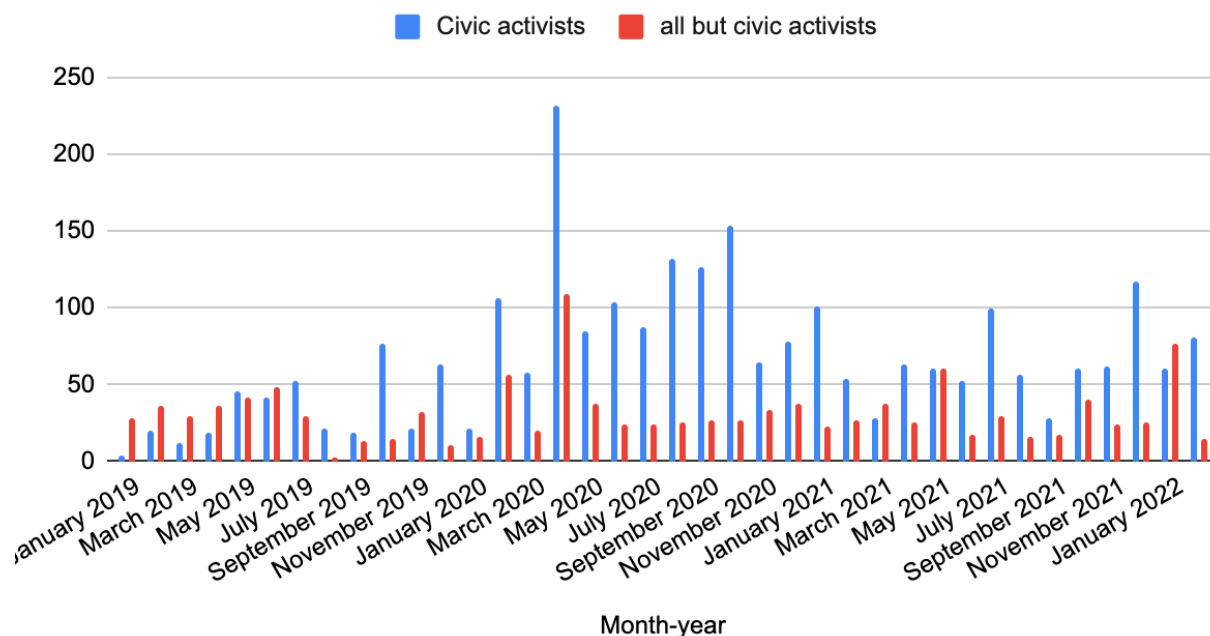
⁵² Almaz Kumenov "Kazakhstan sends activists to perform military service," *Eurasianet*, 17 May 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-sends-activists-to-perform-military-service>. Also see this interview with an activist about his experience in the military: Manas Kaiyrtaiuly (2020), "Бейбарыс Толымбеков: «Демократические изменения начинаются снизу, а не сверху» ['Beibarys Tolymbekov: "Democratic changes start from the bottom, not from the top"']" *Azattyq*, 21 May 2020, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-interview-with-activist-tolymbekov/30626289.html>.

outcomes in recent years, including the death of activist Dulat Agadil just a few hours after arrest in February 2020.

Importantly, not all civil society actors experience the same (extra)legal constraints on their work. One informant said that because “we [activists] talk about political reforms, it is a little harder to be an activist than a rights defender.”⁵³ The Public Association Dignity conducts monthly monitoring of threats (*ugrozy*) to civil society; I consolidated the data from their reports to illustrate the extent to which civic activists are targeted more often than other types of civil society actors. In Figure 2.1, I aggregate the monthly counts of threats to rights defenders (*pravozashchitniki*), activists working on the environment, labor, and religion, public figures, journalists and bloggers, political opposition, and human rights lawyers to compare with the number of threats to civic activists. Between January 2019 and February 2022, threats to civic activists outweigh threats to all other kinds of civil society actors in 31 of 38 months.

⁵³ Author interview, 9 May 2021.

Figure 2.1: Threats to civil society actors, recorded by Dignity



Financing

Kazakhstan’s elite have leveraged the country’s natural resources to develop a competitive economy, which has also been wielded to fund civil society. A 2005 law on State Social Contracts formalized the process for state financing of CSOs. Between 2005 and 2019, Kazakhstan increased government spending on CSOs from 100,000 to 40 million US dollars.⁵⁴ As of 2017, 34.6 percent of NGO financing came from government sources.⁵⁵ There was a massive uptick in government funding for CSOs between 2014 and 2016, following the adoption of restrictive financing procedures in December 2015 called “Rules for Providing Information by CSOs.” This law –

⁵⁴ Decenta, “Natsional’ny Doklad: ‘Grazhdanskij Sektor NPO Kazakhstana’ [National Report: Civil Sector of NGOs in Kazakhstan],” (2019): 27.

⁵⁵ 29.3 percent from state contracts for social services (gosudarstvennyj sotsialnyj zakaz), which are the main source of financing. Decenta, “National’nyj Doklad,” 23.

proposed by the Civil Alliance of Kazakhstan, an umbrella NGO affiliated with the Ministry of Information and Culture – imposed burdensome information requirements for all NGOs. The law “On Payments” was adopted in July 2016 and instituted additional reporting requirements for those associations that receive foreign support.⁵⁶ The adoption of these rules mirrors legislation passed in Russia restricting foreign funding for NGOs in 2012.

The pressures to rely on state funding meant that in order “to stay alive, [CSOs] had to choose between changing their tactics and relying on state funding.”⁵⁷ Many independent NGOs expressed concern that accepting government funding could undermine their credibility.⁵⁸ Activists and NGO professionals that I interviewed largely agreed that accepting funding from the state meant giving up operational independence. In 2017, only 2.9 percent of government tenders went toward projects relating to the protection of rights, though projects related to this accounted for 31.4 percent of government grants.⁵⁹

Respondents who work at registered non-commercial organizations nearly universally said they would never take money from government sources. A human rights lawyer told me that “some of the organizations that began to work using grants offered by the government turned into GONGOs.”⁶⁰ Slightly different from fears of co-optation, others explained their decision to avoid government grants in terms of impartiality. One interlocutor, with many years of experience in

⁵⁶ ‘O platezhakh i platezhnykh sistemakh [On payments and payment systems],” Administrative Code of Kazakhstan, 20 August 2016, https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=38213728.

⁵⁷ Nurseit Niyazbekov, “Is Kazakhstan immune to color revolutions? the social movements perspective.” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 26, no. 3 (2018): 419.

⁵⁸ Author interviews: 25 May 2021, 12 April 2021.

⁵⁹ Decenta, “National’nyj Doklad,” 23-25.

⁶⁰ Author interview 12 April 2021.

politics and civil society, also spoke of the desire to maintain independence: “We have never received financial support here in Kazakhstan. We need this in order to maintain our independence, impartiality, and in fact ... so that we are not pressured, influenced, but although there is always pressure, at least they cannot interfere in our activities directly.”⁶¹ An activist involved at a registered NGO, echoed this sentiment, “The situation in Kazakhstan with the system of [state grants] is imperfect. We should remember that Kazakhstan is an authoritarian country and that we won’t be able to criticize the state and take money from them at the same time.”⁶² This interlocutor described having worked with a local NGO worker (‘NPO-shnik’) and parting ways with that NGO after two years because of government funding: “I got disillusioned with him when he took government orders, took money and so on. So I was like, ‘Goodbye.’”

Of the 28 people I spoke with in Kazakhstan, only one said she would not be opposed to accepting funds from the state. “It’s our money, from our taxes. Why shouldn’t I take it?”⁶³ She argued that activists could push for more transparency in funding if they pursue government grants; by refusing to engage, independent civil society forfeits that leverage. This interlocutor also referenced the importance of pushing back on the notion that only “social” projects (read: apolitical, unthreatening – usually having to do with disability rights, ecology, and social services for mothers and small children) should be funded by the government. Another activist echoed this sentiment, explaining, “There is really no difference [between social and political]. It’s just difficult for people to understand, that when they advocate for some social things, let’s say, benefits for mothers of large families or trapping wild animals or helping homeless people. It’s all politics.

⁶¹ Author interview 25 May 2021.

⁶² Author interview, 10 May 2021.

⁶³ Author interview, 17 August 2021.

It all stems from how the budget is distributed.”⁶⁴ Even though many of the 28 civil society actors said their own efforts are not political because they do not aspire to hold office, their refusal to take government funds implies a recognition of this social-political divide, with social implying depoliticized, pliant projects.⁶⁵ This debate over funding and credibility demonstrates the role that money and financing play in shaping the types of principled claims civil society actors can make.

Regulations on civil society organizations’ financial reporting has also been weaponized to silence dissent. One interlocutor explained, “Today, legislation in the field of finance, taxation, commercial structures is very stringent, and any organization can be shut down for any reason.”⁶⁶ This was demonstrated in November 2020, when Kazakhstani tax authorities targeted over a dozen human rights NGOs with fines and threats of suspension.⁶⁷ These organizations were told they failed to properly report on foreign funds. In interviews, representatives from three of these organizations asserted that these charges were not based in reality, but were an attempt to distract watchdog organizations in the weeks before parliamentary elections in January 2021.

In lieu of government funding, independent civil society actors lean on personal wealth or leverage creativity and self-reliance to finance their activities. A seasoned consultant in human rights responded to my question “If the opposition uses only these legal mechanisms, can they change the system from within or not?” with a financial perspective. She said, “The big question here is about money. I mean, of course, you need creativity. We need people that can use legal

⁶⁴ Author interview, 9 May 2021.

⁶⁵ For analysis of the incentives to frame a movement’s activities as “nonpolitical,” see Holmes (2019).

⁶⁶ Author interview, 25 May 2021.

⁶⁷ Bagdat Asylbek, “Kazakhstanskije NPO zayavili ob ‘atakakh’ nalogovikov pered parlamentskimi vyborami [Kazakhstani NGOs announced “attacks” by tax authorities ahead of parliamentary elections],” *Radio Azattyk*, November 30, 2020, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/30976521.html>.

methods and so on, but ... creativity can achieve something interesting.”⁶⁸ Creativity speaks to the use of art and clever “flashmobs” to gain attention, but also to making events happen on a minuscule budget. This includes paying for materials, food, and space from their own pockets, as two activists associated with Oyan Qazaqstan recounted.⁶⁹ Beyond self-financing, activists can draw on a wider community for financial support. One interlocutor explained that while groups that are not registered cannot have a bank account or collect financial assistance, “We don’t need to be bothered with that... there are other ways, like donations there to an individual (*fizicheskij lits*).”⁷⁰ With the spread of mobile banking apps in Central Asia, crowdfunding (directly borrowed into Russian as краудфандинг/*kraudfanding*) has proven a useful tactic for quickly raising money to pay activists’ fines or buy materials.

Financial Flows from Global North to South

After gaining independence in 1991, international aid began flowing into Kazakhstan in exchange for supporting and implementing neoliberal reforms. In his annual address to the people of Kazakhstan in October 2000, president Nazarbayev reflected on the challenges and opportunities that came with accepting this aid: “It was necessary to act immediately. We have begun to carry out privatization, to create a completely different tax system, to form domestic entrepreneurship. ... We were forced to make painful reforms. The social cost of the reforms, especially at the first stage, was high.” Nazarbayev acknowledged that this aid came with strings

⁶⁸ Author interview 18 May 2021.

⁶⁹ Author interviews 28 April 2021, 21 May 2021.

⁷⁰ Author interview 21 May 2021.

attached and hinted at wanting to move way from dependence on foreign support: “To be or not to be an independent Kazakhstan?”⁷¹

Net official development assistance received in Kazakhstan rose until 2008 at \$337,679,992 but dropped after the 2008 financial crash.⁷² Even as the global economy recovered, development assistance to Kazakhstan did not rise significantly. Kazakhstani authorities framed this decrease in foreign aid as a result of the country’s successful development.

Multiple informants working in independent NGOs relayed a reduction in internationally funded projects starting around 2015. One rights defender told me this was “because [donors] thought that now Kazakhstan is an independent enough country and can work on its problems on its own.”⁷³ Indeed, after consultations with the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee in 2014, Kazakhstan’s government adopted a series of directives on the distribution of development aid in 2015 (Insebayeva 2020). While foreign funding has waned, this reduction in development aid has pushed collective organizations to think creatively about how to fund their activities.

⁷¹ “Poslanie Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan N.A. Nazarbayeva narodu Kazakhstana. Oktyabr’ 2000 g. [Message of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N.A. Nazarbayev to the people of Kazakhstan. October 2000], Official site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, https://www.akorda.kz/ru/addresses/addresses_of_president/poslanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazakhstan-n-a-nazarbaeva-narodu-kazakhstana-oktyabr-2000-g_1342416665.

⁷² “Net official development assistance and official aid received (current US\$) - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic,” The World Bank Data Group, accessed January 20, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ALLD.CD?locations=KZ-KG>. Woodard, “From Prikaz to Procedures,” 76.

⁷³ Author interview, 12 April 2021.

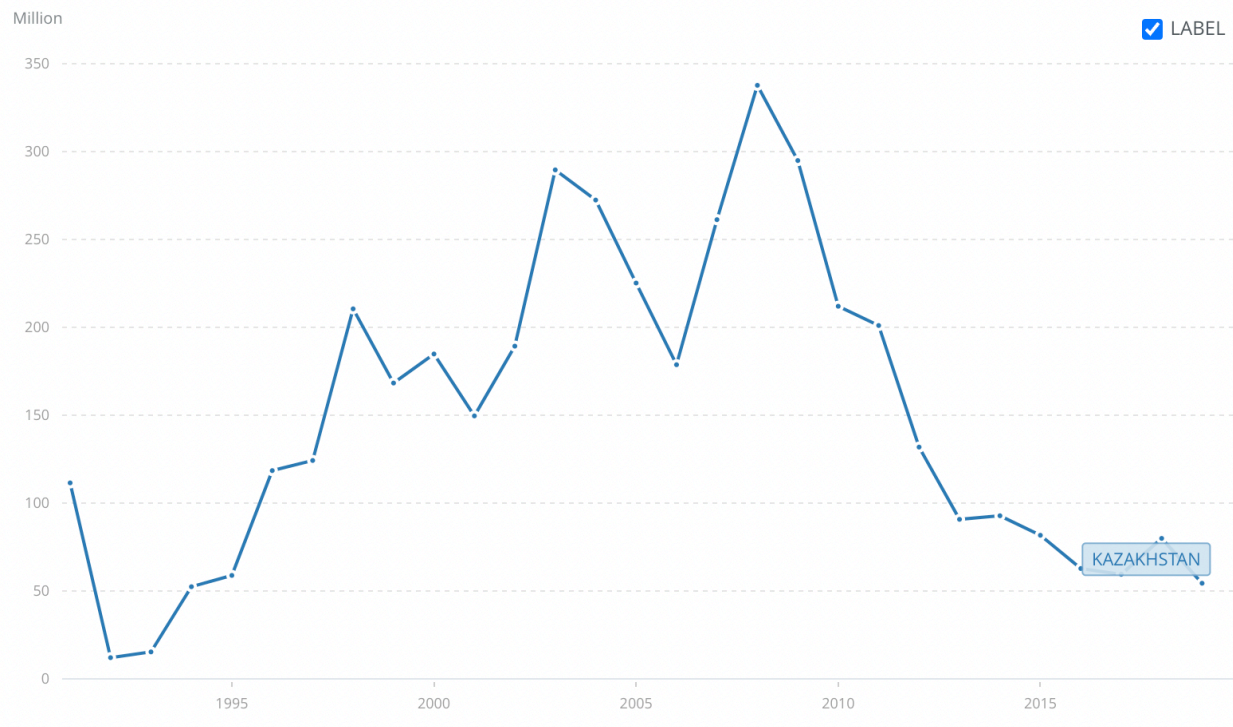


Figure 2.2: Geographical Distribution of Financial Flows to Developing Countries, Development Co-operation Report, and International Development Statistics database. Data via World Bank (2021)

Professionalization

The development studies literature takes a harsh view on the process of professionalization, implying that civil society actors institutionalize more concretely than they may want or need because of donors' documentation needs. Empirical studies of civil society in Kazakhstan find that NGO workers have sought to professionalize so as to be more legible to donors (Woodard 2018: 82). A human rights lawyer explained in an interview that international donors do not specifically require organizations to professionalize: "Donors, they might not have a requirement that the organization must be locally registered. Though, because requirements are strict and bureaucratic ... [donors] can only work with registered organizations."⁷⁴ This suggests that international donors

⁷⁴ Author interview, 12 April 2021. However, as I will detail in Chapter 3, unregistered organizations often partner with registered public associations in order to access formal funding streams.

have their own reasons for preferring to work with registered organizations, such as consistency with internal budgeting requirements, but also that international donors operate in Kazakhstan at the discretion of the government and need to follow local laws. Both governing bodies push for groups to professionalize, but for different logistical and political reasons.

The pressure to professionalize does not only stem from international donors, however. One informant mentioned that the downsides of registration come after becoming a formal organization; “there are all kinds of reports having to do with your work, just lots of reports.”⁷⁵ A lawyer and leader of a prominent human rights organization called the requirement to have founders, a board of trustees, and a charter “a kind of forced institutionalization.”⁷⁶ This institutionalization or professionalization stems from authorities’ interest in “efficiency of interaction with non-governmental organizations.”⁷⁷ From the perspective of authorities, professionalization is a tool of efficient (and compliant) service provision. Consider the example of the public foundation Strong Mothers Nur-Sultan, which was registered in March 2020. The foundation’s leaders distanced themselves from a spate of “mothers’ protests” that took place across Kazakhstan in February 2019 following the death of five children in a house fire. “We were not with those aggressive mothers, but those who asked the state for fair benefits, benefits, housing,” the director of Strong Mothers told a Tengrinews.kz reporter in May 2021.⁷⁸ Strong

⁷⁵ Author interview, 18 May 2021.

⁷⁶ Author interview, 13 April 2021.

⁷⁷ “O dalneishikh merakh Respubliki Kazakhstan v oblasti prav cheloveka [On further measures of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the field of human rights],” Official site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, June 10, 2021, <https://www.akorda.kz/ru/o-dalneyshih-merakh-respubliki-kazahstan-v-oblasti-prav-cheloveka-9505>.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Renat Tashkinbaev, “‘My te samye zhenshchiny, kotorye vykhodili na mitingi.’ Kak izmenilis’ mnogodetnye materi [We are the same women who went to the rallies.’ How mothers with many children have changed]” *Tengrinews*, May 19, 2021, https://tengrinews.kz/article/myi-samyie-jenschinyi-kotoryie-vyihodili-mitingi-izmenilis-1580/?fbclid=IwAR3W9_i-C1KgRunYRDp4tFBFSptRDgKwMWDCGf_37UF_Z9XNFrbrVGFfRgg

Mothers Nur-Sultan fills an immediate need for many women in Kazakhstan's capital city, and they do so through financial support from the government, with close support from local bureaucrats and up-and-coming party functionaries. The women behind Strong Mothers Nur-Sultan clarified their understanding of the role that civil society should play in Kazakhstan in an Instagram post on March 5, 2021: "In our country, NGO activists are proposing special projects for the social protection of women, improving their living standards, a golden bridge between the local government and the population!"⁷⁹

This vision of efficiency strives for active, dedicated citizens to fill gaps in the provision of public services without criticizing the regime for the fact that gaps exist in the first place. In and of itself, citizens' active engagement in their communities is a worthy goal; many of the people working tirelessly in this sphere are making incredible contributions to the neediest in their communities. However, it presents unreasonable constraints on associational life to subsume citizens' rights to direct action and advocacy – which, admittedly, can be messy and bring about uncomfortable public conversations about the nature of government power – under a notion of civil society as service provision.

Interviews reveal that professionalization is not only a mechanism of depoliticization. Without clear institutional structure, an advocacy campaign or coalition can falter. An interlocutor who directed a large NGO and participates in an informal collective of civil society organizations was frustrated that "Our membership is a little blurry, and there's been a stagnation in our work. ... We have no breakthrough projects." As such, she explained that she wanted to "sort out the organizational structure, [to figure out] who are members are, what our strategy is, and ... where

⁷⁹ @Strong_mothers_NS, *Instagram*, 5 March 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMB-tWxJeaW/>.

to position ourselves in the third sector.”⁸⁰ In addition to the need for thoughtful institutionalization, civil society actors recognize the need for training and education to be prepared for their line of work. Reflecting on the transition from working in another industry, one informant said, “I realized that I didn’t have enough legal training, so I trained as a lawyer from 1996-1999. And since 1999, some twenty plus years, I have been a lawyer, international expert, and specialist in the field of human rights and international law. This is my profession.”⁸¹ Some 80 percent of this interlocutor’s organization’s employees are trained as lawyers, “not just activists or concerned citizens.” As human rights lawyers, they bring substantial expertise to the table.

Professionalization and expertise are also useful for achieving civil society actors’ goals. Several older interlocutors emphasized the importance of technical training and expertise, both in knowing how to manipulate the system for their goals and in gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the population and state authorities alike. One interlocutor explained, “Taken together – the NGO experts, the lawyers, the scientific experts – we have a strong mind (*sil’niy um*).” Having a “strong mind” is a responsibility, she told me, “Civil society can teach and hold seminars or lectures for people, and we can organize advocacy campaigns (*advocacy said in English*) in line with the law.”⁸² This was echoed by another interlocutor, “Considering the ordinary population, it is important to inform them about their rights. We are experts who have quite a lot of experience in the human rights field.”⁸³

⁸⁰ Author interview 14 May 2021.

⁸¹ Author interview 12 May 2021.

⁸² Author interview, 25 May 2021.

⁸³ Author interview, 23 April 2021.

Socio-political context

Kazakhstani authorities do not villainize civil society or specific NGOs as much as officials in neighboring states do, however several interlocutors mentioned feelings of isolation.⁸⁴ Furthermore, interlocutors' mention of "smear campaigns" (*klevetnicheskie kampanii* in Russian) and slander is reflected in independent monitoring (Crude Accountability 2019: 34). Beyond government actors' discrediting or villainizing of civil society, three broad features of Kazakhstan's socio-political context affect the prospects for civil society actors' advocacy efforts: the geographic gap between urban centers and villages, the siloing of Russian and Kazakh-language-speaking communities, and patriarchal values.

Independent civil society is largely concentrated in Almaty, though networks of reform-oriented NGOs and civic initiatives have branches across the country, and the national government has attracted collective organizations' offices to Astana, the capital.⁸⁵ Explanations for the urban concentration of civil society vary. One informant mentioned Kazakhstan's geography: "[In some provinces] villages might be 6-10 hours away from each other. From a practical point of view of view, it's better to work with cities, because after all, there is a concentrated population."⁸⁶ While it is logistically easier to work in cities, several organizations whose members I spoke with described efforts to reach rural communities. Civil Alliance promoted several social projects initiated in rural areas on its Instagram account, emphasizing the importance of community-building and active citizens in Kazakhstan's villages.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Author interviews, 13 April, 28 April.

⁸⁵ As of 2019, there were 17988 registered non-government organizations in Kazakhstan. 3013 of them were in Astana, 1584 of them in Almaty. See Decenta, "Natsional'nyj Doklad," 7.

⁸⁶ Author interview, 18 May 2021.

⁸⁷ @civil.alliance, *Instagram*, 30 October 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B4PkWNnp8ML>.

The urban-rural divide closely resembles the linguistic divide, with villages tending to speak more Kazakh and cities being Russian-speaking hubs.⁸⁸ This has resulted in the siloing of media consumption by language-speaking communities, with fewer Kazakh-language outlets of repute (Kurumbayev 2022). The leader of a large NGO described it as if, “the Russian-speaking and Kazakh-speaking audiences live ... in two different worlds.”⁸⁹ Despite the challenges of bilingualism,⁹⁰ some civil society organizations are keen to reach out to Kazakh speakers and facilitate more Kazakh-language content. For example, the government-affiliated umbrella NGO Civil Alliance conducted a project to teach NGO leaders Kazakh.⁹¹ MISK has actively begun to develop Kazakh-language content and hopes that their materials will be split evenly between Russian and Kazakh by the end of 2022. Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law has coordinated the translation of Kazakhstan’s international legal agreements into Kazakh. Their translation of the Declaration on Human Rights has been used by the UN. One informant involved with Oyan Qazaqstan commented, “It’s really remarkable that a culture is

⁸⁸ Compared to other countries in the region, Russian is more widely spoken in cities. Some 54 percent of urban Kazakhstani respondents in the 2019 wave of the Central Asian Barometer reported speaking Russian at home, compared to only 24 percent of urban Kyrgyzstani respondents, 8 percent of Tajikistani respondents, and 11 percent of Uzbekistani respondents. However, rural communities do not exclusively speak Kazakh. Only 56 percent of rural Kazakhstani respondents cited speaking Kazakh at home, compared to 77 percent of respondents from Kyrgyzstan, 81 percent from Tajikistan, and 89 percent from Uzbekistan.

⁸⁹ Author interview, 20 May 2021.

⁹⁰ The politics of language revival are poignant in Kazakhstan, which was the only Soviet republic to not have a titular ethnic majority upon independence. For decades, widespread Russian use – especially in cities – and anxiety about the loss of Kazakh language and traditions have driven policies to expand language skills among schoolchildren and government officials. See Dave, Bhavna. *Kazakhstan-ethnicity, language and power*. Routledge, 2007. In recent years, Kazakh journalists and researchers have observed a sharp upward shift in the popularity of Kazakh language and availability of cultural artifacts like hip music, indie films, and magazines. On the hipsterification of Kazakh language see Asem Zhapisheva, “Kak Kazakhskij stal Yazykom Gorodskikh Subkultur I Ulichnogo Iskusstva [‘How Kazakh Became the Language of Urban Subcultures and High Art’], *The Village*, 7 August 2019, <https://www.the-village-kz.com/village/city/columns/6913-kak-kazahskiy-stal-yazykom-gorodskikh-subkultur-i-ulichnogo-iskusstva>.

⁹¹ @civil.alliance, *Instagram*, 5 September 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2B79jpJMnj/>.

emerging and people [in the Kazakh-speaking sector] are appearing who talk about important things like democratic institutions.”⁹²

Although some interlocutors described a sudden positive shift in the “mentality” and political awareness of young people, there is not an all-encompassing embrace of progressive values. Active national-patriotic groups have campaigned against “western influences” in Kazakhstan and promote retraditionalization, which Kudaibergenova defined as power-seeking discourses about one’s culture, nation, and traditions in the wake of globalization and growing nationalism” (2017: 305). This includes the group *Alash Kyzdary* (Kazakh for *Alash* girls),⁹³ which claimed to have 1500 activists among its ranks in the late 2000s and organized campaigns against abortion and porn (Laruelle 2016). There is a climate of antagonism toward LGBTQ+ people in Kazakhstan, and civil society groups working on gender or sexual identity have been the target of violence and harassment.⁹⁴ For example, in May 2021, co-leaders of the feminist group *Feminita* were hosting an event on gender equality in Shymkent, a city in southern Kazakhstan with a reputation for being more conservative than other urban centers, when a group of men began harassing the participants. Police arrived and rather than intervene to stop the harassers, they violently detained *Feminita*’s co-leaders. Although the police later claimed that they acted to “ensure the safety of the organizers,” the incident illustrates that those who act violently in the name of preserving nationalist values can act with impunity.⁹⁵

⁹² Author interview, 12 May 2021.

⁹³ *Alash* broadly means “tribesman,” but is a nod to the *Alash* Party that was founded by Kazakh elites in 1917.

⁹⁴ Author interview, 4 May 2021. Also see Human Rights Watch, ““That’s When I Realized I Was Nobody:” A Climate of Fear for LGBT People in Kazakhstan,” 23 July 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/07/23/thats-when-i-realized-i-was-nobody/climate-fear-lgbt-people-kazakhstan>.

⁹⁵ Yuna Korostelyova, “Politsiya ob’yasnila zaderzhanie rukovoditel’nit’s ‘Feminity’ namereniem obespechit’ ix bezopasnost’ [Police explained the detention of leaders of ‘Feminita’ as a way to ensure their safety],” *Vlast*, May

Conclusion

In this chapter, I described the evolution of civil society in Kazakhstan and top-down processes that have shaped the ecosystem of associational life. Having drawn from literature in political science and development studies, I identified five particular mechanisms that scholars see as having a negative effect on independent civil society organizations. These include (extra)legal coercion, channeling finances, undue influence of the Global North, professionalization, and the socio-cultural environment.

In addition to laws that require groups to register and constrain CSOs' activities, authorities target dissidents with charges of extremism, inciting social unrest, and spreading false information. Although the regime has touted civil society as a central tenet of Kazakhstan's development plan, authorities continue to pass increasingly restrictive regulations on CSOs. These laws followed shortly after similar regulation was passed in Russia. Extralegal pressure ranges from surveillance, phone tapping, arbitrary detention, damage to workspace and belongings, and torture and psychological violence in pre-trial detention. These instances of coercion are not practiced evenly across civil society, with civic activists experiencing more threats than other types of civil society actors. The range of repression echoes Moss's findings of a typology of coercive control of dissidents in Jordan, and the selective pressure is in line with research on forbearance. Research that traces the evolution of repressive tactics over time and distinguishes instances of coercion by activists' issue area would offer important analytical leverage to understand the long-term process of authoritarian learning and innovation to control associational life.

29, 2021, https://vlast.kz/novosti/45202-policia-obasnila-zaderzanie-rukovoditelnic-feminity-namereniem-obespecit-ih-bezopasnost.html?fbclid=IwAR0XXtDbExAKO_2ccDNTiE5MGRq12GoykfrW41BduvliOH-CkHWcHnXenS4.

The regulatory regime governing CSO operations also incentivizes accepting funding from the government by placing burdensome reporting requirements on receiving foreign grants. Since 2015, however, there has been less overall international funding as a result of Kazakhstan's economic and bureaucratic development. This has pushed CSOs to think creatively about how to fund their activities, including crowdfunding.

While the development studies literature is quite pessimistic about the effect of professionalization on civil society (Igoe 2003; Chahim and Prakash 2014; Atia and Herrold 2018), civil society actors from Kazakhstan spoke favorably of expertise and institutionalization of their efforts. Some interlocutors expressed frustration with the forced institutionalization that comes with registering a CSO, while one interlocutor – a member of an unregistered coalition of rights defenders and NGOs – described the fuzziness of the organizational structure having a negative effect on their work. Those working in legal advocacy spoke of the importance of education and experience, not only as tools to effectively perform their job, but also to appear legitimate in the eyes of the state and communities they work with. The ambiguity of this interpretation suggests conceptual stretching, with various disciplines understanding the process of professionalization differently. However, even political scientists who study international organizations have demonstrated the various pathologies that stem from institutionalization. Later research that isolates how state actors versus international development actors encourage professionalization would offer insights useful on both a scholarly and policy level. Furthermore, given that the people I spoke with are highly educated and represent some of the most prominent human rights organizations and activist networks, the ambiguity I identified is likely not representative of civil society in Kazakhstan as a whole. Further research is warranted to understand whether

professionalization exerts uneven pressure on smaller campaigns in more rural areas or in communities with less education.

With regard to the socio-political climate, I found that authorities largely do not resort to hostile rhetoric regarding activists and rights defenders. However, grassroots violence toward activists working on gender equality and trans rights suggest a broader backlash. In general, scholarship on civil society emphasizes the “good,” with research on advocacy for equality, protection of human rights, and democracy. Another body of literature analyzes groups on the opposite side of the spectrum, specifically white nationalists and the far right. This is certainly important research and offers insight for policymakers and progressive-minded community members, given a rise in reactionary rhetoric surrounding the rights of trans people, racialized communities, and women in the West.

Respondents’ comments about a rural-urban divide that mirrors linguistic siloing echoes concerns articulated in three decades of research on language, identity, and politics in post-Soviet countries.⁹⁶ However, civil society organizations – even those staffed by higher-educated, ethnic Russian, or Russian-speaking people – recognize the need to bridge these gaps and are actively developing Kazakh-language content. As Zhir-Lebed demonstrates in her study of how ethnic Russian youth build community in Kazakhstan that identity is less linked to the linguistic-ethnic nexus of the early 1990s; they create their own vision of belonging as Kazakhstani citizens and seek out Kazakh-language material (2022). Russia’s escalated invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has raised the stakes of Kazakhstan’s geopolitical relationship with Russia (Marat and

⁹⁶ Brubaker (2014) offers a useful review of the literature on this point; this essay revisits an article Brubaker published in 1995.

Engvall 2022), which could further heighten desire for Kazakh-language material and national unity.

This chapter is framed like much of the political science literature on authoritarianism, in which CSO regulations and the patterns of their development are often viewed as the outcome of interest or the dependent variable, ultimately: the end of the story. DeMattee uses the metaphor of a greenhouse to explain the link between a constructed sociolegal context and the possibilities of associational life: "In the way a farmer builds a greenhouse to grow plants, civil society organizations (CSO) laws create the architecture in which civil society exists and the space in which CSOs operate. Like plants in a greenhouse, civil society's ability to bear fruit and contribute to positive sociopolitical outcomes is profoundly shaped by the legal institutions that structure its activity" (DeMattee 2020: 1-2). In this analogy, the fate of planted flora depends on how the space was constructed; legal restrictions can encourage or undermine voluntary association. While of course, it is important to understand the socio-legal context to study civil society, I contend that this metaphor leans too determinative. Plants don't make noise, nor can they persuade or argue or advocate. Taking "the plants" seriously as agents in the greenhouse metaphor is the central goal of the remaining chapters. As I will explore in the next chapter, I argue that civil society actors can exert proactive political subjectivity even in a closed authoritarian context.

Chapter 3: Debating the Stakes of Within-System Engagement

Almaty is one of the world's most polluted cities.⁹⁷ This is partially due to topography – the surrounding mountains lock in smog – but also because of heavy traffic and emissions from factories and heating plants. A number of green spaces just outside the city are protected as national parks and offer locals and visitors a chance to appreciate the area's natural beauty. One highland plateau, Kok Zhailau (Kazakh for blue/heavenly pastureland), is home to endangered species and is a central hub of Kazakhstan's ecotourism industry. In 2011, Almaty's mayor raised the possibility of building a ski resort on the territory, inciting outrage from ecoactivists and nature lovers.

For years, as government actors slowly worked through feasibility studies and allocating funds for building the resort and accompanying infrastructure, civil society actors organized campaigns to halt construction and protect the ecological preserve. Their efforts included guided mountain climbing tours and photography exhibitions alongside more confrontational demonstrations, such as in 2014, when a group of activists wrote out “STOP” in white cloth at the construction site and linked arms to block the excavation trucks. Green Salvation, an ecological society with activism experience, worked with a group called Save Kok Zhailau on an information campaign that with press conferences, TEDTalks, and a petition that garnered 28,960 signatures.⁹⁸ Activists also targeted the legal system by taking local ministry representatives to court for violating protections enshrined in the Red List of Threatened Species, which prompted temporary

⁹⁷ Lars Carlsen, Rainer Bruggemann, and Bulat Kassenov (2018), “Use of partial order in environmental pollution studies demonstrated by urban BTEX air pollution in 20 major cities worldwide” *Science of the Total Environment* (2018): 234-243.

⁹⁸ “Trebuem sokhranit’ Kok-Zhailau dlya sebya i dlya potomkov! [We demand to protect Kok-Zhailau for ourselves and our progeny!]” *Petitions.net*, 7 August 2018, <https://www.petitions247.com/savekokzhailau>.

blocks on construction and a reallocation of state funds away from the project. In 2014, activists submitted a complaint to the Compliance Committee under the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making, and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (also known as the Aarhus Convention). The Compliance Committee issued a report detailing that the Kok Zhailau ski resort project violated multiple requirements of the Aarhus Convention and called for authorities to facilitate public participation in decisions about the resort's construction.⁹⁹ Citing recognition of widespread criticism, in April 2019, Almaty's akim (a position similar to mayor) called to postpone construction of the ski resort. This was echoed by Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who announced a ban on the construction of a resort in Kok Zhailau in October 2019. "We don't need it," he said. "Moreover, professional environmental engineers and the knowledgeable community are against it."¹⁰⁰

The campaign to protect Kok Zhailau demonstrates how civil society actors work both inside and outside the state to accomplish their advocacy goals. While some organized performance art and protests, others filed lawsuits and complaints within government bodies. It also reflects the multi-scale approach to within-system advocacy: activists leveraged legal and political tools at the local, national, and international levels. In this chapter, I ask what are the main institutional channels for within-system advocacy? How do civil society actors in Kazakhstan make senses of the stakes for within-system engagement?

⁹⁹ "Decision VI/8g Compliance by Kazakhstan with its obligations under the Convention," from the 6th Session Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, 11-13 September 2017, accessed online https://unece.org/DAM/env/pp/compliance/MoP6decisions/Compliance_by_Kazakhstan_VI-8g.pdf.

¹⁰⁰ "Environmental activists saved Kok Zhailau," *Adamdar*, 29 October 2019, accessed <https://adamdar.ca/en/post/environmental-activists-saved-kok-zhailau>.

To address these questions, I first review literature from comparative politics and international relations about within-system engagement in authoritarian regimes, cooptation as a dissent management tactic, and how a state's desire to maintain a positive reputation can shape its commitment to international agreements. I argue that within-system engagement is not necessarily a sign of cooptation, contrary to literature largely based on studies of Russia and Eurasia that deem organizations which work with government bodies to be mouthpieces for the state. Taking a vertical view of civil society actors' tactics, I find that organizations leverage power differentials across levels of administration to advance their rights claims in four spheres. I contend that this is distinct from the "boomerang" theory advanced by Keck and Sikkink, but rather is an example of "jurisgenerative politics" (Cover 1983, Benhabib 2009) in which communities use the language and institutions of law as tools for reform. To make these arguments, I present evidence from interviews, digital ethnography, and visual analysis of social media posts to describe debates about within-system engagement in four spheres:

1. Whether to register as a non-governmental organization
2. Whether and how to organize a protest
3. Whether and how to contribute to lawmaking
4. Whether and how to engage in the legal system

I end the chapter by reflecting on how this evidence extends and challenges the literature on opposition and contentious politics in autocracies and considering where I would expect these insights to be most relevant.

Theorizing Within-System Engagement in Authoritarian Regimes

To pursue advocacy causes, should an activist or rights defender work within the system or outside it? In other words, is it more productive to leverage connections with politicians, journalists, and business leaders to rewrite laws, or to organize grassroots protest? To what extent are these tactics mutually exclusive? Scholars have explored these questions in a range of

geographic contexts, including both democracies and authoritarian regimes: civil society actors working in the United States for gay rights debated the merits of within-system and grassroots tactics (Beam 2018); some Pakistani political parties also organize street protests (Hassan 2018); and environmental activists in China frequently work with state actors to accomplish their goals (Yang, Bradtke, and Halvey 2020). The literature sharply contrasts the stakes of these debates in democracies and authoritarian regimes, contending that institutional features and dynamics of the sociopolitical climate in authoritarian regimes make within-system engagement vulnerable to cooptation and depoliticization.

Within-System Engagement in Non-Democracies

Authoritarian regimes carefully encourage within-system engagement, and they privilege certain agendas and programmatic activities more than others (Chapman 2021; Henry 2012; Jamal 2009: 9). Some scholars have conceptualized top-down encouragement of civil society actors to work with the state as a mechanism of depoliticization (Hemment 2012; Alvarez et al., 2017). Froissart (2014) argues that the “insistence, on the part of human rights groups, on sticking to dialogue with authorities and abiding by the law ... allows both for limited political participation constraining political power and for participation in the reproduction of authoritarian rule” (2014: 222). Geoffray (2014) presents a case study of contentious politics in Cuba, where the government manages discontent by creating channels for ‘legitimate’ political participation that serve to disconnect social and cultural claims from political ones (224).¹⁰¹ Clement and Zhelina find that grassroots activists in Russia avoid framing their claims as “political,” which is understood as the sphere of government, instead focusing on urban, economic, or social struggles (2019: 5-6).

¹⁰¹ Geoffray, M. L. (2014). Channelling protest in illiberal regimes: The Cuban case since the fall of the Berlin Wall. *Journal of Civil Society*, 10(3), 223-238.

While some see any within-system engagement as evidence of cooptation,¹⁰² others have pointed out that as associational life is regulated and restricted, “participation and engagement with the state (not withdrawal) is one of the few remaining ways to exert influence” (McCarthy, Stolerman, and Tikhomirov 2020: 1502). Civil society can make “within-system” engagement at multiple levels of administration national (Mercer 2002: 8) and across branches of government (Moustafa 2014). Recognizing variation in relationships between national bureaucratic offices, local officials, and the communities they govern is key to heeding Herbst’s urge against turning the state into a “forbidding monolith” (1989: 199, cited O’Brien and Li 2006: 2). O’Brien and Li (2006) investigate the practice of locating and exploiting divisions between local officials in rural Chinese provinces and central authorities. They theorize that villagers’ blending traditional tactics with self-directed, legalistic efforts constitutes what they call “rightful resistance” (O’Brien and Li 2006: 10-11). This serves to assert and reclaim their lawful rights, but also reconfigure local governance. The divide in central-local relations among government officials represents a political opportunity structure that bridges within-system political participation and extrainstitutional social movements.¹⁰³

Law as Coercive Instrument and Tool for Empowerment

Moustafa’s review of the literature on law and courts in authoritarian regimes demonstrates that although authoritarian regimes pack courts with loyal judges and wield the law as an instrument of governance, the legal field can also open up avenues for civil society actors to challenge the state (2014: 287-289). This echoes Straughn’s argument in his study of genres of

¹⁰² See Chapter 2 for an in-depth discussion of the literature on cooptation.

¹⁰³ For more on institutional dynamics and opportunity structures between center-periphery, see Baldwin (2013), Albertus (2015), and Boone (2014).

contention in in closed societies (2005). He contends that citizens practice “consentful contention” by “taking the state at its word” in submitting grievances that challenge the state through formal channels set up by the state (1603). An important takeaway from Straughn’s article is the relevance of the “strategic dimensions of political dramaturgy—the manipulation of roles, identities, professed loyalties, and interests—as well as on the ambiguities and information deficits arising in a context where both loyalty and dissidence, true belief and cynicism, constitute plausible orientations with real political and social consequences for the lives of citizens” (2005: 1601).

Authoritarian regimes – especially those in the “hybrid/liberalizing” category, but also hegemonic/closed regimes – have complex bureaucratic infrastructures, with a multiplicity of possible institutional channels through which civil society actors could pursue their advocacy goals. Corrales (2015) coined the concept of “autocratic legalism” to explain how hybrid regimes stay stable, with leaders controlling courts and justice institutions to remove checks on executive power and limit challenges to their rule. Case studies of Hungary, Turkey, and Poland advanced the concept as a mechanism of democratic backsliding (Scheppelle 2018: 547; Kadioğlu 2021; Ríos-Figueroa and Paloma Aguilar 2018). This is certainly an important development in the literature, but the analysis centers on the decision-making calculus of legalistic autocrats – not civil society actors.

In contrast to the top-down framing of autocratic legalism, legal pluralism is a potentially useful concept in thinking through possible explanations for how activists and rights defenders might go about achieving their goals. This research agenda has largely been concerned with the instrumental considerations citizens make when choosing among multiple legal orders within the state. For example, Lazarev (2019) compares the different strategies men and women in Chechnya pursue to resolve grievances between Russian state law, Chechen traditional law, and Islamic

Sharia law. Beyer (2016) explores the resurgence of courts of village elders in Kyrgyzstan, tracing the historical trajectory from Soviet rule to independence. She draws on ethnographic immersion to demonstrate the interdependence between the customary elders' courts and the state. Often, these analyses do not differentiate power differentials across levels of government. Murtazashvili's study of customary governance in Afghanistan is an exception (2016), and she finds that state legitimacy is shaped at the local level, despite international organizations' counterproductive efforts to centralize power in Kabul.

From Local to International

Although comparative politics is concerned largely with explaining variation in governance *within* states, it is also necessary to consider the international sphere in accounting civil society actors' strategic calculus in navigating *vertically* across possible institutional channels.¹⁰⁴ Even states that retreat from international governing bodies exist in the broader ecosystem of states, NGOs, legal frameworks, and activist networks.

The predominant theory of how activists work across local, national, and international institutions is articulated in Keck and Sikkink's groundbreaking book about transnational advocacy networks (1999). The boomerang theory expects NGOs to bypass the state altogether in search of international allies, including groups with shared morals and friendly states. Other organizations in the transnational advocacy network that operate in freer environments communicate up the ladder to their governments and international organizations, which in turn put pressure on the home state to reform. How autocrats treat activists and other civil society actors can affect the regime's international reputation. Lorch and Bunk (2017) argue that authoritarian

¹⁰⁴ Dixon (2018) articulates the importance of an ontology that bridges international and domestic levels of analysis.

regimes “use civil society as a democratic façade,” with high numbers of registered organizations giving the perception of democratic attributes (990). DeMattee argues that states use civil society laws to expand legitimacy both among its citizenry and the international community. While DeMattee develops and tests his theory using case studies of civil society laws in east Africa, with a focus on Kenya, he argues that his theory applies to all regime types and levels of development (2020: iv). But some states care more about their reputation than others,¹⁰⁵ and depending on the design of international agreements, the reputation costs for breaking an agreement or mistreating civil society can be severe or minimal.

In addition to the degree to which an authoritarian regime is concerned with its reputation, variability in international agreements’ “teeth” affects whether and how citizens could exercise international channels to achieve advocacy goals. Abbot and Snidal (2000) conceptualize the difference between “hard” and “soft” international law. In contrast with “hard” law with precise commitments and strict enforcement, treaties that lack binding obligations, are less precise in the language stipulating expected behaviors, and that delegate authority for implementing the law are “soft” law that reduce the costs of ratifying international agreements while enhancing the benefits of rules in practice (433-438). Softer international agreements open up different ways to break the agreement. Chayes and Chayes (1993) argued that ambiguous treaty language, states’ limited capacity to carry out their commitments, and the length of time needed to accomplish points of a

¹⁰⁵ Much of the international relations literature on reputation is concerned with states’ reputation for resolve during a crisis, including Schelling (1960), Mercer (1996), and Copeland (1997). Yarhi-Milo (2018) examines psychological traits of leaders to understand why states sometimes fight to protect their reputation and other times back down. Crescenzi (2018) calls for considering the broader network of actors, rather than focusing solely on dyadic relationships between states, to understand the dynamics of reputation. A growing body of research on shame explores the process, rather than relationship, dynamics of reputation. See Rochelle Terman and Erik Voeten (2018), “The Relational Politics of Shame: Evidence from the Universal Periodic Review.” *Review of International Organizations*, 13 (1) and Rochelle Terman and Joshua Byun (2022), “Punishment and Politicization in the International Human Rights Regime.” *American Political Science Review*, 116 (2), 385-402.

treaty make for varieties of noncomplying behavior. Civil society actors can lodge complaints via international bodies or cite international law to justify claims to national government actors, but the “softness” of many international agreements could undermine the efficacy of this approach, even in contexts where an authoritarian regime is highly concerned about their reputation.

However, empirical research demonstrates that transnational ties between activist groups are not always the driver of civil society groups’ tactical approach. For example, Moss’s study of activists’ tactical adaptation to repression in Jordan found that international NGOs provide “shelter” because “INGOs have the power to embarrass regimes claiming to uphold human rights and democratic principles” (2014: 274). Jordanese activists do not always or necessarily ask for activists in the U.S. or Europe to put pressure on their government; rather, they appeal directly to international organizations. Organizations like the United Nations or the European Court of Human Rights offer institutional channels like individual complaints and alternative reports that give civil society actors some leverage over government officials.

In this chapter, I demonstrate a slightly different model of within-system engagement that does not depend on activists’ transnational ties. Tracing debates about engaging within the system at different levels of government about what is practical and what is right offers valuable insight to how civil society groups see their relationship to the state and role in politics. I argue that civil society groups leverage power differentials across levels of administration – between the international and national, national and local – to advance rights claims and negotiate for reform. This is an example of leveraging “jurisgenerative possibilities” (Cover 1983; Benhabib 2009). Civil society actors “empower themselves by creating new subjectivities in the public sphere, new vocabularies of claim making, and new forms of togetherness (Benhabib 2009: 692). They

accomplish this not only acting as the subject of law, but by wielding the language and institutions of law as tools for reform.

Sites of Within-System Engagement

In this section, I explore debates about within-system engagement in several contexts: whether to register as a non-governmental organization, whether and how to organize a protest, whether and how to assist legislators in drafting laws, and whether and how to engage the judicial system. After describing the stakes of within-system engagement in each sphere based on interviews and digital participant observation, I analyze how civil society actors engage in jurisgenerative politics by working across levels of government.

Registering as a Non-Governmental Organization

One of the primary debates I encountered in my interviews was whether to register as a non-commercial entity. This formalization of a civil society group opens doors to funding but also invites scrutiny from government officials. After briefly explaining the legal framework governing the registration of non-commercial organizations, I draw on interview data and digital participant observation to describe the rationales given for pursuing or forgoing registration in Kazakhstan.

Opportunities and Pitfalls of Registration

First and foremost, registration helps a group avoid illegal activity as unregistered entities risk administrative and criminal liability.¹⁰⁶ Participation in unregistered public organizations may result in administrative or criminal penalties, such as fines, imprisonment, the closure of an organization, or suspension of its activities. “[Registration] is just a legislative requirement that

¹⁰⁶ Article 375 of the Code on Administrative Offenses January 30, 2001; Article 337 of Criminal Code, July 16 1997.

you must reckon with, and which you have to obey, that's all. It cannot be avoided,” a human rights lawyer based in Almaty told me in an interview.¹⁰⁷

While registration can help a group avoid punishment, it also opens them up to more careful scrutiny from state officials. One interlocutor told me, “Of course, there are pluses in that you can enjoy all the rights that the law provides. But, on the other hand, ... let's just say you have an organization, then this organization can be closed, they can do some kind of tax check In general, there are many ways to close this organization, or to paralyze its activities, again in legal ways.” This pushes non-commercial organizations working in the human rights sector to be very careful in their operations. He continued, “We, of course, very carefully keep our financial statements and tax statements; we pay all the necessary taxes, pay wages. In this respect, [we] and other non-profit organizations receiving funding from foreign sources, are whiter than the first snow in December.”¹⁰⁸

The decision to register is not only about avoiding punishment, but also about opening opportunities for material support. A huge incentive for groups to register is opportunities to receive and use grants – both from national and international sources. A group must be a legal entity to open a bank account and to legally be able to apply for funding. The head of a prominent human rights NGO explained, “Registration is needed, because if you are not registered, you do not have the right to receive grants, you do not have the right to conduct any economic activity, you cannot have any contracts, including insurance contracts for their employees or leases.”¹⁰⁹ While international donors may not have official requirements that a group be registered, but

¹⁰⁷ Author interview, 12 April 2021.

¹⁰⁸ Author interview, 13 April 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Author interview, 13 April 2021.

according to a human rights lawyer, donors point to the bureaucratic requirements for their own operation in Kazakhstan as a reason that they only work with registered organizations.¹¹⁰

Opting Not to Register

But not all civil society organizations in Kazakhstan pursue registration. Registration costs a lot of time, money, and effort. One interlocutor explained that although he went through the registration for another organization he runs, he told me that members of a coalition of 25 NGOs and civic initiatives opted against registration because of the costs:

“We discussed this for almost six months, in 2019, just the same, just when we started working on our strategy, organizational and communication potential, and we discuss it at each of these meetings, that is, we even did an analysis - the pros and cons , what risks, what opportunities, SWOT analysis, and came to the conclusion that ... putting all the eggs, roughly speaking, in one basket was too much, and given our legislation, which regulates legal entities, the non-governmental sector, it was a burden.”¹¹¹

Although an organization should be registered to apply for grants, this interlocutor spoke of “flexibility” from not registering the coalition. Members of the coalition can coordinate with each other to get around restrictions on financing, with unregistered entities collaborating on projects with registered ones to have access to grants and office space. Two other respondents explained that they operate this way. “While we cooperate, we kind of help each other. This is much better than us individually. It works more efficiently,” one representative of an unregistered group told me.¹¹² Another interlocutor whose organization is a member of the coalition disagreed that this

¹¹⁰ Author interview, 12 April 2021.

¹¹¹ Author interview, 6 April 2021.

¹¹² Author interview, 4 May 2021.

manner of operation is productive. “We are using the potential of another organization to... I don’t know, to get some kind of grant. It is inconvenient, it is impractical,” he said.¹¹³

Just as there is flexibility to work around financial restrictions, informants described avoiding registration as a way to stay nimble. Groups that do not register can skirt repressive tactics. “If you do things that pose a great risk to your safety, health, and so on and are engaged in political activities, so as not to create more risks for yourself, you should keep your informal status,” an activist told me.¹¹⁴

In addition to cost-benefit considerations, some interlocutors argued that it is wrong to register as a formal non-commercial entity. When asked whether the civic movement he works with considered registering, he told me, “No. No, no, no. Because we are a civic *movement*.”¹¹⁵ Other activists echoed resistance to institutionalizing their efforts. Beyond the question of formalization, this interlocutor argued that there is no need to register because the group does not want to participate in high politics: “And we won’t participate and legalize (*uchastvovat’ i legalizovat’sya*) our civic movement because we do not make any claim on power (*ne pretenduem na vlast’*).”¹¹⁶

Moreover, while the civil code places restrictions on collective organizing, Kazakhstan’s constitution guarantees citizens’ right to assembly and organization. Several activists pointed to the constitution as the true source of rights, and that any laws which restrict citizens’ ability to protest peacefully or join together as an association should not be binding. Indeed, the constitution

¹¹³ Author interview, 13 April 2021.

¹¹⁴ Author interview, 21 May 2021.

¹¹⁵ Author interview, 12 May 2021.

¹¹⁶ Author interview, 21 May 2021.

lays out a hierarchy of the sources of law, topped by the constitution and followed by constitutional decrees, international treaties, codes, ordinary laws, and decrees.¹¹⁷ One interlocutor argued that the conditions in which the 1995 constitution and legal code were adopted nullify their validity: “When the Constitution of '95 was still being adopted, a lot of laws were passed by decrees of the President, or bypassing the standard procedure. There was the Mazhilis, the Senate and then the signature of the President. There were no discussions, just presidential decrees.”¹¹⁸

Struggling to Register

Going through the steps of gathering all the proper documents and submitting the state duty does not guarantee that an organization will be registered. Civil society actors working in the sphere of civil liberties and human rights understand the denial of their registration as a government tactic to slow their advocacy efforts. Referring to a gay activist group that she worked with previously, a human rights lawyer explained that authorities nitpick over paperwork details to justify denying registration to a group with potentially undesirable advocacy claims.¹¹⁹ “Here you have the wrong letter, here you didn’t write something...” she said. Other respondents referenced the experience of Feminita, a women’s rights organization’s that has struggled to

¹¹⁷ However, this hierarchy changed in 2017, when authorities placed the Constitution above International agreements. See “KAZAKHSTANI HR NGOs COMMENTS to the Information provided by the Republic of Kazakhstan on Follow-up to the Concluding Observations on the Second Periodic Report of Kazakhstan,” 6 June 2017, accessed online https://ccprcentre.org/files/documents/NGO_follow-up_report_June2017.pdf. Oleg Stalbovskiy and Maria Stalbovskaya, “UPDATE: Laws of the Republic of Kazakhstan,” *GlobaLex* (2019), <https://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/Kazakhstan1.html>. Constitutional Decrees and Laws include guidelines on the duties and privileges of the President, First President, Parliament, and Government, as well as procedures for referenda and elections. There are many different branches of law that have been codified; the ones most relevant to this chapter are the Civil Code and Criminal Code.

¹¹⁸ Author interview, 12 May 2021.

¹¹⁹ Author interview, 12 April 2021.

register, suggesting that the belief that the government restricts registration based on social mores is widespread in this circle.

Feminita was founded in December 2017 by two activists who got interested in civil society during the 2014 currency devaluation protests. They gathered the required paperwork to register their organization with the Ministry of Justice in late December 2017. The Almaty branch of the Ministry of Justice suspended the organization's registration on January 9, 2018, citing inconsistencies in the clauses of Feminita's charter (though the Ministry did not specify what needed to be eliminated from the charter to make it in proper order). Feminita's leaders made corrections to their packet and resubmitted the documents on February 13, but their request was again denied, vaguely citing failure to fix the errors in the first submission. The two activists applied for registration a third time on December 20, 2018, with an explanation arriving on January 3, 2019. The Ministry of Justice sent the standard denial, citing some violations in the charter paperwork. They deduced that officials were bothered by one paragraph in the charter, which indicates that Feminita would "Provid[e] support and development of the potential of communities of women with disabilities, LBTIC communities, sex workers in Kazakhstan in order to protect their rights and legitimate interests."¹²⁰

One of the founders recounted, "They [government officials] said, 'If you don't like something, then take it to court.' So, we sued them."¹²¹ The two leaders filed a lawsuit against the Almaty branch of the Ministry of Justice on June 5, 2019. During the trial, they couldn't decide where we were at fault, at first here and then there," she said. This indecisiveness she recounted

¹²⁰ "Styd, sram, i strakh peremen [Shame, Disgrace, and Fear of Change]" Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, 5 June 2019, accessed online https://bureau.kz/public/sobstvennaya_informaciya/styd_sram_i_strakh_peremen/.

¹²¹ Author interview, 4 May 2021.

mirrors the wide range of reasons cited in the ruling against Feminita. Medeu District Court judge Timur Zhumamuratov ruled that Feminita’s goals posed a threat to society, arguing that the charter “does not aim to strengthen moral and spiritual values, spiritual culture, prestige and the role of the family in society.” Additionally, Feminita’s charter supposedly called for making changes in the political sphere, which Zhumamuratov argued is unacceptable for a public fund. The court also tried to argue that Feminita should actually have been registered as a charity organization (*blagotvoritel’naya organizatsiya*) instead of a non-profit (*obshchestvennyj fond*). In September 2019, an appeals court upheld the Medeu District Court’s decision to refuse Feminita’s registration.¹²²

Feminita tried another legal angle to receive registration. In October 2019, they coordinated with a group of special rapporteurs working for the United Nations to send an application to the Ministry of Justice. Yet again, registration was denied, but the Minister of Justice Marat Beketayev asked Yevgeny Zhovtis – a well-respected human rights defender and the director of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law – to serve as a mediator in negotiations between Feminita and the Ministry of Justice. On July 2, 2020, after an online meeting with Feminita, Zhovtis, and the Vice Minister of Justice, representatives of the Ministry announced that “amendments” to Feminita’s charter had been approved and the organization would be granted registration. One of Feminita’s leaders publicly denied having made any amendments to their charter; she told local media, “We are outraged that our registration is being forced like this because the time of some kind of reporting is approaching,” referencing the looming submission of a national report on the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political

¹²² “Kazakhstan: Feminist Group Denied Registration,” *Human Rights Watch*, 13 September 2019, accessed online <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/09/13/kazakhstan-feminist-group-denied-registration>.

Rights. “Where were the representatives of the Ministry of Justice and the Department of Justice for these 2 and a half years?”¹²³

Registration as Jurisgenerative Politics

A central line of the debate about whether to register was more about logistics than jurisgenerative possibilities. Even so, collective organizations are forced to work within the power dynamics between local, national, and international bodies. Kazakhstan’s national authorities made and maintain the law on registration, but the process of actually registering an organization happens at the local level. Groups that were formally registered and operate with more within-system engagement explained that registering is a “must” to be able to organize activities and to access funding possibilities. Even if groups follow the guidelines on registration, there is no guarantee that local authorities will grant registered status; they claim that technical errors are the reason for rejection, but groups that were rejected have missions that run counter to dominant cultural mores or pose a potential political threat. Furthermore, following the law on registration puts collective organizations at risk of closer scrutiny under the law – or extralegal pressures, as with the organizations that were subject to tax audits. When it comes to finances, although international organizations and foreign governments funding development projects claim to consider unregistered organizations for grants, informants spoke of the reality for registration to be competitive. This is because international organizations operate in Kazakhstan per Kazakhstan’s national law; even if it were not a bureaucratic struggle for international NGOs to offer funding to unregistered groups, they are constrained by domestic requirements. However,

¹²³ “Minyust zaregistriret obshchestvennyj fond ‘Feminita’ v Kazakhstane [The Ministry of Justice will Register Public Fund ‘Feminita’ in Kazakhstan], *informburo.kz*, 3 July 2020, accessed online <https://informburo.kz/novosti/minyust-zaregistriret-obshchestvennyy-fond-feminita-v-kazahstane.html>.

registered and unregistered organizations can collaborate, which allows groups that choose not to register or that have been denied registration to access fundings from international sources.

The example of Feminita illustrates how a civil society group can leverage power differentials across levels of government to pursue jurisgenerative possibilities. Its founders saw registration as a way to be seen by the state on the state's terms. For groups that represent marginalized communities, receiving the requisite stamps on their registration paperwork signals the government's acknowledgement of their community's right to organize. Feminita's founders persisted in working with designated local authorities to register their organization. When this failed three times, they sued the Almaty branch of the Ministry of Justice in an attempt to leverage national courts' authority over local officials. While they lost the case, the judge's decision articulated the real reason that local authorities had denied registration; with a paper trail showing that the government was discriminating against Feminita because the group "does not aim to strengthen moral and spiritual values, spiritual culture, prestige and the role of the family in society," Feminita was better equipped to appeal to international governing bodies.

By requesting assistance from UN-affiliated rapporteurs, Feminita brought Kazakhstan's international reputation under scrutiny. With its international reputation on the line, authorities rushed to solve the stalemate in Feminita's registration as a public foundation. However, national elites attempted to save face by simply doing away with the troublesome clauses in Feminita's charter without the group's approval. This is the vision of efficiency in relations between state and society: one that does not disrupt the state's vision of social order, and one that can be toted out for approval from international bodies. While Feminita still has not been granted registration, its leaders coordinate with legal entities to apply for grants and organize activities.

Feminita's persistence in pursuing registration is an example of jurisgenerative politics, but it is also worth analyzing activist groups' refusal to register as jurisgenerative politics. Interlocutors differentiated between the Constitution and the Administrative Code as sources of rights; restrictions on assembly and association are articulated in the Administrative Code, which is lower than the Constitution in its authority. Activists questioned the legitimacy of the process by which the Administrative Code was adopted; the laws that make up the Administrative and Criminal Code were largely pushed by presidential decrees, issued by Nazarbayev after consolidating power.

Sanctioned Protest

Kazakhstan strictly regulates civil society actors' ability to register as formal organizations and to gather in public to make demands. Although Kazakhstan's Constitution guarantees citizens the right to "peacefully and without arms assemble, hold meetings, rallies and demonstrations, street processions and pickets," it holds for restriction of this right in the interests of state security and public order. Until June 2020, Kazakhstanis had to request permission from local government authorities to hold a meeting; permission was rarely granted to anyone other than groups that had demonstrated political loyalty.¹²⁴ A law that came into force in June 2020 changed to a notification-based procedure, which authorities framed as significant progress in respecting the right to assembly. However, in order to legally abide by the new law, citizens must wait for a response from authorities and cannot hold their gathering until 10 days after getting approval.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law. "Report on the Monitoring of the Right to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly in the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2018-2020." December 2020. https://bureau.kz/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/2021_report-pa.pdf

¹²⁵ Moreover, the new law restricts individuals' right to assembly, as protests must be announced only by registered organizations. See Mihra Rittman, "Kazakhstan's 'Reformed' Protest Law Hardly an Improvement," Human Rights Watch, 25 May 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/28/kazakhstans-reformed-protest-law-hardly-improvement#>.

Despite the restrictions, Kazakhstanis frequently take to the streets. Between January 2018 and June 2021, researchers with the Oxus Society Central Asia Protest Tracker recorded 1328 protest activities across Kazakhstan – the highest frequency in the region.¹²⁶ The most common issues were human rights (16.39% of all protests), income (11.9%), and welfare (8.46%). Most rallies targeted local and national government (28.9% and 25.7%, respectively).

In the rest of this section, I present four case studies of contentious episodes in Kazakhstan – a sliver of the total protests that occurred during that time. I trace backwards in time from mass protests in January 2022 to much smaller instances of collective action over the previous four years. This is perhaps an unconventional presentation, but my analytical approach lends itself to writing the chapter this way. Presenting the cases in chronological order involves implicit acceptance of an explanatory structure that favors structural accounts of contentious politics.¹²⁷

February 5, 2022

On February 5, about 150 Almaty residents gathered in front of the akimat (akin to city hall) to demand that the new akim step down from the post he occupied for a week.¹²⁸ Tokayev dismissed Bakhytzhan Sagintayev from the post on January 31 and replaced him with Erbolat Dosaev – a seasoned politician and member of the Nur-Otan party who had served as the Minister

¹²⁶ The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs. “Tracking Protests in Central Asia.” <https://oxussociety.org/projects/protests/>

¹²⁷ I am not the only political scientist to wield writing style to make an analytical point. Theda Skocpol’s groundbreaking purple book, *States and Social Revolutions*, speaks of people and communities almost exclusively in the passive voice. This is appropriate because her theory of revolution is structural, focusing on high-level political and class conflicts rather than individual actors. I thank Tim Frye for making this connection.

¹²⁸ Pyotr Trotsenko. “‘Dosayev, ket!’ ‘Shal, ket!’ Pervye posle yanvarskiyx sobytij miting v Almaty.” Radio Azattyq. 5 February 2022. Tokayev was ostensibly responding to a petition demanding Sagintayev’s resignation that got more than 20,000 signatures. The petition lists Sagintayev’s failures during the January events and calls for open elections for Almaty’s akim. Although Kazakhstanis that live in villages had the opportunity to vote for their akims for the first time in July 2021, Almaty’s residents – more than 1.7 million people – did not get the opportunity to elect their representation.

of Finance and the Minister of Health in the 2000s, the Minister of National Economy in the 2010s, and deputy prime minister from 2017 until the mass resignation of the government in late February 2019. People in the crowd held signs in Russian and Kazakh demanding the right to choose their own local representation, and chants of “Shal ket!” (“Old man, out!”) echoed across the plaza. Police officers in heavy fur hats stood watch from the balconies of the akimat, though they did not interfere with the gathering, which had been sanctioned by local authorities.

Although jokes circulated on social media about the akim sanctioning a protest against himself, many were relieved that the protest took place without much fanfare. It was the first public gathering in Almaty following mass unrest in early January. Just a month prior, on January 6, 3,000 troops the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) descended on Almaty. The CSTO, a military alliance between Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Armenia, had never sent a peacekeeping mission in its 30-year history. But a request from Tokayev to restore order after “20,000 terrorists” took over the city was enough to rally the troops (Kudaibergenova and Laruelle 2022).

Tokayev’s terrorist narrative stemmed from uncontrolled riots in Almaty in the early hours of January 5. A crowd in Republic Square in the center of Almaty grew to several thousand people just after midnight, and protesters pushed through the line of riot police holding shields to rush the akimat. Elsewhere in the city, protesters clashed with police, who responded with stun grenades and teargas. At 1:30 in the morning, Almaty and Mangystau oblast entered a state of emergency set until January 19; the cities of Shymkent and Astana joined that afternoon, as did Atyrau, Kyzylorda, and Zhambyl oblasts.¹²⁹ In the light of dawn, Almaty’s streets remained full of people,

¹²⁹ Radio Azattyq, “Chrezvychajnoe polozhenie, svetoshumovye granaty i komendantskij chas. Chto proiskhodilo v Kazakhstane v noch’ na 5 yanvarya [State of emergency, stun grenades, and curfew. What happened on the night of January 5],” 5 January 2022, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/31639929.html>

waving Kazakh flags and chanting demands that Tokayev resign. A crowd stood outside the akimat as men flung reams of government documents from broken windows, and not long after, smoke billowed from windows on the ground floor. Videos of the akimat burning capture echoes of gunfire, and the city descended into chaos as security forces disappeared and groups looted businesses and ATMs.¹³⁰ Tokayev called for police to shoot without warning, and at least 238 people died during the unrest.¹³¹ Despite the risks, 40 people gathered for a picture with a massive sign reading “karapaim khalykpyz biz–terrorist emespiz!” (Kazakh for “we are simply people – we are not terrorists!”).

Almost 1300 miles away, a thousand people had gathered in front of the akimat in Aktau. Unlike Almaty, the mood was light, and police had joined the protesters the day before. Even though the government had announced the creation of a commission to regulate the price of liquefied gas, and owners of gas stations in western Kazakhstan agreed to reduce the cost of fuel from 120 tenge to 90, Aktau residents persisted in protest.¹³² Men passed around a microphone to give speeches, many of which were interjected with chants of “Forward!”¹³³ The crowd remained

¹³⁰ Current Time, “Chto proiskhodilo v Kazakhstane 5 yanvarya: 24 chasov protestov i besporyadkov [What happened in Kazakhstan on 5 January: 24 hours of protest and unrest],” 6 January 2022, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/31642351.html>

¹³¹ Radio Azattyq, “Azattyq prezentoval minisajt istoriyami pogibshikh v yanvare 2022 goda [Azattyq presented a mini-site with histories of those who died in January 2022]” 1 June 2022, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/azattyq-project-pogibshie-vremya-sobyti-yanvarya-2022/31878333.html> The government has not established an independent investigation into the deaths and reports of torture and ill-treatment. See Human Rights Watch, “Kazakhstan: No Justice for January Protest Victims,” 5 May 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/05/kazakhstan-no-justice-january-protest-victims>

¹³² Radio Azattyq, “V Mangistau snizyat stoimost’ gaza do 90 tenge za litr, nachato rassledovanie na predmet tsenovogo sgovoram [In Mangistau they’re lowering the price of gas to 90 tenge per litre, starting research on the subject of pricing collusion],” 3 January 2022, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/31637176.html>

¹³³ Radio Azattyq, Facebook, “Азаттық журналисі Сәнияс Тойкен Ақтаудағы оқиға орнынан 6 қаңтарда хабарлады. Алаңда наразылар бір-біріне микрофон беріп, сөз сөйлеп жатыр, [Azattyq journalist Saniyash Toyken reported from the scene of the incident in Aktau on January 6. In the square, the protestors are giving each other microphones and giving speeches],” 6 January 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=753104785664432>.

through the night with poetry readings and calls for the removal of corrupt politicians from office.¹³⁴



Figure 3.1: Protesters on January 6 in Almaty carrying a sign reading “We are simply people – we are not terrorists!!!” via Mazorenko and Kaisar (2022)

¹³⁴ @orda_kz, *Telegram*, 6 January 2022, https://t.me/orда_kz/13431.

These demands had been voiced across the country, with residents of Astana,¹³⁵ Almaty,¹³⁶ Uralsk,¹³⁷ and Aktobe gathering on January 3. Police targeted small numbers of protesters – especially those with national prominence – in major cities.¹³⁸ In Zhanaozen, the oblast akim, Nurlan Nogaev, visited a crowd of a thousand people that had been standing in the western oil town’s central square for more than 24 hours. Nogaev and the director of a gas processing plant tried to explain how the market shapes gas prices, to which the disaffected crowd shouted at the akim to leave, screaming “We are tired of your fairytales!”¹³⁹ Beyond chanting, crowds in western Kazakhstan organized more disruptive actions. In Aktau, the administrative center of the oblast, oil workers threatened to go on strike unless the government addressed the cost of fuel.¹⁴⁰ In a Facebook Live stream, an activist filmed the interim akim – wearing a black fur hat that was distinct from the cheap beanies and hoodies the city residents used to keep warm – and calmly

¹³⁵ Darkhan Omirbek and Asylkhan Mamashuly, “V podderzhku Zhanaozena: politiya zaderzhala lyudej v Nur-Sultane, v Almaty perekryli dustup k mestam predpolagaemykh mitingov [In support of Zhanaozen: Police arrested people in Nur-Sultan, in Almaty access to places with proposed protests is restricted]” *Radio Azattyk*, 3 January 2022, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/31637135.html>

¹³⁶ Ol’ga Loginova, “V Almaty vnov’ perekryta ploshchad’ Respubliki i podkhody k nej [In Almaty Republic Square and entrances to it are closed]” *Vlast*, 4 January 2022, <https://vlast.kz/novosti/48014-v-almaty-vnov-perekryta-plosad-respubliki-i-podhody-k-nej.html>

¹³⁷ Yuna Korostelyova, “V Atyrau i Ural’ske sotni chelovek vyshli na mitingi v podderzhku protestuyushchikh v Mangistau [In Atyrau and Ural hundreds of people attended a protest in support of protesters in Mangystau],” *Vlast*, 4 January 2022, <https://vlast.kz/novosti/48018-v-atyrau-i-uralske-sotni-chelovek-vysli-na-mitingi-v-podderzku-protestuushih-v-mangistau.html>

¹³⁸ Kaztag.kz, “Siloviki v Atyrau zabrali Maksa Bokayeva s aktsii v podderzhku protestuyushchikh Mangistau [Police in Atyrau detained Maks Bokayev from a gathering in support of protesters in Mangistau],” 3 January 2022. <https://kaztag.kz/ru/news/siloviki-v-atyrau-zabrali-maksa-bokaeva-s-aktsii-v-podderzhku-protestuyushchikh-mangistau>

¹³⁹ Radio Azattyk. “‘My ustali ot skazok!’ V Zhanaozene protestuyushchie prognali s ploshchadi akima oblasti Nurlana Nogayeva [‘We’re tired of fairytales!’ In Zhanaozen, protesters chased the oblast akim Nurlan Nogayev off stage],” 3 January 2022. <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/31637803.html>

¹⁴⁰ Kaztag.kz, “Chast’ rabochikh v Mangistau prigozila zabastovkoj iz-za tsen na gaz [Some workers in Mangistau threatened to strike because of the price of gas],” 3 January 2022. <https://kaztag.kz/ru/news/chast-rabochikh-v-mangistau-prigozila-zabastovkoj-iz-za-tsen-na-gaz>

explained that the mayor had no power to change the price of gas and reminded the protesters that their gathering was not in accordance with the law on public assembly. That night, residents of nearby villages gathered to express solidarity and recorded video messages addressed to the president and local officials calling for lower gas prices. Kazakhstan's Ministry of Energy issued a press release explaining that the price of fuel was "balanced," and that market mechanisms would smooth out any further issues.¹⁴¹ In response, thousands of car owners blocked the road to Mangystau.

These riots and protests that Kazakhs have come to call "Bloody January" reputation all stemmed from a tiny crowd of men, huddled together in heavy jackets who had gathered in Zhanaozen to protest the doubling of the price liquefied petroleum gas on January 2, 2022. Men passed a bull horn around to make speeches, which had widened in scope from the price of fuel to demand for choice in local representation. One man yelled, "We don't need any puppets sent by Akorda! We need someone who cares about the people, the land. Where are the deputies in parliament whom we've supposedly elected?"¹⁴²

March 8, 2021, 2020

March 8, International Women's Day, is a significant holiday across the post-Soviet space. Although some criticize the holiday for becoming corporatized, with an emphasis on buying women flowers and giving toasts in honor of "tender women's happiness" (*nezhnoe zhenskoe*

¹⁴¹ Kaztag.kz, "Sbalansirovannym schitayut v minenergo Kazakhstana tsenoobrazovanie na gaz [The Ministry of Energy considers the pricing of gas to be balanced]" 2 January 2022. <https://kaztag.kz/ru/news/sbalansirovannoy-schitayut-v-minenergo-kazakhstana-tsenoobrazovanie-na-gaz->

¹⁴² Tojken et al., "'Akimov dolzhen vybirat' narod!' Protest v Zhanaozene: ot prizyvov snizit' tseny do politicheskikh trebovanij ['The people should choose their mayors!' Protest in Zhanaozen: From calls to lower prices to political demands]" *Radio Azattyq*, 3 January 2022. <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-zhanaozen-rally-gas-prices/31637309.html>.

shchast'e), its roots are in radical socialist arguments for gender equality.¹⁴³ March 8 has become an important day for protests in Eurasian capitals, where there are high rates of domestic abuse and systemic violence against women (Ishkanian 2005). When working to plan the 2021 march, organizers decided to go through the motions of notifying local authorities in line with a new law “On Peaceful Gatherings.” Under this law, citizens only need to *notify* authorities of a planned gathering; approval is not required.¹⁴⁴ The activists didn’t have much hope that the akimat would sanction the gathering. One of the organizers explained that they persisted in submitting requests for support “to show that the law on peaceful assemblies in Kazakhstan does not work. The fact is that activists are denied very often. Moreover, this would be the first authorized march in general under the new law, so we wanted to show that we would get a refusal anyway. And we knew that we would get a refusal and still go through with the gathering.”¹⁴⁵ It was a shock, then, when “the akimat said, ‘Okay, we support you, we will ensure the safety of the police. Nobody will follow you, no pressure will be put on you.’” On the day of the march, law enforcement protected the crowd of more than 1000 people who gathered in central Almaty for a five-kilometer march. This

¹⁴³ Kaplan, T. (1985). On the socialist origins of International Women's Day. *Feminist Studies*, 11(1), 163-171. One of the organizers of the 2020 march told journalists, “I always quote Nazipa Kulzhanova, an early activist for women's rights [in Kazakhstan], who said in 1921 that on 8 March, we must remember what rights we have been able to achieve and which we are still deprived of. At today’s march, we wanted not only to support the global women’s struggle for rights, but also to raise the important issue of security for Kazakhstani women.” See Aery Duisenova, “In Kazakhstan, women march for their rights – and against violence,” *openDemocracy*, 9 March 2020. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/kazakhstan-women-march-their-rights-and-against-violence/>

¹⁴⁴ Despite the new supposed reforms to citizens’ right to protests, Mihra Rittmann pointed out that the law still bans spontaneous protest, prohibits protesters from “incit[ing] social, racial, national, religious, class, or tribal discord,” and that unregistered groups cannot organizing protests. See Mihra Rittman, “Kazakhstan’s ‘Reformed’ Protest Law Hardly an Improvement,” Human Rights Watch, 25 May 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/28/kazakhstans-reformed-protest-law-hardly-improvement#>.

¹⁴⁵ Author interview, 28 April 2021.

was Kazakhstan's largest Women's Day march since independence, and it was the first to have been sanctioned by local authorities.¹⁴⁶

Indeed, the 2020 march was not sanctioned, even though organizers applied for approval. Police – both in uniform and in plain clothing – stood near the column of marchers, some subtly photographing participants and wearing medical masks to hide their identities. One local news outlet reported that at the beginning of the march, a representative of Almaty's akimat demanded that everyone disperse because the local authorities had not approved the protest. In response, organizers activated call-and-response chants like, “Die, patriarchy!” and “Freedom, sisterhood, feminism!”¹⁴⁷ In total, about 200 people attended this march, with no detentions or direct violence between the crowd and the police. After the event, however, two of the organizers were charged with “light hooliganism” for participating in an unsanctioned protest, failing to register the event, and burning a garland of flowers that symbolized the women who have suffered and died from domestic violence.¹⁴⁸ The two women charged were able to crowdfund to pay the collective fines, which totaled just above 145,000 tenge (\$366 USD).¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Daniyar Musirov, “Samyj massovyj zhenskij marsh v istorii. Fotoreportazh Daniyara Musirova [The biggest women's march in history. Photoreporting of Daniyar Musirov],” *Vlast*, 8 March 2020. <https://vlast.kz/fotoreportazh/44067-samyj-massovyj-zhenskij-mars-v-istorii-fotoreportaz-daniara-musirova.html>

¹⁴⁷ Timur Nusimbekov, Malika Aumalipova and Nalnura Nusipova. “Marsh 8 marta v Almaty [March 8 march in Almaty],” *Adamdar.ca*, 8 March 2020. <https://adamdar.ca/en/post/marsh-8-marta-v-almaty/187?lang=ru-RU>

¹⁴⁸ Timur Nusimbekov, Malika Aumalipova and Nalnura Nusipova. “Marsh 8 marta: sudy nad uchastnitsami [8 March march: trials of participants].” *Adamdar.ca*. 12 March 2020.

¹⁴⁹ Kloop, “Kazakhstan: Organizatorok zhenskogo marsha 8 marta oshtrafovali za ‘melkoe khuliganstvo’ i uchastie v mitinge [Kazakhstan: Organizers of March 8 women's march were fined for light hooliganism and participating in a protest],” 12 March 2020. <https://kloop.kg/blog/2020/03/12/kazahstan-organizatorok-zhenskogo-marsha-8-marta-oshtrafovali-za-melkoe-huliganstvo-i-uchastie-v-mitinge/>

June 30, 2019

On June 30, 2019, upwards of 500 people showed up to Almaty's Sary Arka theatre – the space designated for peaceful protest by local authorities. The crowd represented a broad coalition of groups and individuals with distinct messages.¹⁵⁰ Posters referenced police reform; violence against women and the need for stronger laws against domestic abuse and sexual harassment; calls for the release of political prisoners; and the consequences of corruption. In addition to these issue-based slogans, many placards and speeches communicated the need to loosen freedom of assembly laws. For example, several posters were adorned with the phrase, “I don’t need permission to speak.” One made a reference to the burgeoning Oyan Qazaqstan movement: “This is just a poster. PS I woke up in a country where a blank poster is a statement.” Unlike other protests of the summer, there were no detentions.

Just days before, the organizer had calmly presented himself for arrest at the police station. He stated his intention to hold a peaceful demonstration on June 30, and given that he expected authorities to withhold approval, he was giving himself up for proper punishment of 10 days of administrative arrest in accordance with part 1 of Article 488 of the Administrative Offenses Code of Kazakhstan. “Even if the law is harsh, I must adhere to it. If I go to violate it, I will be ready to incur punishment for this,” the organizer told independent media outlet Vlast.¹⁵¹ The police officer

¹⁵⁰ Dmitrii, Mazorenko, “Uchastniki mitinga v Almaty prizvali ustranit’ zakonodatel’nye ogranicheniya na provedenie mirnykh sobranij [Participants of a protest in Almaty called to eliminate legal restrictions on holding peaceful gatherings], ” *Vlast*, 30 June 2019. <https://vlast.kz/novosti/34135-uchastniki-mitinga-v-almaty-prizvali-ustranit-zakonodatelnye-ogranicheniya-na-provedenie-mirnykh-sobranij.html>

¹⁵¹ Daniyar Moldabekov, “Protesty vesny-leta v Kazakhstane: chto eto bylo i k chemu privedet?” *Vlast*, 17 June 2019. <https://vlast.kz/politika/34386-protesty-vesny-leta-v-kazakhstane-cto-eto-bylo-i-k-chemu-privedet.html>

read over his request with a puzzled look on her face and asked the activist, “Why are you doing this?”¹⁵²

The activist did not jump straight to submitting himself to arrest; since August 2018, he had filed 36 requests to local police to hold a peaceful demonstration. He started the task of organizing a peaceful gathering by submitting 30 separate requests to hold a protest between August 11 and September 11, one for every day. Every single request was denied, for reasons ranging from “overlapping with a public holiday” to “planned construction on the square.” The activist posted on Facebook, “Everyone already clearly understands that there will be no official permission for a rally on the reform of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, anywhere in Kazakhstan. You should have seen the smiling faces of the employees of the Internal Policy Department of Almaty at our meeting.” The decision to submit an application for every single day was strategic, “so that life does not seem like honey to them.” This activist *sued* the city on September 25, 2018, but the court ultimately upheld the Akimat’s decision, and the protest was denied.

The demonstration that was eventually sanctioned and held in June 2019 was not initially about freedom of expression or the right to protest. The organizer had planned a peaceful gathering in memory of Denis Ten, the first Kazakhstani to win an Olympic medal, who was murdered on July 19, 2018 while a group of men stole the mirrors from his car. Ten’s murder sparked a massive outcry on social media, with people across the country reflecting on what his Olympic win meant for them and decrying the inefficacy of the police to keep citizens safe. In addition to sparking a Facebook-based campaign to reform the police (see Chapter 5), authorities’ adamant refusal to sanction a gathering inspired a broader rights-based dialogue.

¹⁵² Daniyar, Moldabekov, “Aktivist Al’nur Il’yashev prishel v department politsii Almaty, chtoby ego zaderzhali,” Vlast, 19 June 2019. <https://vlast.kz/novosti/33881-aktivist-alnur-ilasev-prisel-v-departament-policii-almaty-ctoby-ego-zaderzali.html>

February 2019

On March 19, 2019, Nazarbayev resigned one month after asking the government to resign for failing to improve the living standards of families with many children. In the weeks before his surprise resignation, Nazarbayev announced a massive increase in social-welfare support amounting to 2 trillion tenge (\$5.3 billion) that would take place by 2022.¹⁵³ But this promise was not enough to quell frustration that had bubbled over into small protests across the country.

Protests had spread across the country, hundreds of mothers showing up to government buildings in big cities and provincial capitals.¹⁵⁴ February 11 saw protests in Aqtobe and Karaganda, with women traveling from villages some 200 kilometers away to attend. On February 15, hundreds of mothers showed up at a concert hall in Astana, where they had demanded to meet with the city's Akim. In his place, Deputy Akim Nurlan Nurkenov showed up, but the women shouted at him until he left the stage. He was shouted down from the stage, which journalists speculated was because he was speaking Russian, not Kazakh; because he was not the Akim; and because the women did not like what he was saying.¹⁵⁵ As women screamed, demanding microphones so they could speak directly to authorities, akimat employees tried to calm them by yelling back, "Patience! Have patience!"

Families had been patient, though, with thousands of women spending years on waitlists for social housing. On February 6, some 50 women gathered at the city's Akimat in temperatures

¹⁵³ Aleksei Aleksandrov, Svetlana Glushkova, and Ganizat Ospanov, "Kazakh Mothers: Proving A Force for Change," *CurrentTime*, 21 February 2019, <https://en.currenttime.tv/a/kazakhstan-mothers-protests/29880082.html>

¹⁵⁴ Farangis Najibullah, "Tragic Fire In Astana Gives Kazakh Mothers' Protests New Momentum," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 12 February 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tragic-fire-in-astana-gives-kazakh-mothers-protests-new-momentum/29765930.html>.

¹⁵⁵ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Kazakh Service, "Angry Kazakh Mothers Demand Reforms After Five Girls Die In House Fire," 15 February 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/angry-kazakh-mothers-demand-reforms-after-five-girls-die-in-house-fire/29771963.html>

that dipped as low as -30 Celsius. Although the protest was not sanctioned, Akimat employees invited the women inside; the women read out an appeal to the government and president Nazarbayev with a dozen demands to improve housing and social conditions.¹⁵⁶ Clusters of people – mostly women, but a few male journalists, all of whom were bundled in warm winter clothing – circled around women giving speeches. An Azattyq journalist was on live stream speaking with women who showed up to protest;¹⁵⁷ at the 9-minute mark, the journalist abruptly cuts off a woman he is talking with and walks toward the sound of another woman yelling. By the time the Azattyq reporter gets a clear shot, the speaker is explaining that she wants to have more children but cannot afford to take care of a bigger family. Her cheeks are flushed – perhaps from coming in from the cold, perhaps from the rush of intense oration – and several in the small crowd that has gathered hold their cell phones up to record her words. “I demand, *we* demand, a voluntary meeting [with the Akim]. No one should be persecuted based on some political or social categories, no one should be persecuted for giving everyone freedom. There shouldn’t be any censorship, and tomorrow all of this should be on TV, so that all this can be seen and heard,” she shouted, continuing, “If not, foreigners will hear about it, and it will be shameful for the whole country.” Comments flooded in on the YouTube livestream chat, with viewers sharing emoji fists up in solidarity and typing words of prayer, encouragement, and solidarity.

On February 5, a local journalist organized a protest at the Almaty Akimat building. In Astana, hundreds gathered not to protest, but to mourn the death of five girls. The children died in

¹⁵⁶ *Kursiv*, “Mnogodetnye materi sobralis’ na miting v Astane [Mothers of many children gathered for a protest in Astana],” 6 February 2019, <https://kursiv.kz/news/obschestvo/2019-02/mnogodetnye-materi-sobralis-na-miting-v-astane>

¹⁵⁷ The video has 1,003,000 views to date (an increase of 200,000 since July 2021). Azattyq TV – Azattyq – Azattyk, “Astanada kop balaly analar aleumettik talap kojyp zhatyr – Radio Azattyq [Mothers of Many children make social demands in Astana],” 5 February 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvxY2G5BCHg>.

a house fire, caused by the oven being left on overnight while the parents were working. The family lived in one of the newly (and hurriedly) constructed buildings in the capital, in which heating hadn't been connected yet, compelling the use of a burning oven to keep warm during the frigid Astana winter. Chain messages on WhatsApp invited women across the country to protest in every city and village.¹⁵⁸ These protests would be focused on getting the attention of political elites who came up with the social benefits system. Government officials needed to rectify the lapse in social services: The line of thinking went that the girls never would have died if the family had been properly cared for by the state; with sufficient social services, the parents would not have had to take extra jobs that required them to work all night.

Sanctioned protest as Jurisgenerative Politics

The people organizing protests for Women's Day and to memorialize Denis Ten went through the legally mandated process of requesting permission from local authorities, while networks of mothers across Kazakhstan made no effort to apply for sanctioned protest. The Women's Day March organizers submitted their request to protest in an ironic way, with the goal of calling the state out for the gap between the constitutionally enshrined freedom of expression and limited possibilities to exercise that freedom given criminal code regulations. In 2020 and 2022, they went ahead with their protest despite local authorities' denial. The Denis Ten memorial organizer also illustrated the absurdity of trying to organize a legal protest by submitting 36 requests to local authorities and presenting himself for arrest. Whereas the Women's Day protest assumed a bluff in the legal code and that local law enforcement would exercise forbearance (in 2019, an Akimat employee met the protest to yell out that they were breaking the law; only two of

¹⁵⁸ Ol'ga Loginova, "Miting materi v Almaty: "Oni ot nas otmakhnutsya, kak ot nazojlivykh mukh [Mothers' Protest in Almaty: "They dismiss us like annoying flies"]" *Vlast*, 6 February 2019, <https://vlast.kz/obsshestvo/31604-miting-materej-v-almaty-oni-ot-nas-otmahnutsa-kak-ot-nazojlivyh-muh.html>

the organizers were fined, and not for serious charges), the Ten memorial organizer was demonstrating fidelity to the law.

In contrast, the mothers made no effort to get permission for their many gatherings in February 2019. Arguably, they do not see themselves as “political” – and therefore really *protesting*, which is seen as a political act – because motherhood and social services are understood as “social” issues in Kazakhstan. The mothers’ refusal to engage with formal channels is also reflected in the geography of their protests. Whereas the Ten memorial organizer stuck to the law and held the event in the secluded spot designated by local authorities and the Women’s Day march took to the central streets of Almaty, the mothers’ protests gathered at government buildings. Their primary audience was local and national authorities, including akims, maslikhat representatives, the minister of Industry and Infrastructure, the minister of Labor and Social Protection.

Where the organizers of the Women’s Day march and the Ten memorial were laying bear the limitations of the current legal framework, the mother protesters were critiquing the social contract; the desired response to the former was not only grounded in issue area – namely, reform of the police and laws criminalizing domestic violence or gender-based discrimination – but also an expansion of freedoms of speech and assembly. This speaks to different approaches to leveraging power differentials across levels of government. In the case of the mother protesters, they targeted local government officials and Nur-Otan party members to demand the resignation of national authorities so as to change policy. Although they did not directly appeal to international governing bodies, the Women’s Day march organizers nevertheless took advantage of Kazakhstani authorities’ concerns about their international reputation by citing international obligations relating to freedom of protest.

All of these protests exemplify jurisgenerative mobilization. While the mother protesters did not go through the courts system or apply to local Ministries of Justice for approval of their gatherings, they nonetheless flexed the personalist nature of the rule of law in Kazakhstan to pursue advocacy goals. The Tan memorial organizer and the Women's Day march organizers followed the law to demonstrate its absurdity, thus creating new vocabularies and repertoires of claim making. One key difference is that the Women's Day march organizers wagered Kazakhstan's commitment to maintaining a clean international reputation and went ahead with their march in 2022, despite not having received approval; the Ten memorial organizer compelled local law enforcement into acquiescing by fastidious fidelity to the law.

I contend that activists' decisions to request formal permission to protest reflect normative understandings of how state-society relations should be structured. Reflect here implies both transitive and intransitive meanings. Activists are thinking carefully and creatively about how to advance rights claims in a way that is effective and right, and the choice to protest with or without formal approval from local authorities is itself a performance of contention.

Even when faced with censorship or repression, they transform these experiences into opportunities to "present themselves and their work as honorable and legitimate and challenge the terms of their repression and the legitimacy of the repressive agents" (Moss 2014: 271). Even social, supposedly apolitical claims voiced through protest are vehicles for bigger arguments for free expression and open communication with authorities. Protests can be laden with multiple meanings, some of which are articulated only after attempts to silence dissent. Blee describes how "a simple anti-war message, for example, might draw out the political implications of militarism in a democratic society, make a claim about morality in warfare, express a socially normative idea about peace, and employ discursive understandings to distinguish between war and conflict"

(2012: 31). Concerns about housing shortages and poor welfare support for families can draw out the political implications of the wealth gap and corruption. Being ignored or shushed by politicians invites criticism of restrictions on speech and assembly, which depend on discursive understandings of the social contract and how policy is made.

Lawmaking

Although legislative power theoretically stems from Kazakhstan's bicameral parliament, the president and the government (*pravitel'stvo* in Russian) play a significant role in drafting bills that go on to be approved by parliament.¹⁵⁹ Representatives from registered organizations working to hold the government accountable for rights violations and to reform restrictive laws spoke of the necessity of interacting with the state.¹⁶⁰ The head of one human rights organization recognized the importance of participating in these spectacles of round tables and meetings with authorities: "We take part in official meetings when we are invited. ... We have to go to the Ministry or some local executive body, for example. This requires go through security and leaving our phones, and we are checked by the guards there. Then we're sitting all important in our suits and we try to say something, wondering whether we will have time to ask any questions."¹⁶¹ Despite the difficulties in the procedure for getting face-to-face contact with the government, he acknowledged, "Of course, it is an important tool." A respondent at a prominent watchdog organization told me, "When ... we are doing work, we always try to attract the attention of the state. The work that is

¹⁵⁹ Oleg Stalbovskiy and Maria Stalbovskaya, "UPDATE: Laws of the Republic of Kazakhstan," *GlobaLex* (2019), <https://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/Kazakhstan1.html>. Timur Kanapyanov, (2018), "The Role and place of the parliament of Kazakhstan in the system of checks and balances," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 51(1), 81-87. *Pravitel'stvo* is comprised of the prime minister and deputy prime minister and the Council of Ministers, all appointed by the president.

¹⁶⁰ Author interviews: 6 April 2021, 27 April 2021, 12 May 2021, 18 May 2021, 25 May 2021.

¹⁶¹ Author interview, 13 April 2021.

being carried out in [our] field is ... ineffective if it is carried out only by the non-governmental sectors. It is necessary that the state always be present, as a 'second author' of sorts.”¹⁶²

Civil society actors who work in established human rights organizations or registered advocacy organizations saw value in contributing to the national lawmaking process in different ways. The primary goal of one interlocutor's organization is to encourage parliamentarism in Kazakhstan; she explained that at her organization, “We assist deputies to expand their capacity, especially control functions. All this activity is aimed at supporting public initiatives. ... to achieve the constitutional right to participate in the management of state affairs, primarily through the legislative process. ... The goal is to influence the policies that the government, parliament, and the president adopt.”¹⁶³ Other organizations contribute to the language of draft bills more directly, including those working on the media and internet, and initiatives on police reform, political rights of disabled citizens, and rights of transgender people in Kazakhstan.

Outside-System Tactics

Some activists argued that it is wrong to collaborate in any way with government officials. One interlocutor criticized the pomp and circumstance of round tables, “I had a lot of strong skepticism about this. ... When you are invited to round tables and used by the public or a civil organization for their PR, the fact that we are supposedly listening to you, you see, we are talking with you, we are meeting - this is not reform. Reform must be clearly consistent, program documents are adopted, deadlines are set and implemented. For this I don't need to sit next to

¹⁶² Author interview, 23 April 2021.

¹⁶³ Author interview, 25 May 2021.

feminists, take pictures, you know.”¹⁶⁴ Another seasoned activist described a distrust of the entire system. Recounting her experience being arrested for organizing a Women’s Day protest in 2020, she said, “This once again proved that we are doing the right thing, and that the judicial system is rotten, that everything ... well, like some kind of ... mmm, what is it called ... <sighs> a criminal group. This is the police, the court, journalists, officials, they all seem to be in the same gang ... and we’re just citizens who are trying to fight this group.”¹⁶⁵

Both of these activists who critiqued collaboration with state officials explained that within-system incremental reform does not work. Referring to the splintering of an initiative working for police reform following Olympic medal winner Denis Ten’s murder, one interlocutor said, “They [those that wanted to work “inside”] wanted soft processes, well, to talk, listen, clap for each other. Well, in the end, do you see how it turned out? Nothing succeeded. The police have remained the same, nothing has changed, it has even become worse in some ways.”¹⁶⁶ The other said, “I respect those people who say that it is possible somehow ... to change the system [from within].”¹⁶⁷ However, she believes that this inside maneuvering does not work because authorities have no incentive to make real reform. “No one will let you do it. All the officials who are now in power, they are so shaking in their boots (*tryasutsya*) to keep their place, they want to stay there so that they do not have this power taken away from them. They simply use you as a puppet, and uh, they will threaten you, and you won’t get anything done anyway.” From this perspective,

¹⁶⁴ This respondent challenged me to think of this question in my own political milieu. “Well, for example, if we take the United States, or just New York. Do you know who Rudy Giuliani is?” I nodded, and he continued. “Okay, and would you agree to sit next to him so he could use you for PR?” Author interview, 21 May 2021.

¹⁶⁵ Author interview, 28 April 2021.

¹⁶⁶ Author interview, 21 May 2021.

¹⁶⁷ Author interview, 28 April 2021.

participating in regime-sponsored spectacle is an example of what Annavarapu and Levensen (2021) describe “creat[ing] a sort of Wizard of Oz state, arresting projections that suggest an organ of omnipotence lies just behind the curtain.”

Even though some activists see interaction with state officials as counterproductive and ethically wrong, they engage in outside-system tactics to promote legal reform. The case of advocacy efforts for harsher punishment for rapists is an illustrative example of contributing to lawmaking sans within-system engagement. Kazakhstan’s lawmakers first made rape illegal in 1997, when they introduced Article 120 into the legal code. At the time it was adopted, Article 120 penalized rape as a “serious” crime. In 2000, however, lawmakers amended the rule and reduced rape to a crime of “moderate” severity. Activists criticized the status of rape as a moderately severe crime for many years, but the issue did not gain national prominence July 2019, when a judge passed down a light sentence on two train conductors who beat and raped a passenger in November 2018.¹⁶⁸

Sustained advocacy to attach stricter punishments for rape was pursued via a hashtag campaign, and a virtual petition, and unsanctioned protest. Women took to social media, using hashtags like #MeTooTalgo (referring to the name of the passenger train where the woman was raped in November 2018) and #NeMolchi (“Don’t Stay Quiet” in Russian, a spin-off of #MeToo that has been used in several Russian-speaking countries) to share personal stories of sexual violence and near-encounters with rape on Kazakhstan’s trains.¹⁶⁹ The head of an organization

¹⁶⁸ Prosecutors requested six years prison for the defendants, but the court decided each man would get two and a half years behind bars. The judge shaved three months off one man’s sentence because he had already been under house arrest for that long. Neither punishment met the three-to-five-year jail time required under Article 120. See “Article 120 of the Criminal Code (Punitive Actions against Rape),” *UNWomen Global Database on Violence Against Women* (2016), <http://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/asia/kazakhstan/1997/article-120-of-the-criminal-code-punitive-actions-against-rape>.

¹⁶⁹ @nemolchi.kz, *Instagram*, 28 July 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B0dXOwrgDLv/>.

against domestic violence organized a petition making direct demands about the content of Article 120. The demands were not written in formal legal language, in contrast to previously mentioned groups' more direct contributions to lawmaking. By August 12, after a short time in circulation, the petition had more than 5000 signatures.¹⁷⁰ Two Almaty-based activists coordinated with lawyers to craft a formal request to protest. Even though local authorities denied the request,¹⁷¹ the activists went ahead with the demonstration, which garnered local and international media attention.

In his first address to the nation on September 2, 2019, Tokayev called for reform on domestic violence laws: "We urgently need to tighten the penalties for sexual violence, pedophilia, drug trafficking, human trafficking, domestic violence against women and other grave crimes against the individual, especially against children. This is my task to Parliament and the Government."¹⁷² Within days, the Deputy Prosecutor General had presented the foundation for a bill in a press conference and deputy Nurzhan Altaev had formally initiated a bill to toughen punishment for criminal violence.¹⁷³ Article 120 was formally changed to consider rape a serious

¹⁷⁰ Irina Tuleubekova, "Bolee 5 tysyach podpisei sobrali pravozashchitniki za uzhestochenie nakazaniya za iznasilovanie [Rights defenders gathered more than 5 thousand signatures to make the punishment for rape stricter]" *zakon.kz*, 12 August 2019, <https://www.zakon.kz/4981182-bolee-5-tysyach-podpisey-sobrali.html>.

¹⁷¹ "Aktivistam otkazali v provedenii mitinga za uzhestochenie zakona ob iznasilovanii [Activists were denied to protest for making the law on rape stricter]," *The Village KZ*, 13 August 2019, <https://www.the-village-kz.com/village/city/news-city/6985-aktivistkam-otkazali-provesti-miting-za-uzhestochenie-zakona-ob-iznasilovanii>.

¹⁷² "President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's State of the Nation Address, September 2, 2019," 2 September 2019, accessed online https://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses_of_president/president-of-kazakhstan-kassym-jomart-tokayevs-state-of-the-nation-address-september-2-2019

¹⁷³ Daniyar Aisarov, "Ugolovnyuyu stat'yu za seksual'nye domogatel'stva khotyat vvesti v RK. Razbiraem novyj zakonproekt [They want to introduce a criminal article for sexual harassment in Kazakhstan. We break down the new bill]," *informburo.kz*, 18 September 2019, <https://informburo.kz/cards/ugolovnyuyu-statyu-za-seksualnye-domogatelstva-hotyat-vvesti-v-rk-razbiraem-novyy-zakonproekt.html>

offense on December 27, 2019.¹⁷⁴ The language of the law is not something that a single NGO can take credit for, nor is it something that activists who organized protests or hashtag campaigns penned. Even so, the example of the campaign to reform Article 120 illustrates a successful outside-system approach.

Levels

Encouraging Kazakhstan's lawmakers to amend or create laws to be in line with international standards and the country's international agreements is another goal for civil society actors. These international pacts range from agreements on economics, social and cultural rights, and civil and political rights. A human rights lawyer described how these international agreements can help activists. "There are many possibilities within the laws we already have, although they have quite a decorative character. But Kazakhstan is very sensitive to what others think about it. This image is a very big thing, and for the human rights community, it's leverage. We can play on it," she said.¹⁷⁵

Leverage can be gained by preparing and submitting independent reports to international organizations, "where we give an objective assessment of how civil, political, and economic rights are realized."¹⁷⁶ The direction of influence is not always from top to bottom. For example, a human rights lawyer coordinated with Feminita to try to repeal a law that bans women's employment in

¹⁷⁴ Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Article 120. Rape," https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=31575252&doc_id2=31575252#activate_doc=2&pos=130;-101&pos2=1894;-92

¹⁷⁵ Author interview, 12 April 2021.

¹⁷⁶ Author interview, 25 May 2021.

229 specific professions.¹⁷⁷ They went through international channels, including making an appeal at the 2019 review of Kazakhstan’s implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).¹⁷⁸ After trying several different channels at the international level, the human rights lawyer said she realized that the list of prohibited jobs “needed to be cancelled by a legislative decision because it is the law *here*.” She said that their team reflected on who has the power to make these changes, and they realized it was the “party that has been with us for a long time... Nur Otan. We discovered, surprisingly, that it was in their party platform (*programma predvybornaya*) to abolish this list of professions.”¹⁷⁹ This is an example of domestic politicians being aware of the image consequences of their laws and moving to change them to gain legitimacy locally and internationally, rather than changing the law to be in compliance with international agreements.

The human rights organization Erikindik Qanaty (Wings of Freedom) monitored Kazakhstan’s parliamentary elections in March 2016, looking for compliance with the norms of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. Kazakhstan had ratified this agreement just a year before, in February 2015. Human rights lawyers scoured the Convention and found that the Convention referenced not only social rights, but also *political* rights. After monitoring the elections, they worked with the Central Electoral Commission to pass reforms that would benefit voters with disabilities. Kazakhstani officials introduced changes to the Election Law in 2018, incorporating many of the monitors’ recommendations.

¹⁷⁷ The List of Jobs Prohibited for the Use of Women’s Labour, put in force by the Decree N°944 of the Minister of Healthcare and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan on 8 December 2015 with updates of 13 August 2018.

¹⁷⁸ Feminita submitted an alternative report in January 2019, which is accessible here: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/KAZ/INT_CEDAW_CSS_KAZ_33738_E.doc

¹⁷⁹ Author interview, 12 April 2021.

Civil society actors do not only interact with government officials in Kazakhstan. Interlocutors described speaking with international organizations and officials from western countries as well. A prominent human rights advocate recalled, “I’ve testified before the US Congress in hearings on Central Asia three time. I’ve spoken at the European Parliament and parliaments of other countries, as well as the OSCE and the UN. Basically, I speak anywhere where there’s a platform to raise the question of human rights abuses in Kazakhstan.”¹⁸⁰

Going up the ladder in administrative levels is not the only tactic for shaping the lawmaking procedure. Although the primary nexus of lawmaking in Kazakhstan takes place at the national level, local governance has been a priority of the government, especially since 2012.¹⁸¹ Cities and oblasts have their own legislative and executive offices that have the power to set their own budgets. One interlocutor whose organization is dedicated to building parliamentary democracy explained, “We work primarily with deputies of parliament in both the Mazhilis and Senate. We also work with deputies of local government bodies, but a little less because it is more difficult to work with them.”¹⁸²

Civic councils are another institutional lever in lawmaking. Maslikhats and akimats should have civil councils with representation from civil society, along with national ministries. An interlocutor with a strong legal background pointed to the civil councils as a potential point of leverage. Referring to these civic councils, “Civil society has already begun to interact with authorities better than before, because they started to study and use opportunities that are provided

¹⁸⁰ Author interview, 12 May 2021.

¹⁸¹ Akram Umarov, “‘Mainstream’ of the Past: How Did the Decentralization Reform Take Place in Kazakhstan?” *CABAR*, 24 July 2020, <https://cabar.asia/en/mainstream-of-the-past-how-did-the-decentralization-reform-take-place-in-kazakhstan>.

¹⁸² Author interview, 25 May 2021.

in the law. It a wash right now, because the majority of those who are members of the public councils are from GONGOs, but people are slowly starting to win back this instrument.”¹⁸³

Jurisgenerative analysis

Civil society actors work with members of parliament and representatives of local governance bodies to craft legislation and assist in the lawmaking process. This is jurisgenerative politics in its most literal conceptualization, insofar as rights defenders and activists are penning new legal language. The successes outlined here – including the repeal of a law banning women’s employment in certain professions, reforms to the Election Law to bring it in compliance with international law, and the reinstitution of rape as a serious offense – reflect different strategies of jurisgenerative politics. In the campaign to repeal the law restricting women’s employment, activists worked directly with Nur Otan-affiliated lawmakers. This approach was not the activists’ first strategy. Rather, they began by targeting international channels, specifically CEDAW. Recognizing CEDAW’s limited ability to force compliance, the activists leveraged lawmakers’ desire for positive public perception to encourage the law’s repeal. The organization that advocated for making elections more accessible to people with disabilities used the language of the Conention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in advocacy to domestic bodies, specifically Kazakhstan’s Central Electoral Commission. But civil society actors that are less formally organized and who pursue outside-system advocacy can also see success. A handful of protests, local media coverage, and a hashtag campaign generated enough attention for Tokayev to call for reform of domestic violence laws. This demonstrates that the language and institutions of law are perceived as sources of legitimacy and political possibility.

¹⁸³ Author interview, 12 April 2021.

Courts

When asked about the role that law and the legal system play in the protection of human rights in Kazakhstan, one rights defender and legal expert answered, “A huge role. It’s our only hope.”¹⁸⁴ As a superpresidential regime without meaningful checks and balances across branches of government, Kazakhstan does not have independent courts. Even Zhakip Asanov, the Chairman of Kazakhstan’s Supreme Court, openly admitted the lack of independent judges.¹⁸⁵ Despite the limited path for legal justice, rights defenders and civil society actors spoke of courts as a platform for achieving advocacy goals. This is not surprising given that many of my interlocutors who work in the field of human rights defense are trained as lawyers.

Civil society actors navigate the justice system in multiple ways, demonstrating both within-system and outside-system approaches. Within-system approaches include advocating for reform of the protocols governing criminal trials and the criminal justice system more broadly, as well as strategic litigation to protect human rights. Some civil society actors who usually conduct within-system advocacy pursue outside-system engagement through legal clinics for journalists and activists and court monitoring. Additionally, activists who are detained and brought before a judge also make claims for reform by turning their trial into performance art or drawing media attention about injustice.

¹⁸⁴ Author interview, 12 April 2021.

¹⁸⁵ “Zhakip Asanov rasskazal o semi kamnyakh sudebnoj sistemy [Zhakip Asanov discussed seven stones of the judicial system]” *informburo.kz*, 26 January 2018, <https://informburo.kz/novosti/zhakip-asanov-rasskazal-o-semi-kamnyah-sudebnoj-sistemy.html>.

Within-System Reform of the Justice System

First, rights defenders described attempts to reform specific features of the criminal justice system. For example, the organization Dignity prioritizes advocating for the presumption of innocence as one of its three main tasks; they organize conferences and advocacy campaigns to encourage respect of this principle in the judicial system.¹⁸⁶ Additionally, the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KIBHR) has worked for more than two decades to end the death penalty and to create a separate system for juvenile justice. In 1992, KIBHR participated in the government's first roundtables on the question of how to handle the death penalty. At that point, 90 percent of Kazakhstan's population was against it as a form of punishment. In 2004, authorities passed a moratorium on capital punishment, but it was not until 2021 that a law banning it altogether was passed.¹⁸⁷ This organization was also involved in the introduction of juries to Kazakhstan's court system. This was a very long process of advocacy, with amendments to the criminal code first being introduced in 2001 and jury trials not actually coming into practice until 2007.¹⁸⁸ Serious structural problems with jury trials remain.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ See this interview with Anara Ibraeva: "Kampanii 'Znat', chtoby preduprezhdatt'. [The Campaign 'Know in order to War.' Presumption of Innocence]" *YouTube*, 5 February 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldLQqx17Cy8>

¹⁸⁷ "Kazakh Lawmakers Approve Law on Abolishing Death Penalty," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 23 December 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-approves-law-abolishing-death-penalty/31623072.html>.

¹⁸⁸ Hiroshi Fukurai (2019), "Kazakhstan's Jury Experiment and Beyond: Lessons from Emergent Systems of Lay Participation," *Arizona Journal of International and Comparative Law* (36, 3).

¹⁸⁹ The mixed jury system and reduction from 2 judges to 1 creates a power dynamic in which the judge can sway the jury's opinion. Second, jury trials are restricted to those where the death penalty is a possibility. Finally, judges frequently overturn juries' decisions, which undermines public trust in the institution. Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2016 made it possible for trial jury structure (in addition to the existing jurisdiction) only certain episodes of criminal cases involving minors in criminal offenses, kidnapping, human trafficking, trafficking in minors. Slyamzhar Akhmedzharov, "Kazakhstan: Why the Institute of Trial Jury Cannot Function in Full Power?," *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting*, 3 September 2019, <https://cabar.asia/en/kazakhstan-why-the-institute-of-trial-jury-cannot-function-in-full-power>

However, rights defenders see the reforms as a success: “They’re very weak (*slaben’kie*, the diminutive form of the adjective), but even so, we managed to introduce juries.”¹⁹⁰

Beyond efforts to reform the judicial system, some human rights defenders in Kazakhstan work within the system to pursue what they call strategic litigation (*strategicheskie tyazhby*). One interlocutor said that his organization looks for “concrete cases that could influence the situation in the future.” His organization has to be discerning with which cases they take on, because resources are scarce. Logistically, strategic litigation looks like “fil[ing] cases in different courts and local executive bodies in a parallel manner.”¹⁹¹ This tactic is not foolproof, however. He continued, “We have sent requests for information, filed in some courts, but we are denied, denied, denied. But we keep trying. We’re finding new evidence and trying to make sure that our petition is accepted into proceedings, and that proceedings actually start.”

Kazakhstan’s government is not the only target of strategic litigation; interlocutors also spoke about possibilities afforded by international law and courts. The head of a human rights organization explained, “By writing complaints to state bodies, we’re referring not only to national law, but also to parts of international law.”¹⁹² This is in reference to Kazakhstan’s ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 2005, the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 2009, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhumane and Degrading Treatment or Punishment in 2008 after accession to the base Convention in 1998. In 2017, Kazakhstan’s Constitution was amended to change the process by which international treaties are applied. Until March 10, 2017,

¹⁹⁰ Author interview, 28 April 2021.

¹⁹¹ Author interview, 13 April 2021.

¹⁹² Author interview, 13 April 2021.

the Constitution read, “international treaties ratified by the Republic shall have priority over its laws and shall be applied directly, except where an international treaty implies that a law is required to be adopted for its implementation.” With the amendments, that paragraph now holds that “international treaties ratified by the Republic shall have priority over its laws. The procedure and conditions for the execution of international treaties, to which Kazakhstan is a party, in the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan shall be defined by the legislation of the Republic.”¹⁹³

Other interlocutors affiliated with rights defense organizations explained their experiences and strategic approach to filing cases and appeals to international organizations. The civil society actors I spoke with emphasized the individual complaint mechanism, in which anyone can bring an alleged violation of human rights to the attention of the United Nations. Although the organizations with significant legal expertise help Kazakhstani citizens file complaints, resources exist for activists and journalists without legal training to do this themselves. The organization Dignity has a guide to submitting an individual complaint on its website that is complete with templates and advice. This tactic is successful from the perspective of acknowledgment from UN Committees. KIBHR follows UN procedures, and they have “[won] more than two dozen cases in the UN Committee Against Torture and Human Rights with individual complaints.”¹⁹⁴ The head of a non-profit that works on media freedom told me, “We have a case that we won in the UN committee just a month ago. It was a free-speech case. The legal case is a form of advocacy because we make information available.”¹⁹⁵ Beyond making information available, individual complaints

¹⁹³ This was originally referenced in Paragraph 3 of Article 4 in “KAZAKHSTANI HR NGOs COMMENTS to the Information provided by the Republic of Kazakhstan on Follow-up to the Concluding Observations on the Second Periodic Report of Kazakhstan,” 6 June 2017, accessed online https://ccprcentre.org/files/documents/NGO_follow-up_report_June2017.pdf.

¹⁹⁴ Author interview, 28 April 2021.

¹⁹⁵ Author interview, 26 April 2021.

serve to benefit a broader constituency than just the person who submitted it; one rights defender explained, “The decisions are individual, meaning they are made in favor of one person. But the committees’ findings concern all citizens of Kazakhstan.”¹⁹⁶

In theory, committees’ findings apply to all citizens because Kazakhstan has ratified international treaties. However, in practice, Kazakhstan has not taken action in response to committees’ decisions. BirKipish (OneBrick in Kazakh)¹⁹⁷ tracks the status of individual complaint decisions in Kazakh courts. Of the 65 total decisions from three UN committees against Kazakhstan submitted since 2011, 53 found violations of human rights. However, Kazakhstan has taken action on 0 of these decisions. One expert who contributed to a human rights organization’s efforts to submit individual complaints to UN Committees expressed doubt about the effectiveness of this mechanism: “Our authorities are in no rush to pay compensation, release the people who were humiliated and tortured, or do anything at all to improve the situation. Kazakhstan spits on their international obligations. It’s really bad. We’re trying to teach government agencies step by step that the UN decisions must be implemented. But even if these cases get to the UN – that is, they go through the Supreme Court and then to the UN – they are not quite effective.”¹⁹⁸ With Kazakhstan assuming a position on the UN Human Rights Council in January 2022 and embracing a role in peace mediation since 2015, however, the government may be more concerned for its reputation.

¹⁹⁶ Author interview, 23 April 2021.

¹⁹⁷ The name BirKipish comes from a poem by Abai Kunanbayev, arguably the most prominent figure in Kazakh literature and history: “Be discerning in your path / If you are talented, be proud / You are a brick in the wall of the world, / Find your place in it!”

¹⁹⁸ Author interview, 18 May 2021.

Outside-System Tactics

One outside-system form of engagement is information driven, including educating people about their rights and monitoring trials of journalists and activists. Multiple interlocutors used the word “enlighten” (*prosveshchat*) to describe their organization’s mission.¹⁹⁹ Education takes the form of digital media campaigns, YouTube channels and online courses with creative videos, workshops for young people. Human rights organizations also organize legal clinics and offer pro bono legal counsel.²⁰⁰ The coalition Pana Defenders monitors trials of activists and rights defenders; their website invites citizens to apply to become a monitor and offers examples of letters of complaint or appeal and YouTube videos with instructions on how to monitor trials.²⁰¹

Another iteration of outside-system engagement is more subversive and consists of activists and lawyers using the courtroom as a stage for dissent. Shelekpavev (2021) analyzes the case of Evgenii Tankov, a lawyer from Karaganda, who hit a judge with a fly swatter during a court session. Shelekpavev argues that Tankov’s act “was not a flash of rage or a real attempt to harm the judge. It was, instead, a calculated strategy in which a political statement was concealed if not sheathed within the form of a grotesque performance. Tankov knew he would be judged for disrespect towards the court: and yet he used his subsequent trial to demonstrate the moral and intellectual impasse of Kazakhstan’s judicial system” (364).

Independent media coverage of several high-profile cases – specifically those involved with the “You Can’t Run from the Truth” action at the Almaty Marathon on April 21, 2019 –

¹⁹⁹ Author interviews, 12 May 2021, 20 May 2021.

²⁰⁰ Author interviews, 13 April 2021, 23 April 2021.

²⁰¹ See PANA’s webpage on court monitoring: “Nablyudaem sudy! [We’re observing courts!]” *PANA Defenders*, 2022, https://pana-defenders.info/watch_courts/.

spread images and transcripts of the trial far beyond the courtroom. For example, the independent outlet Adamdar published the text of Tulesova's interactions with the prosecutor and judge from her trial. The judge and prosecutor stumble through questions, trying to trick Tulesova into admitting that the banner can only refer to sports or politics:

Prosecutor: All right, but what does the content on the outer portion of the banner mean?

Tulesova: "I have a choice"? "I have a choice" means that I have a choice. I want people to realize that we need to learn how to build democratic institutions which really work. We need a good president who will be held accountable to the population, and who will also take care of the quality of life of their people.²⁰²

The same outlet covered artist Suinbike Suleimenova's trial, where she was judged for videotaping the "You Can't Run from the Truth" action. A crowd of supporters stood in the back of the courtroom; they had covered their mouths with pieces of tape that read "UYAT," the Kazakh word for shame.²⁰³ Activists are engaging in the court system insofar as they are charged with petty crimes, but they leverage the opportunity to poke holes in the judicial system's sanctimoniousness through irreverence and media coverage.

Jurisgenerative Politics in the Courts

The judicial system in Kazakhstan is loaded with judges who are loyal to the regime. These judges frequently sentence activists, journalists, and rights defenders, yet some civil society actors persist in working within the system to improve it. Scholars disagree about the extent to which courts can be an effective site of contention in authoritarian regimes. Chua's review of scholarship

²⁰² Timur Nusimbekov, "In Asya's Own Words," *Adamdar*, 22 April 2019, <https://adamdar.ca/en/category/firsthand/in-asya-s-own-words>.

²⁰³ Malika Autalipova, "Protest Performance in a Courtroom," *Adamdar*, 17 May 2019, <https://adamdar.ca/en/post/protest-performance-in-a-courtroom?category=adamdar-news>.

on legal mobilization in authoritarian contexts traces empirical studies of how dissidents use both formal and informal claims to law to resist repression (2019). For example, Abel's analysis of legal mobilization in apartheid-era South Africa demonstrates how Black South Africans and their legal advisors criticized inconsistencies across laws (1995: 23-65). Formal legal tactics may not overturn authoritarianism, but can support civil society actors through positive publicity or self-preservation (Chua 2019: 364-365). Among those who are less optimistic about the feasibility of legal mobilization, some have argued that litigation alone cannot achieve restitution (Atuahene 2014). Legal mobilization can also have counterproductive consequences. In his study of the campaign for pay equity reform in the United States, McCann (1994) framed law as a tool for sustaining power hierarchies and points to efforts to create norms outside formal legal institutions. Froissart argued that citizens inadvertently reproduce political domination through resistance via legal institutions. However, her case studies of public interest litigation in China demonstrate "an inherently ambivalent, contradictory process" (2014: 256).

On the level of analyzing the success of this tactic, I concur with Froissart that within-system engagement of the justice system in an autocratic context yields contradictory outcomes. The wins my interlocutors described – such as the introduction of juries or successful individual complaints lodged to UN Committees – have not yielded significant policy changes. Since juries were introduced, they have served on less than 1% of all trials because they are only used for a narrow subset of offenses. Although UN Committees have ruled in favor of those who submitted individual complaints, Kazakhstani authorities have resisted compliance with these decisions. Even so, this constitutes jurisgenerative politics insofar as human rights defenders are using the language and institutions of law as tools for reform. The act of claiming the letter of the law that

was written under illiberal conditions and that is implemented for illiberal ends empowers civil society actors to create new vocabularies and forms of political engagement.

Assessing the Analytical Leverage of a Jurisgenerative Framework

In this chapter, I sought to understand how civil society actors understood the moral stakes and strategic advantages of working within the system to advocate for reform. I analyzed debates about the opportunities and pitfalls of within-system engagement in four sites of potential interaction, including whether and how to: register as a non-governmental organization, organize a protest, contribute to lawmaking, and engage in the legal system.

Registration is legally required for groups to organize activities, open a bank account, and apply for grants. For independent groups, registration offers Janus-faced advantages: it helps a group avoid punishment, but also subjects groups to scrutiny and strict requirements for documenting their activities. The case of *Feminista* illustrates how registration could be an empowering process, insofar as registration signals the government's acknowledgement of a marginalized community's right to collectively advocate for themselves.

Civil society actors who organize protests and peaceful demonstrations take different approaches and hold different beliefs about how to engage with the law on public assembly. Going through the legal procedure for procuring permission can be a way of expressing dissent or exposing the hollowness of the government's commitment to easing restrictions on public assembly.

The work of penning new laws is perhaps the ultimate expression of jurisgenerative politics. Multiple avenues exist for contributing to lawmaking, and it does not always require within-system engagement to advocate for legal reform. A trio of activists campaigned to repeal a law prohibiting women's employment in specific professions; after realizing that international

channels would not be effective at overturning the law, they leveraged lawmakers' desire for positive public perception to encourage the law's repeal. This involved direct communication with deputies from the ruling Nur-Otan party who had the unique power to repeal law from Kazakhstan's Administrative Code. In contrast, a series of in-person protests and a widespread hashtag campaign generated enough attention that the president instructed parliament to make domestic violence laws stricter.

Finally, civil society actors work within the justice system by advocating for reforms of courts and prisons, as well as pursuing strategic litigation at national and international levels to protect human rights. There are also important efforts to make courts more visible that eschew within-system engagement. Some organizations offer legal clinics and court monitoring to make the justice system more transparent and better understood by those facing trial. Activists use the courtroom as a stage for contentious performances, which affords them a voice in a system that seeks to charge them for dissent. Both tracks of engagement constitute jurisgenerative politics and serve to empower civil society actors.

Keck and Sikkink's "boomerang theory" is the predominant alternative interpretation of how activists work across local, national, and international institutions (1999). The boomerang theory depends on transnational ties and the idea that "less powerful third world actors" working in a closed context bypass their state in pursuit of their advocacy goals. These NGOs communicate horizontally with peer NGOs and friendly governments, who do the work of pressuring the home state with moral leverage and information campaigns. The patterns of within-system engagement I describe in the chapter are distinct from the boomerang theory. Many civil society actors in Kazakhstan do not bypass the state, but rather wield the letter of the law (or work to change it) to hold authorities accountable. They take advantage of power differentials between local, national,

and international institutions to make substantive and normative claims about the relationship between state and society in Kazakhstan.

Moreover, the transnational component that is so central to Keck and Sikkink's model is not prominent in the cases I analyzed. Keck and Sikkink emphasize the significance of transnational advocacy networks that link groups working in resource-rich first world countries with those in third world countries that struggle with repression. One interlocutor described a shift away from depending on western institutions toward grassroots advocacy: "All of our advocacy, we did it through the west, that is, we advocated through some institutions abroad, so that they.... lobbied our own government on some issues of public importance. But [the type of advocacy] we actually need is bottom up, internal advocacy. This is just starting now."²⁰⁴ The first half of her comment describes the Keck and Sikkink model, but she explains that there has been a shift to internal advocacy.

This internal advocacy is not necessarily isolated advocacy. Interlocutors described having friendships and working relationships with activists and rights defenders from other former Soviet countries.²⁰⁵ Many civil society leaders watched the trajectory of associational life in countries like Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia to try to understand the prospects for a vibrant civil society in Kazakhstan. "These countries are trying to crawl out of the same [situation]. I try to understand why they are not successful, the major mistakes. Why is it so hard for Ukraine to get out [of this situation,] even harder than Georgia?"²⁰⁶ Beyond macro political trends, civil society actors are also looking for inspiration for projects from neighboring countries. "We look for

²⁰⁴ Author interview, 12 April 2021.

²⁰⁵ Author interview, 4 May 2021.

²⁰⁶ Author interview, 12 May 2021.

interesting campaigns (акции), which ones are catchy and which ones get spread in the media.”²⁰⁷

What distinguishes these transnational relationships with the boomerang model is that the civil society actors I spoke with do not leverage these relationships to indirectly pressure Kazakhstan’s government. Rather, they work vertically, displaying an awareness of power dynamics across levels of government, namely that Kazakhstan’s ruling class is concerned with its international reputation, and that local authorities will respond to pressure from above.

We get more analytic leverage by interpreting Kazakhstani activists’ within-system engagement through the lens of jurisgenerative politics than the boomerang theory. Theorists of jurisgenerative politics emphasize the possibility that law and legal institutions can be tools of empowerment, and this framework gives relatively more agency to activists and rights defenders in Kazakhstan. Whereas the boomerang interpretation would focus on intermediaries in the west as the mechanism through which Kazakhstani authorities decide to reform, a theory of jurisgenerative politics recognizes that local civil society actors identify and leverage power differentials among local, national, and international governing bodies to achieve their goals. This can be a long and imperfect process, but it demonstrates the possibility for proactive political subjectivity in an authoritarian context.

²⁰⁷ Author interview, 9 May 2021.

Chapter 4: Strategies of Visibility

Over the course of a week in July 2021, authorities and street artists waged a battle over former president Nursultan Nazarbayev's image. On July 5, a mural of the Nazarbayev appeared at the intersection of Zharokova and Mynbaeva Streets near the Alatau subway station in Almaty. Nazarbayev's title – Elbasy, *Father of the Nation* in Kazakh – was written in italic block Latin print to the left of his portrait. On the other side of his face, “FOREVER YOUNG!” had been painted in English in loose white print. Within a day, anonymous street artists had covered up “FOREVER YOUNG!” and redone the backdrop in a more vibrant, bloodlike red. They left Elbasy, though added an all-caps message on Nazarbayev's forehead: CANCEL. The message #qazaqkoktemi (*#kazakh.spring*, a hashtag that had been prominent during protests in the spring and summer of 2019) was spraypainted on the left side of the mural with a stencil.

City authorities whitewashed this mural overnight, erasing the back-and-forth competition for Nazarbayev's image. Within hours someone had added an ominous message: “I’LL BE BACK...” The next day, an entirely new iteration of the original portrait featuring Nazarbayev flanked by his official title and a description of his persistent youth appeared on the same wall.²⁰⁸ This version was navy and white, though, and featured a much younger Nazarbayev smiling under the brim of a cowboy hat. Again, it took only hours before this mural was defaced. Artists affiliated with the movement Qazaq Koktemi had crossed out “Forever Young” and each letter of ELBASY. They tagged “Cancel” in white spraypaint, emphasized with an underline in red. Nazarbayev's

²⁰⁸ @ruk2k19, *Instagram*, 7 July 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRDGvYBnatM/>.

face was painted in the clownish style of Batman villain The Joker, his eyes blacked out with two crosses imposed above. In addition to the #qazaqkoktemi stencil, the artists behind these additions to the mural wrote “uly dala ury,” which translates to *thief of the great steppe*. This is just a syllable off from “uly dala **uly**,” meaning *son* of the great steppe, a phrase the government had used in praise of Nazarbayev.

What was the point of this back-and-forth, collaborative-meets-combative street art? Local authorities were quick to cover images critical of the former president, and the mural was not painted in a prominent pedestrian area of Almaty. Who was the message for, then? At a Zoom event about art activism in Kazakhstan organized in January 2021 by the collective group of NGOs “New Generation of Human Rights Defenders Coalition,” the moderator described the long history of artists’ political communication in Kazakhstan.²⁰⁹ She explained how the spread of social media and internet access changed the logic of public performances and street art. Often, the point is not that people see the art installation itself, but rather that they see photographic representation on social media. Writing about the ACT UP movement that advocated for a stronger response to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, Schulman (2021) argued, “the representation of the action can be more important for spreading the word than the event itself. The video can be the most important aspect of an experience of resistance” (124). This sentiment was echoed by one of my informants, who described seeking examples of activists in other countries who organized “interesting ... and

²⁰⁹ There is a long history of performance art and shocking presentations in Kazakhstan, including graffiti but also films about violence in totalitarian regimes, theatrical interpretations of politically motivated killings, burning a coffin to symbolize the death of democracy, and dismembering a fish in a central square of Almaty. Oftentimes, the artists behind these actions are arrested – sometimes directly for their art, other times for fabricated charges – but activists continue to organize and document these flashmobs (флэшмобы). See “Civil Protests, Art, and Politics in Kazakhstan,” *Voices on Central Asia*, 14 May 2019, <https://voicesoncentralasia.org/civil-protests-art-and-politics-in-kazakhstan>.

memorable” campaigns (акции) as a way to get media attention.²¹⁰ Indeed, while it is not possible to get a precise number of people exposed to the mural (other than the two city workers who painted over it), the image and its message traveled far on social media.

How do civil society actors leverage visibility to pursue advocacy claims, despite the dangers of publicly communicating dissent? Much of the scholarship on collective contention in closed contexts finds that activists go underground to avoid costly repression (Scott 1985; Wedeen 2015; Fu 2018). However, civil society actors sometimes pursue their causes above ground and even seek broad visibility and attention. In this chapter, I break down the concept of visibility into three metaphors: virality, palimpsest, and pixelization. I argue that these metaphors have different implications for political subjectivity, which I illustrate through three case studies.

First, I present my experience attending a meme-making workshop to show how popular digital satirists leverage an awareness of social media algorithms and controversial content to get their posts to go viral. Then, I trace the evolution of performance art, graffiti, and protest hashtags from April 2019 through June 2022 to demonstrate palimpsest. Activists and authorities alike battle for discursive power by repurposing slogans and symbols to make claims about Kazakhstan’s future. Finally, I describe an Instagram campaign to sew a hashtag quilt on behalf of a political prisoner in the summer of 2020 to illustrate pixelization. Campaigns and protests are co-constituted through both digital and in-person participation, and the aggregation of these individual acts can influence political outcomes. These cases demonstrate that visibility is not a single process, and civil society actors pursue different metaphor-mechanisms for a range of goals: to reach a wide audience, to preserve protest art that authorities will doubtlessly destroy, and to

²¹⁰ Author interview, 9 May 2021.

build solidarity. By distinguishing between these mechanisms in analysis of contentious politics, social scientists will be better positioned to account for campaign success.



Figure 4.1: Photographs of a shed at Zharokova and Mynbaeva Streets in Almaty between July 5 and July 8, 2021

Differentiating Processes of Visibility

Here, I draw on political science literature about authoritarian resilience, dissent management, and contentious politics to present the dominant view of visibility in contentious politics. After demonstrating some limitations of this perspective, I turn to research from sociology, communication studies, and political theory that explores how “politics is enacted in and through visual media cultures” that exist online (Dean 2019). This is a departure from much of the positivist political science literature on social media, which is concerned with making causal

arguments about exposure to the internet on political beliefs and behaviors (see the review essay by Zhuravskaya, Petrova, and Enikolopov 2020). Rather than focusing on the effects of the mural war described above, I take a step back to examine how features of digital interaction contribute to or hinder political claims-making. How do political actors understand the goals and implications of visibility? What makes visibility an attractive strategy?

The state's ability to "manag[e] zones of visibility and invisibility, has become a key means of exercising power whether as a core function of statecraft, corporate mission, or terrorist activity" (Gürsel 2017: 134). The politics of sight reflect state power, which Pachirat (2011) breaks down into two analytical threads. First, the state has the power to conceal and hide away revolting things.²¹¹ The German sociologist Norbert Elias traces the "civilizing" of manners and attitudes toward nudity, sex, and illness; he argues that structural changes in European states facilitated stronger self-restraint among citizens. Pachirat's ethnography of a meatpacking factory demonstrates how "labor considered morally and physically repellent by the vast majority of society [is] sequestered from view rather than eliminated or transformed" (2011: 11). Research on digital authoritarianism demonstrates the broad toolkit of tactics dictators use to censor the internet. Attempts to mobilize collective action through digital channels can be easily thwarted, either by outright suppression – for example, via crude blackouts and blocking websites (Gunitsky 2015) – or by co-opting social media to frame public discourse in a favorable way (Lewis 2016; Sanovich et al. 2018).

The second formulation of state power Pachirat identifies is the capacity to collapse distance and expose concealed spaces, drawing on Foucault's interpretation of the Panopticon. In

²¹¹ Dictators fear the free flow of information, but many autocratic countries have quite free media environments. Egorev, Guriev, and Sonin (2009) demonstrate that autocrats in resource-poor contexts rely on free press to monitor the outcome of their policies and to incentivize lower-ranking bureaucrats to perform their jobs well.

Seeing Like a State, Scott describes how the state's impulse toward "legibility" – wanting to make its population and territory visible, countable, and orderly – leads to misguided overconfidence in massive, centrally managed projects (1995). Even if some Soviet engineering projects failed (most notably, the unsuccessful effort to reverse the flow of northern Siberian rivers from the Arctic to cotton fields in Central Asia), some of their social engineering campaigns continue to shape life in its former colonies. The Soviet nationalities policy was meant to create orderly collective identities in "backward" communities of nomads and Muslims; the process of imposing ethnic categories in Central Asia in the 1920s created sticky identities that continue to provide fuel for contemporary populists. The ability to surveil is central to policing bodies and spaces, which contributes to authoritarian resilience (Moss 2014; King, Pan, Roberts 2013).

Research from a range of sociopolitical contexts worldwide demonstrates how the steep costs of organizing collective action encourage concealed forms of contention. Scott draws on his fieldwork in Malaysia and historical analysis of slavery in the United States and scheduled castes in India to argue that seemingly placid acquiescence on behalf of dominated groups does not necessarily signify false consciousness. Rather, dominated people often conform in public to protect themselves from violent consequences but preserve their dignity through hidden forms of resistance. Resistance may be furtively voiced or enacted in many different social sites, anywhere from pubs to markets and kitchen tables to cotton fields (Scott 1985: 124-128). This theme of cleaved behavior between public and private life is echoed in Wedeen's research on Assad's cult of personality in Syria (1999, 2015). She finds that compelled participation in state spectacles was a critical mechanism of authoritarian resilience in Syria, but that many resisted full subjugation by acting only "as if" they respected the regime in public while privately criticizing the regime through jokes and subversive cartoons. Fu's work on disguised collective action in China finds

labor organizers employed a hidden pedagogical process to instruct workers on lodging individual complaints en masse; this disguised collective action allows citizens to mobilize without triggering repression from the state (2018). This body of literature suggests the following pattern:

“authoritarian regime” → “censor and surveil dissent” → “dissent goes underground”

But civil society actors do not always go underground or hide their contention. To the contrary, they can and often do lean on strategies of visibility. This can be to draw attention to activists’ issues of interest, as with the case of a Cuban rapper associated with opposition politics that livestreamed his arrest on Facebook.²¹² This is particularly striking given that Cuba only began allowing internet access on cell phones in 2018. Authorities claimed that the rapper’s social media activity constituted “contempt,” and they sentenced him to eight months in prison. During that time, however, the San Isidro Movement – a collective of artists, performers, writers, and scholars which the rapper was aligned with – staged a protest in November 2020. About three hundred people attended, making it one of the largest peaceful demonstrations in decades. The rapper was released in July 2021, and while the mass gathering did not lead to a shorter sentence, it speaks to the mobilizing potential and the dynamics of documentation of social media platforms.

Civil society actors also appreciate visibility as a protective mechanism. For example, when Kazakhstani authorities put an activist under house arrest to undermine his organization’s mission of rescuing ethnic Kazakhs detained in Xinjiang, China, his organization responded with a social media campaign to draw attention to the leader’s arrest. Following this campaign, which

²¹² Ed Augustin, Natalie Kitroeff, and Frances Robles, “‘On Social Media, There Are Thousands’: In Cuba, Internet Fuels Rare Protests,” *The New York Times*, 9 December 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/09/world/americas/cuba-protest-san-isidro.html>

amassed several thousand tags on Instagram and more than a thousand video submissions uploaded to YouTube, authorities eventually freed Atajurt's leader under the condition that he would not engage in political activism for seven years (Wood 2022). This is not to say that visibility is a foolproof strategy – there are many instances in which visibility can be a liability.

Given that empirical research has demonstrated that digital surveillance reduces citizens' participation in online discussions (Stoycheff 2016) and can produce shifts in offline behavior (Marder et al. 2016), how then should we understand instances when civil society actors emphasize visibility? I contend that subtle variation in mobilizing strategies speaks to different logics of visibility. I conceptualize three metaphors of visibility with different opportunities and pitfalls for civic campaigns and movements that play out online: virality, palimpsest, and pixelization.

First, the metaphor of “virality” draws on the process of spreading infectious diseases to describe the way images circulate rapidly across the internet. Postill (2014) argues that social media are inherently “viral” media, insofar as they are “designed and actively used to spread digital contents epidemically, from peer to peer, through routinized activities” (55). Media anthropologists have long been interested in the social and cultural circulation of media (Ginsburg et al., 2002; Spitulnik, 1996; Graber 2020), though there is no accepted measure of what constitutes viral content (Boynton 2008; Goel et al. 2016). Content does not magically spread to many users; platforms facilitate sharing through distinct algorithms. While algorithms can facilitate a campaign going viral, social media algorithms can also be configured to dampen socio-political campaigns (Zeng and Kaye 2022). Wasik (2009) argued that virality can only produce “nanostories” with little lasting impact. Bonilla and Rosa contend that the aggregative nature of viral activism can shape political outcomes (2015: 10). The aggregation of viral posts is further explored by Gürsel (2017), who conducted a case study of the Unity Rally in Paris in January 2015. She considers

how photography and social media platforms “change not only an individual’s experience in a crowd but also the very nature of the crowd’s political potential” (135). Seeing photographs of a demonstration or that a political hashtag is trending can push a tipping point in mass mobilization (Kuran 1991).

Second, “palimpsest” refers to the “ancient practice of reusing parchment to produce new manuscripts by scraping off previous layers of text, underwriting would eventually reappear and complicate the meaning of the manuscript” (Magaña 2020: 4). The parchment that was scraped off, scribbled on, and rewritten is still essentially the artifact it was before, and “one can either read the single narrative of one layer, or observe its intertextual interactions” (Welty et al 2013: 26). Scholars have used the metaphor of palimpsest to analyze a range of political outcomes. Carter (2012) examines policymaking through the lens of palimpsest, tracing the “discursive and temporal nature of policy” as documents are formally amended and interpreted beyond the letter of the law (223). Social movements and protest have also been analyzed as palimpsest. Begum et. al (2021) trace monuments, street names, graffiti, and media coverage of a central square in Dhaka, Bangladesh as sites of mass mobilization about language in the 1950s to protests against metro rail in 2020. A micro-research agenda has centered on Occupy Wallstreet, with Welty et. al (2013) explicitly interpreting the movement as palimpsest and Taussig (2012) incorporating photographs from Zuccotti Park, slogans on placards, protest chants, and snippets from interviews into an academic essay that itself could be read as palimpsest.²¹³ As with the introductory anecdote, I am interested in images that are literally layered, painted over, edited in Photoshop, and repurposed

²¹³ Perhaps recognizing this, Taussig begins the essay with a prescient note: “Friedrich Nietzsche says somewhere that a historian has to create a text equal to what he or she is writing about. In *The Gay Science* he has a line, “only as creators can we destroy,” which I take to mean not a demand for “positive critique” but an awareness of how description and analysis of an event is a culture-creating activity.”

for later campaigns. This certainly includes graffiti – as with Magaña’s study of youth countercultures’ role in massive protests in Oaxaca in 2006 (2020), or in Lerner’s decade-long analysis of street art in Moscow (2019) – but also songs, music videos, images of historical figures or politicians, and cat-and-mouse-style design of protest placards to evade (or invite) repression.

Third, “pixelization” – the division of images into tiny pixels to facilitate display in a digital format – speaks to the diffuse relationship between bodies, digital devices, and social movements. People are at once separate and interconnected through digital devices and social media platforms. Posts both document events happening in “the real world” and can cause events to happen. Hartblay and Klepikovka argue that “embodied spatial political action is distributed, diffuse, and digital publics assemble sporadically, creating bubbles of truth, subcultures, interests and fandoms” (2021: 14). They emphasize the appropriateness of this metaphor for the post-Soviet space, as pixelization draws on a visual rhyme between the pixel cells of a computer screen with the windows of Khrushchovka apartment blocks that litter cities across Eurasia even thirty years after independence. But the metaphor of pixelization can apply to cases worldwide, insofar as radical periods of resistance and revolution are diffuse and straddle digital and analog spaces. This includes studies of the role of the internet in facilitating the Arab Spring (Steinert-Threlkeld 2017 in Egypt; Moore-Gilbert 2019 in Bahrain), the 2011-2012 Bolotnaya Square protests in Russia (Gray 2016), the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Turkey (Tufekci 2017), and Black Lives Matter protests in the United States (Bonilla and Rosa 2015).

The above three metaphors map onto mechanisms of political subjectivity, which I lay out in Table 5.1

Table 5.1: Metaphors of Visibility

	Virality	Palimpsest	Pixelization
Mechanism of the Metaphor	Images circulate rapidly across the internet, made possible by algorithms	Artifacts are canvases for narratives and tactics that congeal/mutate over space and time	People are at once separate and interconnected through digital devices
What does this metaphor tell us about political subjectivity	Widely viewed photographs can spur people to action	The link between artifact, space, time, and affect as salience/mobilizing potential	Co-constitution of digital and in-person participation (digital participation not “less than”)

In the second half of the chapter, I illustrate the three metaphors through case studies of a meme-making workshop and political meme culture in Kazakhstan, the evolution and congealing of subversive hashtags, and an Instagram campaign calling for virtual and in-person collective action for the release of a political prisoner.

Making Memes in a Virtual Yurt

On October 8, 2021, around 4:45 in the morning (a comfortable 2:45pm in Kazakhstan), I logged onto Spatial Chat, a digital platform with customizable environments that allows participants to freely move between groups by dragging their avatar. I was here – inside a room

outfitted like a yurt, but also splayed out on my living room floor with a mug of coffee to keep me awake – for a workshop on meme-making as part of the annual FemAgora festival.²¹⁴

For fifteen minutes, the session’s fifteen participants – countable on a panel on the right-hand side of the screen, and within the yurt marked by small circular avatars – waited in silence. One of the session’s facilitators, joked, “God, it’s like before a Clubhouse starts.” One attendee dropped an image of *bes barmak* – a traditional dish made of boiled meat, thick noodles, and onions– into the yurt, taking advantage of the customization features of Spatial Chat. In minutes, the yurt was adorned with .PNGs of food platters and Fanta bottles, and GIFs of belly dancers and steaming tea. While we were decorating the space, one of the FemAgora organizers solved whatever tech problem had been holding up the session. At 5:18/13:18, A began by explaining that she wanted “to talk about serious things during the workshop,” a wry nod to the fact that memes are seen as silly and frivolous, but they are vehicles for political communication and engagement. The facilitators took turns presenting a PowerPoint with slides constructed with Word Art and flashy clipart.

Two early slides gave an English-language definition of “meme,” explaining the portmanteau coined by Richard Dawkins. A slide with a yellow heart labeled with “Meme as an Instrument” in chunky ombre Word Art laid out the facilitators’ political theorization of memes. According to the facilitators, memes serve at least five purposes: “promoting certain views, telling about your feelings and worries, satire, education, and the creation and maintenance of feelings of community (*obshchnost*).” While going over this slide, one facilitator said, “When people see memes about elections, they feel, ‘Wow I’m not alone,’ and realize that others see the unfairness

²¹⁴ Colleen Wood, “Central Asia’s FemAgora Embraces Cyberfeminism,” *The Diplomat*, 18 October 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/central-asias-femagora-festival-embraces-cyberfeminism/>

also.” She described how memes can be thought of as “folk art” (*narodnoe tvorchestvo*) that “future historians will be able to read into the social and political problems through memes, like we read ancient records (*letopisi*).” She assured the participants that memes are not just for historical theorizing, but for contemporary political consciousness. “Not everyone has access to education, but everyone can participate in memes.”

Another slide introduced the concept of going viral, with an image of a blue body holding up a hand to resist green viruses that have been labeled with simple text boxes. The facilitators talked through three features to get a meme to go viral. A creator should think about accessibility (*dostupnost'*) and whether there is an audience for memes on the platform they're posting to. They also need to consider shareability (*delimost'*) across platforms; being able to repost to stories or send via Telegram to friends can affect whether a meme will go viral, and whether the creator will be credited for their work. Finally, a creator should think about relatability (*uznavaemost'*), and whether their meme is in line with current aesthetic trends. The facilitators suggested the need to keep up with “trends” and the “zeitgeist.”

One of the facilitators explained the importance of paying attention to the time of day when posting, because there is a certain “politics of social media” that makes some posts more successful than others. She did not mention platforms other than Facebook or specifically say the word algorithm, though that is how I understood the “politics of social media.” Success here, she explained, is measured in likes and views. Controversial posts “bring clicks, attention, and money” (*prinosyat kliki, vnimanie, den'gi*), she said. Posts where people react, write comments, and get into fights – those are the ones that get pushed to the top.

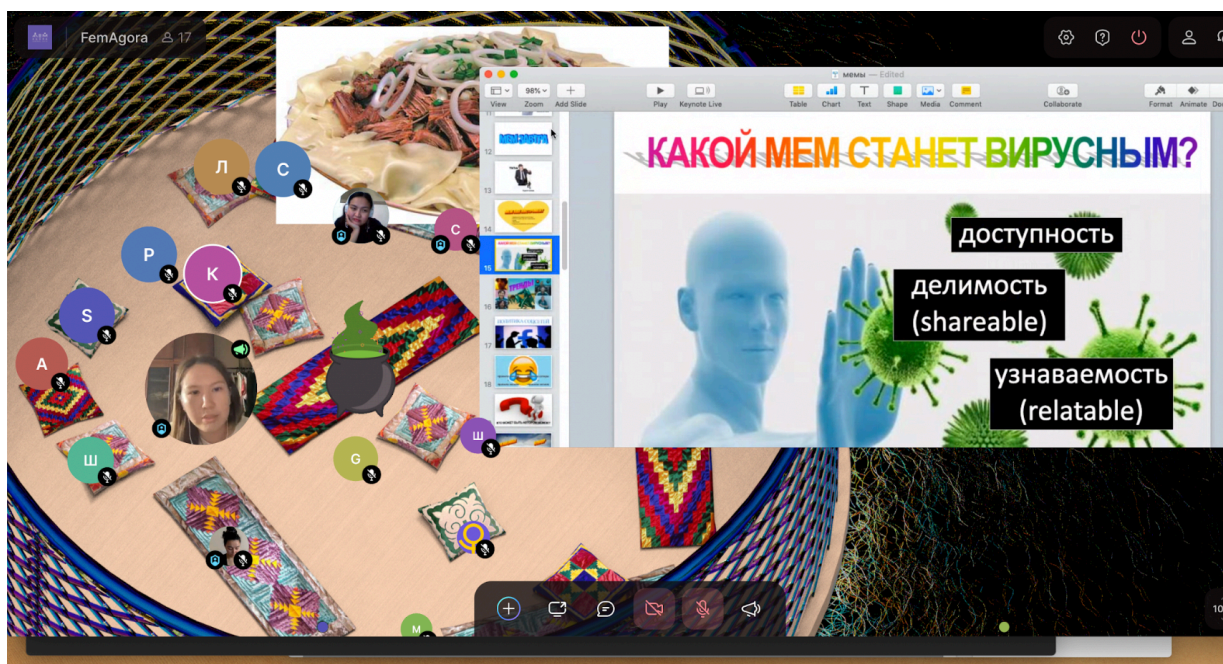


Figure 4.2 Screenshot from the meme-making workshop organized by FemAgora and held on Spatial Chat on October 18, 2021

About an hour in, the time came to move from theory to practice. The moderators talked through a list of apps and websites used for making memes, including image-editing programs and an English-language meme library that presents etymology and broad interpretations of base images. Before setting us loose to make our own memes, the moderators ask whether the participants have any questions. It was quiet for several seconds, and no one typed anything in the chat. I decided to speak, although I was uncomfortable – not because I’m afraid the moderators would not understand me, but because of a sense that by participating in this feminist festival made by and for Central Asians I should not take up space. I asked for advice on how to make a meme about the experience of being a foreign woman in Kyrgyzstan whom taxi drivers ask with overtones of national pride and undertones of aggression whether “I have heard of our national tradition, *ala-kachuu*?” referring to the practice of kidnapping women and forcing them into marriage. I saw one of the facilitators nod in her avatar bubble, and she said that Kazakh women from Almaty and Astana who travel to more rural areas of the country get asked this same question.

While she was talking, the other facilitator dropped a meme into the yurt. I was shocked at the speed at which she selected a base image and came up with witty text; she captioned an image of a young man who is straining so intensely that the veins in his forehead are visible: “When you’re a taxi driver and really want to ask whether your passenger is married.”²¹⁵

With an example of what we can make and how one question can generate different styles of memes, the participants relaxed into our meme-making task. Over the next hour and a half, we listened to music A curated as a YouTube playlist – mostly “toi” music that is common at weddings, shared in a link on the chat – while we made memes and dropped them into the room. Some of the memes were meta, joking about being bad at making memes, and others made sense of queerness and gender socialization. I made two memes that I opted to share in the yurt. The first built on a widely-used image of an excavator digging out the shoreline of the Suez Canal while the *Ever Given*, a 440-million-pound container ship that blocked the canal for a week, towers above it to poke fun at my experience as a Peace Corps volunteer trying to grapple with the agency’s historical role in American imperialism.²¹⁶ My second meme was more playful, and drew on the “kombucha girl” base image to show a foreigner’s journey in learning to love *kymys*, fermented mare’s milk prepared in animal-hide containers. In the last 10 minutes of the session, participants discussed their contributions to the yurt, and the chat box was flooded with Russian-language compliments and expressions of gratitude to the moderators. I logged out of SpatialChat after taking one last screenshot of the space.

²¹⁵ “Trying to Hold a Fart Next to a Cute Girl in Class,” *Know Your Meme*, last updated 2021, accessed online <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/trying-to-hold-a-fart-next-to-a-cute-girl-in-class>.

²¹⁶ Anna Schaverien, “Why the internet loves the Suez Canal stuck ship saga,” *The New York Times*, 27 March 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/27/world/suez-canal-stuck-ship-memes.html>

Memes and Virality

My primary takeaway from attending the workshop was that I am not made out for the “memelord” life. But it also provided insight to how meme-makers are thinking about their political subjectivity online. Indeed, memes may be the ultimate palimpsest,²¹⁷ but here I focus on the workshop’s emphasis on virality and consider the goal of going viral within the ecosystem of meme accounts in Kazakhstan.

I was struck by the literalness of the workshop’s explanation of virality, given that we were convening on Spatial Chat due to the covid-19 pandemic. The slide that explained going viral featured a blue body holding a hand to resist green viruses; perhaps the visual representation of the hand trying to *stop* the virus was a nod to censorship or bots. Against these pressures, meme makers take advantage of platform algorithms to get more engagement and share their ideas. The workshop facilitators argued that accessibility, shareability, and relatability are the three features of a potentially viral post.

Memes are more accessible when they’re shared on certain platforms. @Qonandoyle explained how he migrated to Instagram from Twitter, where he used to post threads about history that got low engagement. At the time he moved to Instagram and started making memes, there was already an “industry of political trolling,” but he carved out a sizable following among other big accounts.²¹⁸ In an interview with *The Village* for their regular series “Who’s Making Viral Memes,” @ShalMustBGone acknowledges that their following is not as massive as mainstream

²¹⁷ Memes are digital objects that are “appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the internet infrastructures they came from” (Nooney and Portwood Stacer, 2014: 249; cited in Dean 2019 258). The meme libraries pointed out to us by the moderators categorize base images and present their “genealogy,” explaining the source image and examples of how they have been bent, scribbled over, and layered to make locally specific commentary.

²¹⁸ Isatai Minuarov, “Abay QonanDoyle: “Memy – khoroshii instrument v bor’be s mrakobesiem [Abay QonanDoyle: Memes are a good instrument in the fight with obscurantism], *HOLA News*, 15 March 2021, <https://holanews.kz/news/107863/?amp=1>

influencers; “27 thousand followers isn’t so many, there are millions of people [on Instagram] in Kazakhstan.”²¹⁹ Even with relatively small follower counts, the most popular posts can reach upwards of 350 thousand views. Not every post travels that widely, but virality is useful because it grows an audience, which in turn increases the chance of further viral posts.

People share memes they find relatable. @alpystogyz recalled her most popular meme not having much of a political bent. “I don’t really like it, that type of meme that’s the easiest to execute.” Her favorites are those that “not everyone gets. It’s like, insider humor amongst us leftist-fat femmes who support LGBT.”²²⁰ Kazakh language and culture constitute another element of “insider” humor; @Qonandoyle recounts that “people like memes about our mentality, they’re always relevant.”

There is a growing audience for political content, however, and meme makers see their work as having an educational bent. While posts described in the paragraph above don’t address the government directly, political memes are the most shared and liked posts. The moderators recognized the multiplicity of memes’ expressive potential, with a bullet of five ways to use memes, ranging from personal expression to political education to building a sense of community. Memes are meant to be funny, inviting analysis of laughter as political sentiment (Särmä 2016). “Comedy and the laughter it provokes do important ideological work, sometimes shoring up political conventions, sometimes offering important challenges to them, and sometimes doing both at once” (Wedeen 2013). The moderators were acutely aware of the value of viral posts, and they

²¹⁹ “Smeyat’sya i kritikovat’: Zachem nuzhny memy Shalmustbgone [Laugh and criticize: Why Shalmustbgone’s memes are needed]”, *The Village KZ*, 26 January 2022, <https://www.the-village-kz.com/village/weekend/best-of-web/20985-smeyatsya-i-kritikovat-zachem-nuzhny-memy-shalmustbgone>.

²²⁰ “Alpystogyz: Kto sozdaet virusnye memy o kazakhstantsakh? [Alpystogyz: Who makes viral memes about Kazakhstanis?]” *The Village KZ*, 29 October 2019, <https://www.the-village-kz.com/village/weekend/best-of-web/8111-meme-review>. @alpystogyz has since deleted all posts from her account, though screenshots of her memes circulate on Reddit and Instagram.

presented memes as a way to both present their own views and inform others' political views. A's explanation of memes as a tool to build speaks to the mechanism of tipping points and preference falsification explained by Kuran (1991). Citizens of a totalitarian state might see one person protesting in the central square and agree with the sentiment on her placard, but be afraid to join her. However, if enough people take to the streets, they send a strong message about widespread dissatisfaction with the political status quo. In an interview with Kazakhstani online magazine *The Village* for their regular series "Who's Making Viral Memes?" @ShalMustBGone explained, "The goal is the desacralization of those in power. You can laugh at them, but above all you can criticize them. ... Recent events in our country have awakened people's interest in public administration, the structure of government, and how our taxes are spent."²²¹

Scholarship has examined the processes by which memes oppose dominant state discourses and shape political narratives (Denisova 2019; Mina 2014, 2019; Pearce and Hajizada 2014). Mina (2014) makes the important point that not all memes "cross the red lines" of what is politically and socially appropriate. This caveat is illustrated by Moreno-Almeida (2020), who studies memes in Morocco to argue that digital amateur activists may not engage in explicitly political activism but who are nonetheless political through creating and distributing memes. The memes that she analyzes criticize the absolute power of Moroccan monarchy without using the language of dissent (2020: 14). In Kazakhstan, memes have traditionally been safe spaces to talk about "no go" topics, and there is a regular stream of Instagram, Telegram, TikTok, and Reddit posts that critique corruption, the Nazarbayev family, and the state of politics in Kazakhstan. @QonanDoyle argued, "it would be foolish to prosecute someone for harmless jokes" and distanced himself from

²²¹ "Smeyat'sya i kritikovat'," *The Village KZ*.

substantive challenges to the regime. “I show what everyone knows. I just do it in a catchy way, by turning the truth into a joke.”

However, there risks with turning the truth into jokes. In May 2021, Temirlan Ensebek, a 25-year-old who opened a satirical Instagram account, was investigated for “disseminating knowingly false information.” Ensebek had already closed the Instagram page following pressure from authorities, but authorities pushed on the criminal investigation, which could lead to three years in prison. Local civil society organizations and media outlets distributed an appeal to Kazakhstan’s internal affairs minister and coordinated for Ensebek to be the first Kazakhstani “hero” of a letter-writing campaign led by Amnesty International.²²² Choosing Ensebek as the focus of the letter-writing campaign was intentional, because his story would resonate with a wide audience.²²³ Campaign organizers leaned into virality and visibility as a protective mechanism. Although as of June 2022, the criminal investigation is still open, Yesenbek reopened his account on May 25 and announced, “I still face jail and I still believe in article 20 of the constitution, which guarantees me freedom of creativity without censorship, so I decided to continue my humorous satirical blog, because it does not violate any article of the criminal or administrative code.”²²⁴ He has not shied away from touchy subjects, evidenced by a post mocking Nazarbayev and the constitutional referendum held on June 5, 2022.²²⁵

²²² Ol’ga Loginova, “Temirlan Ensebek stal pervym kazakhstanskim geroem aktsii “Marafon Pisem” Amnesty International [Temirlan Ensebek became the first Kazakhstani hero of Amnesty International’s “Marathon of Letters” campaign], 4 November 2021, <https://vlast.kz/novosti/47338-temirlan-ensebek-stal-pervym-kazahstanskim-geroem-akcii-marafon-pisem-amnesty-international.html>

²²³ “Pochemu imenno Temirlan Ensebek stal geroem marafona Amnesty International ot Kazakhstana? [Why did Temirlan Ensebek become a hero of an Amnesty International campaign?]", *Molodyozhnaya Informatsionnaya Sluzhba Kazakhstana*, 25 November 2021, <https://misk.org.kz/ru/events/755cd676-7e78-4079-b3c8-348ee98c7324/>

²²⁴ @qaznews24, *Instagram*, 25 May 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cd-ja7pK4LD/>

²²⁵ @qaznews24, *Instagram*, 6 June 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ced4LrbtPJ9/>

Given the threat of repression illustrated by the case against Temirlan Ensebek, it may not be surprising that many of the creators behind meme accounts remain anonymous. However, in interviews with The Village, they explain that this is not out of fear of persecution for political commentary. Rather, meme makers say they prefer anonymity to boost their legitimacy. “Even if I didn’t make political memes, but just trolling stuff, people would judge me through the prism of my background in civil service. Like, that dude was a civil servant, and now he makes memes. It’s not at all because I’m afraid to reveal my name.”²²⁶

The Revolution Will be Hashtagged

Two days after Nursultan Nazarbayev announced his resignation in March 2019, the country celebrated Nauryz – Farsi for “new day,” it is a holiday celebrated on the vernal equinox throughout Eurasia. But the crowds in Kazakhstan’s largest cities were not only gathering to celebrate spring, but also to protest the planned transition of power. In an Instagram video, one young woman filmed herself walking through the crowds saying sternly, “Dariga is not my Speaker, Tokayev is not my President, Nur-Sultan is not my city! I have a choice!” The phrase “I have a choice” reappeared a month later, in a demonstration at the Almaty Marathon on April 21. A group of artist-activists unfurled a simple banner with the phrase “You cannot run from the truth” (*Ot Pravdy Ne Ubezhist*) in hand-painted blue letters. Below, in smaller writing, the banner featured two hashtags: #AdilSailayUshin (#ForFairElections) and #УМеняЕстьВыбор (#IHaveAChoice). Photos of the banner – taken from a distance, including dozens of runners speeding past in the shot – spread quickly across social media platforms; the hashtags provided by the banner united the pictures and commentary. It took only a few hours for a thousand posts linked

²²⁶ Minuarov, “Abay QonanDoyle.”

to these hashtags and for police to arrest the two activists who carried the banner, Asya Tulesova and Beibarys Tolymbekov.



Figure 4.3: Photograph of the “You Can’t Run from the Truth” action, Vlast (2019)

Tulesova and Tolymbekov’s banner inspired a wave of independent actions across Kazakhstan, each building on the last. On May 6, blogger Aslan Sagutdinov carried a blank placard to the main square in his hometown Uralsk, a city on the border with Russia in far western Kazakhstan. “I’m not taking part in a protest,” 24-year-old Sagutdinov told reporters. “I want to show that they’ll still take me down to the station, even though there’s nothing written on my placard, and I’m not shouting any slogans.” After standing with his blank poster for only a few minutes, a group of police officers approached him and escorted him to the police station. Sagutdinov was released later that day because the police could not decide what to charge him with. Activist Zhanbota Alzhanova posted a photo to Facebook on May 6 in which she and a friend

parodied Sagutdinov's arrest by pretending to hold up an invisible poster. Astana police took her into custody on May 9.²²⁷

On May 27, actor Anuar Nurpeisov posted a video to Instagram that begins with a blank screen displaying only #menoyandym, #iwokeup in Kazakh. The video features Nurpeisov and other young artist-activists explaining in Russian and Kazakh what type of country they “woke up” in: Nurpeisov begins by referencing the overnight change of the capital's name without any consultation with citizens, others mention the lack of freedom of speech, distrust of elections, internet blackouts, and corrupt courts. Oyan as a hashtag and later as a protest movement draws on historical figures and texts: the phrase comes from a 1909 poem by Mirjaip Dulatuli called “Oyan! Qazaq” that calls for Kazakhs to “open your eyes! Wake up, Kazakh! Get up! / Stop living in darkness and ignorance. / Land is gone, losing faith, our condition significantly worse / Oh beloved Kazakhs, we can no longer lie idle.” In addition to writing poetry, Dulatuli was a leader of the Kazakh nationalist movement that emerged at the end of the Russian Empire; he had a prominent role in the Alash Orda government that strove for Kazakh autonomy under the Mensheviks. Although elites that were in the Alash Orda participated in local government of the autonomous socialist republic established by the Bolsheviks, many were arrested on nationalism charges under Stalin. After independence, the Nazarbayev regime incorporated symbols from Alash Orda and the many texts its leaders produced into its nation-building project. That “Oyan! Qazaq” has inspired a social movement calling for the end of autocracy in Kazakhstan may seem ironic, but it speaks to the competition for symbolic capital.

²²⁷ Aidai Irgebayeva, “V Kazakhstane zaderzhali aktivistku, kotoraya podderzhivala uchastnikov mitingov za chestnye prezidentskie vybory [In Kazakhstan, an activist who supported participants of protests for fair presidential elections was arrested],” *Kloop*, 10 May 2019, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2019/05/10/v-kazahstane-zaderzhali-aktivistku-sdelavshuyu-foto-s-voobrazhaemym-plakatom/>.

Whereas the regime took a repressive approach to picketers by arresting them for light hooliganism and standing in public with a blank sign, they tried a cooptive tack in response to the #menoyandym video. It did not take long for a mirror video to emerge, reflecting a very different tone. Those featured in the second video borrow the language of the Nurpeisov's clip but focus on more positive — if not completely banal — elements of social and political life in Kazakhstan. "I wake up in a country to the sound of bird songs, not to the sound of explosions," says the first woman to appear in the video. "I wake up in a country where every one of us can get an education for free," says another. After mentioning the Bolashak education exchange program and Kazakhstan's very strong security forces, those in this alternate universe video also call on viewers to emerge from their slumber. The condescending undertones are impossible to miss: "Just wake up and don't forget to say thank you," one young woman says. Another sneers, "Just wake up and grow up!"²²⁸

On May 29, 2019, a statue of Viktor Tsoi – the lead singer of Soviet rock band Kino whose perestroika-era songs called for reform – was given a placard reading "PEREMEN" (CHANGE in Russian) and #QAZAQkoktemi.²²⁹ #QAZAQkoktemi means #KAZAKHspring, signaling a nod to the Arab Spring. Over the next three years, art installations continued to be tagged with the hashtag #qazaqkoktemi. After snap presidential elections on June 6, a 5x7 meter sheet was dropped from an empty building in an outer neighborhood of Almaty; it featured a painting of Tokayev, whose mouth was covered with a piece of tape reading NEMOJ. Nemoj means "mute," but is also

²²⁸ @CurrentTimeAsia, *Twitter*, 28 May 2019, <https://twitter.com/CurrentTimeAsia/status/1133364512101478400>.

²²⁹ The phrase references Kino's song "My zhdem peremen [We want change]" that has been an iconic tune for political opposition and reform campaigns across the Soviet Union for the last 30 years. Lev Gankine translated by Kevin Rothrock, "How Viktor Tsoi's most famous song became the post-Soviet world's protest anthem, against the rock legend's own wishes," 21 June 2017, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2017/06/21/how-viktor-tsoi-s-most-famous-song-became-the-post-soviet-world-s-protest-anthem-against-the-rock-legend-s-own-wishes>.

a play on words of *ne moj*, suggesting “not my president.” On December 1, 2019, in honor of the national holiday Day of the First President, #qazaqkoktemi hung a 5x3 meter banner reading “El basy**nan** shiridi.” The phrase is ostensibly a famous idiom, meaning “A fish rots from the head,” and has been used in performance art and protest placards to criticize corruption among Kazakhstan’s elite. By highlighting **nan** in a different color, #QAZAQkoktemi adds another layer to the criticism of Nazarbayev, whose initials are N.A.N. and who was bestowed with the title *elbasy*, head of the nation, in 2010. Qazaqkoktemi celebrated Day of the First President in 2020 with another banner that calculated the cost of renaming Astana at 47.3 billion tenge and added the hashtag #CANCELe**lbasy**. This hashtag reappeared in the graffiti battle described at the beginning of the chapter.

The shed at the intersection of Zharokova and Mynbaeva where the iterations of Nazarbayev’s Forever Young portrait were vandalized and whitewashed was used again in June 2022 for Qazaqkoktemi’s street art. The artists had affixed a portrait of four-year-old Aikörkem Meldekhan, one of the victims of state-sponsored violence in the January events. To Aikörkem’s right, the artists spraypainted “Qai agha maghan oq atqan?” (“Which of you shot me, uncles?”) and #qandyqantar (#BloodyJanuary). Within hours, a city employee had ripped down the wheatpaste image of Aikörkem and painted over the tags.²³⁰ But the spirit of Qazaqkoktemi’s action was replicated on ballots cast in a constitutional referendum on June 5. In anticipation of vote manipulation, hundreds of people uploaded photos of their spoiled ballot to social media; ballots I saw that had been posted to Instagram stories had been “spoiled” with references to hashtags #AdilSailayUshin and #qandyqantar, with demands for a parliamentary republic and an independent investigation of the scale of state-sponsored violence in the January protests.

²³⁰ @tilkespekjoq, *Instagram*, 2 June 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CeV4TqFoFHE/>

#Qazaqkoktemi as Palimpsest

As an artifact, palimpsest refers to parchment that has been scraped off and rewritten; as a metaphor, it depicts an open-ended historical process in which different authors vie for discursive control. In an authoritarian setting, in which the state has tilted the playing field to prop up the regime – state TV, censorship of social media channels, swift shuffling away of protesters in public squares – this is an uphill battle for dissent. As I traced above, the sites and material of palimpsest in Kazakhstan range from ballots and government officials’ social media pages to overpasses and courtrooms. The graffiti battle on the wall of a shed at the intersection of Zharokova and Mynbaeva combines both literal and metaphorical dimensions of palimpsest, as qazaqkoktemi artists vandalize and ornament state-sponsored pro-regime murals to critique Nazarbayev and the violence of the January events. These artists know that their subversive graffiti will be whitewashed within hours, but photographs of the tag have a life of their own online, reflecting the processes of pixelization (and potentially virality). Indeed, as Kendzior argued about photographs of protest, images can be more significant to dissident diasporas than the embodied protest itself, because they evoke an affective response for those in diverse geographical locations (2011: 570).

The reclamation of symbols that had prior been in the state’s hands for a post-colonial nationalizing project is a crucial component of palimpsest. For example, the campaign for Tulesova and Tolymbekov’s release drew on historical figures and the analogy of Soviet repression. May 1 marked the birthday of Kazakh poet Ilyas Jansúgirov. In honor of what would have been his 125th birthday, activists associated with Trebue Reformu MVD uploaded a trilingual post linking Jansúgirov’s state-sponsored murder and repression that Asya Tulesova – Jansúgirov’s great-granddaughter – faced with Beibarys Tolumbekov for their You Can’t Run from

the Truth action. The hashtags Tulesova and Tolumbekov made famous in April 2019 have persisted through presidential and parliamentary elections and a constitutional referendum.

Sewing a Hashtag Quilt

For a week straight in August 2020, Almaty judges, a slate of cops-cum-witnesses, and lawyers logged into Zoom to hear criminal proceedings against activist Asya Tulesova. Tulesova – who has been politically and civically active in Almaty since 2015 – was arrested in June for “insulting a police officer” and “violence against the police,” charges for which she faced three years in prison.²³¹ Four of her friends organized Protest Körpe, a social media campaign to draw attention to Tulesova’s detention and to advocate for her release.

The campaign’s name comes from the Kazakh word for quilt, *quraq körpe*. In an early Instagram post, the four organizers of the campaign wrote, “Like a *quraq körpe*, civic activism and protection of our rights depend on the voices and contributions of each of us.”²³² Protest Körpe invited users to create virtual quilt squares with slogans about Tulesova and the freedom of assembly in Kazakhstan. The website, which Instagram users could access through a link in the account’s bio, invites users to customize their körpe with 10 designs and 38 preset slogans.²³³ The site invites visitors to upload their körpe to Instagram with 5 hashtags, leveraging Instagram’s hashtag feature to create a newsfeed quilt of sorts. The hashtag #ProtestKorpe has 467 tagged posts, 167 of which are quilt squares.

²³¹ Aliya Uteuova, “Kazakh activist faces three years for insulting police,” *Eurasianet*, 1 July 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakh-activist-faces-three-years-for-insulting-police>

²³² @protestkor.pe, *Instagram*, 29 June 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCAbQ2NB6L6/>

²³³ There are 13 English phrases, 13 Russian, and 12 Kazakh ones. They are not perfect translations between languages. For example, none of the English slogans mention the akimat like the Russian and Kazakh ones do. Strikingly, one of the unique English-language slogans is “Get your knees off our necks,” a phrase that Reverend Al Sharpton used to describe the wave of protests across the United States after Minneapolis police officers murdered George Floyd.

In addition to the hashtag quilt, the Protest Körpe organizers coordinated more than 500 appeals to Kazakhstani authorities on behalf of Tulesova. From July 27 to August 1, they coordinated 500 appeals via three of the government’s “pressure mechanisms.” The organizers consulted Google as well as local lawyers and human rights activists to identify the most powerful institutions; they explained to me, “Who in our country – even just on paper – should be defending our rights? Who do we have the right to contact?” The organizers decided on Kazakhstan’s Human Rights Commissioner, the city court, and the president and wrote detailed instructions on how citizens could submit appeals to all three bodies. Instructions to contact the Human Rights Commissioner included her phone number, email address, and a link to the post’s official Facebook page. Organizers also directed citizens to the Almaty City Court Facebook page with instructions on what to comment. Tactics to reach the president Tokayev were more varied. Two organizers formally submitted an appeal based on a petition signed by 4,000 people.²³⁴ The instruction post also asks citizens to send an appeal via eGovernment and to tag the president on Twitter and Instagram with the hopes of getting his attention.²³⁵

On August 5, 2020, as directed by a link on Protest Körpe’s Instagram account, more than 600 people tuned in via Zoom, Facebook Live, Instagram and a text broadcast to observe the court proceedings – far more than could have fit in the Medeu district courthouse.²³⁶ Visitors changed

²³⁴ “Obrashchenie k Tokayevu ot grazhdanskikh organizatsij po Asye Tulesove [Appeal to Tokayev from civic organizations about Asya Tulesova], *Pana Coalition on Safety and Protection of Rights Defenders*, 4 July 2020, https://pana-defenders.info/petitions/asya_tulesova2020/?fbclid=IwAR3i5ZxrYVUVwPsZ_ZFe61iBANy_oq_ISKrutlS1_V0cnZ0jb5GS_-JvSyM

²³⁵ “Virtual Waiting Room of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan,” 2019, <http://vqb.gov.kz/ru/site/instruction>. While the feature for a “virtual appointment” on Tokayev’s website might be criticized as nothing more than window dressing, research has shown that Kazakhstan’s e-governance is more than just a tool for international legitimacy (Maerz 2016).

²³⁶ @protestkor.pe, *Instagram*, 5 August 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDh6XEXHnXo>. On August 6, the judge banned civil society observers from attending the trial, but activists managed to stream the trial anyway.

their Zoom avatar to the *quraq körpe* templates, leading to a quilt of solidarity on the video conference gallery. Meanwhile, at the physical courthouse, a crowd of 20 chanted for Tulesova's release on the building's steps. Some carried placards with the messages from the website's template, but others held quilted pillowcases and pieces of paper designed to mimic the patterns of traditional Kazakh quilting.²³⁷

Ultimately, the court found Tulesova guilty of insulting a police officer; in addition to ordering her to pay a fine amounting to \$100USD, the judge sentenced her to 18 months of "freedom limitation – a sentence with parole-like restrictions."²³⁸ Tulesova tried to appeal the case, but the Judicial Board did not find any arguments to satisfy the appeal.²³⁹ The Protest Körpe account is still up, but there have been no new posts since Tulesova's appeal hearing in late September 2020. I turn to describe how this campaign exemplifies the metaphor of pixelization to understand the driving mechanism of visibility present in this case.

Pixelization and Protest Körpe

The *quraq körpe* is a traditional Kazakh quilt, made with blocks of vibrant silks and patterned cotton. Quilting is an apt metaphor for collective action, and they have served as collective memorials and as a genre of political communication across time and geographic contexts. The organizers pointed to Aram Han Sifuentes's quilted protest banners and the AIDS Memorial Quilt as inspiration. These quilts are just two examples in a broad body of scholarship that analyzes crafting as collective action and political communication. It is relevant that quilting

²³⁷ @ruk2k19, *Instagram*, 3 August 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDauEt2nZ70>.

²³⁸ "Kazakh Court Convicts Activist Charged with Assaulting Police," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 12 August 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-court-convicts-activist-charged-with-assaulting-police/30779401.html>.

²³⁹ "Sudebnaya kollegiya ostavila bez izmenenij prigovor Asi Tulesovoj [The Judicial board upheld the sentence of Asya Tulesova]" *informburo.kz*, 29 September 2020, <https://informburo.kz/novosti/sudebnaya-kollegiya-ostavila-bez-izmeneniy-prigovor-ase-tulesovoy-111899.html>

and crafting are traditionally understood as domestic, feminine artforms rather than political artifacts (Williams 1994). But quilts should not be read in contrast to “traditional” modes of protest, but rather as processes within a repertoire for groups that are denied access to confrontative, public, or ostentatious spaces to communicate grievances – whether because they are denied access on account of their race, gender, or country of origin, because it is physically dangerous to protest, or because there is an absence of bodies to fill a crowd. For example, the Tribute to the Disappeared Virtual Memorial Quilt drew attention to forty-three students who disappeared in southwestern Mexico (Mallonee 2015). Rohingya refugees collaborated on a quilt as a way to process trauma while preserving a record of the horrors they experienced in Myanmar (Asia Justice and Rights 2022). The African American Quilters of Baltimore have worked for years to build the Monument Quilt, stitching stories of rape and abuse onto red fabric (Witmyer 2021). Each panel of the AIDS quilt represents a person who died because of the epidemic; the scale of death meant that there was no crowd left that could demand mourning or material support (Gambardella 2011: 223-226).

Quilting is an especially productive tactic in contexts where mass gatherings – the traditional way political scientists think about successful social movements – are impossible. Quilt squares are less threatening than protest signs, and when sewn together, they carry a powerful message. This is an example of atomized collective action, in which activists pursue mobilizational strategies that look like individual action – such as Fu’s work on labor organizing in China (2017), or Fitzpatrick’s research on petition-writing in the Soviet Union (1996) – but can encourage reform when taken in aggregate. Indeed, as Scott argues in *Weapons of the Weak*, while single acts of footdragging may be empowering for the individual but are unlikely to change systems, the accumulation of minute resistance can force a response from elites.

Protest Körper is more than just atomized collective action, it is specifically pixelated. Each post in the hashtag quilt can be thought of as a pixel, that, when taken together, creates a powerful image of solidarity. The cultural artifact that inspired the digital campaign was again translated into the physical world with demonstrators carrying hand drawn quilts to the Almaty courthouse. Meanwhile, hundreds of people who could not attend in person – whether due to distance or the COVID-19 pandemic – were able to observe the trial via livestream. The diffuse but intense outpouring of support for Tulesova did not cross into viral territory, as @protest_korpe has about 500 followers and its most-liked post before Tulesova was freed had 288 likes. Even so, the campaign does effectively illustrate one mechanism of visibility, specifically how multiple modalities interact to serve broader social and political goals.

Discussion: Making Use of the Metaphors of Visibility

The politics of sight and visibility reflect state power. In the study of collective action in repressive contexts, scholars have taken up Scott’s phrase “hidden transcripts” to characterize the need to resist state power in secret. However, activists often seek out visibility. In this chapter, I sought to understand why. What makes visibility an attractive strategy, and how do civil society actors understand the costs and benefits of visibility?

In this chapter, I advance a theory of visibility that breaks the concept down into three metaphors – virality, palimpsest, and pixelization – that civil society actors can leverage to be seen. This triad challenges the neat conceptual cleave of public/private, visible/invisible, and repression/acquiescence. To illustrate how these metaphors work in practice, I presented three case studies: a virtual workshop on making memes, the distribution of images of performance art and graffiti on social media, and an Instagram campaign advocating for the release of a political prisoner.

Kazakhstani meme accounts use humor and localized references to challenge state discourses. Controversial takes and awareness of how a platform's algorithm pushes posts help a meme reach many eyes, even if an account does not have a massive following. Art activists lean on palimpsest to make sure people see their graffiti after it is whitewashed by street cleaners. Photographs of graffiti, banners, and other protest art draw on contemporary phrases – “You can't run from the truth” – and historical symbols – poets and politicians who challenged Soviet rule – to make a discursive claim. The scope of activists' claim for free elections has shifted as authorities responded with violence to small protests and tried to co-opt the language of resistance. The claim grew and morphed through layered images of protest events that circulated via hashtags Instagram stories. This bridge between material artifacts of protest and social media as a site of dissent reflects the third metaphor, pixelization. Protest *Körpe*'s campaign to sew a hashtag quilt made of square posts with traditional textile overlain with slogans in Kazakh, Russian, and English. Each post is a pixel that creates a powerful image of solidarity when viewed in aggregate. Organizers gathered with physical *körpes* at the courthouse where an activist stood trial, linking the Instagram quilt with a material artifact. Analysis of only the Instagram hashtag or the in-person protest would not provide a full explanation of this action, because this spatially diffuse political action was co-constituted across bodies and digital devices.

By differentiating between virality, palimpsest, and pixelization, scholars of social movements in repressive contexts will be better positioned to explain strategic choices and campaign success. What are the analytical consequences of quantifying success in the number of retweets or number of likes, when actors on the ground might see success in fighting for public space, as with the graffiti battle in the opening vignette? These metaphors could inform research

design and operationalization of variables on questions about the efficacy of outward-facing social media for activism and social movements.

Of course, not all activists desire or pursue these different logics of visibility. Political actors – whether elites or civil society actors – may leverage both visibility and invisibility for different reasons. For example, perpetrators of some politically motivated killings hide the bodies, while others purposefully distribute images of mutilation; invisibility and visibility can both be communicative strategies. Offstage communication – in private WhatsApp or Telegram group chats, for example – is key to political organizing, as Treré demonstrated in his study of activism in Mexico and Spain (2020). Beyond invisibility as a demonstration of ability to hide evidence, invisibility can be a tactic of nimbleness to avoid detection or repression. Further research that examines the conditions in which civil society actors pursue or avoid virality, palimpsest, or pixelization would advance our understanding of contentious politics. These conditions could be structural, such as features of telecommunications infrastructure, or focused on civil society actors themselves. When and why might virality be more desirable than pixelization for an NGO or protest movement? How does Russia’s sovereign internet or China’s firewall affect the potential of these metaphors? In the next chapter, I explore how differences in social media platforms’ features facilitate various logics of visibility and associational life more broadly.

Chapter 5: Platform Politics

On March 1, 2020, I was struggling to order a taxi in the stairwell of my apartment building in Almaty. *It must be that I left the wifi zone*, I thought. But on the street, the “Go” button on the Yandex app remained greyed out, perpetually loading. I started walking down the main road toward the city center and flagged a car down from the street. The driver was annoyed when I handed him a large bill; I explained I wasn’t expecting to pay in cash, but none of the apps were working to pay digitally. He shrugged, fumbling through his wallet to hand me change, and I got out of the car to meet my Kazakh tutor and her friend for tea. We had been chatting for a while when I checked my phone and mentioned that it hadn’t been working for several hours. “Oh, there’s a protest downtown today,²⁴⁰ cell service is down,” the friend said matter-of-factly. Even after I got on the cafe’s wifi, I couldn’t get Facebook or Instagram to load. I clicked through other apps on my phone, wondering the extent of the blocking. One of the only apps to work was 2GIS, a Russian app similar to Waze that allows for offline navigation and compiles user-generated notes about traffic jams and speed traps.²⁴¹ The map of Almaty was cluttered with location pins showing symbols of traffic lights outlined with red trim. The pins text boxes with popular protest slogans like “Kazakh spring!” and “Wake up, Kazakhs!”

With mainstream social media sites blocked, Almaty residents leveraged communicative features of an app that would not normally be considered interactive or political. The features of

²⁴⁰ I later learned the protest was to mourn the death of civic activist Dulat Agadil, who died in police custody. “Zaderzhaniya, otseplenie, perekrytie ulitsy. 1 marta v Kazakhstane [Detentions, kettling, and closed streets. 1 March in Kazakhstan]” *RadioAzattyq*, 1 March 2020, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-protests-1-march/30462260.html>.

²⁴¹ Not long after residents of Almaty turned to 2GIS to post slogans, Russians used a similar app Yandex.Navigator to tag themselves at government buildings and posted comments critical of the government’s COVID response. Jennifer Wilson, “In 500 feet, you will reach your demonstration,” *Rest of World*, 2 June 2020, <https://restofworld.org/2020/russia-satnav-digital-protests/>.

2GIS are much different than Instagram or Twitter, making for different levels of communicability and organizing potential. For example, while tweets are geocoded, the app does not map them. Although some 2GIS users were dropping pins with comments in the form of popular hashtags, the app does not support organizing conversations by hashtags as both Instagram and Twitter do. In this chapter, I ask: What differences exist between social media platforms, and how do civil society actors navigate these differences to pursue their advocacy goals?

The chapter is laid out as follows: I synthesize literature from digital studies and communications studies to explain the concept of “affordances,” which speaks to the relationships and actions made possible by a platform’s features. I consider how platforms’ affordances shape the possibility for mobilizing advocacy campaigns, and I contextualize the use of major social media platforms in Kazakhstan. With this background, I then describe a series of campaigns that took place on three different platforms. First, I introduce the YouTube channel of Atajurt Eriktileri, a group advocating on behalf of ethnic Kazakhs detained in Xinjiang, China. Second, I compare the Instagram feeds of three civil society organizations: an umbrella NGO affiliated with the state; an officially registered NGO that remains politically autonomous from the state; and one unregistered group that defines themselves as a civic movement. Third, I analyze a public Facebook group that campaigned for police reform following the murder of an Olympian figure skater. I conclude by describing the methodological and substantive implications for this research. The primary contribution of this chapter is an ontological one, insofar as I call for bridging big data with an ethnographic sensibility. Ethnographers’ attention to meaning making and thick description offer much-needed context for quantitative analysis on the consequences of social media for political outcomes.

Affordances as an Analytical Lens for Studying Social Media

As Dean (2019) has argued, research involving social media within the field of political science tends to be framed in consequentialist terms: “social media is interrogated not because it is seen as constitutive of politics, but because it is seen to impact upon politics” (257). This concern with the impact of the internet on outcomes like political beliefs and behavior has been studied in the context of voting (Ohme 2019; Beauchamp 2017), government capacity (Sandoval-Almazan, Kavanaugh, and Criado 2021), rebellion (Gohdes 2020), political polarization (Tucker et al., 2018; Barberá 2020), protest participation (Wojcieszak 2009), and politicians’ responsiveness (Bessone et al., 2019). The emphasis on outcomes has shaped the study of digital features of social mobilization as debate between cyber-pessimists and optimists. Optimists argue that social media enables offline collective organization by lowering the costs for organizing, sharing information, and participating in activism (Earl and Kimport 2011; Carr and Hayes 2015). Some have also argued that the internet can create new forms of resistance.²⁴² Cyber-pessimists have argued that any benefits to collective action are overstated (Morozov 2011) and that digital movements rarely translate into change that transpires through formal political institutions (Beissinger 2017).

One limitation of this debate about the efficacy of digital technologies is a tendency to treat social media as a monolith, an “umbrella concept or a specific medium seen as exemplary for all social media” (Voorveld et al., 2018). For example, in a 2017 article, Tucker et. al present a “simple theoretical framework” to explain the paradox that social media can facilitate

²⁴² There is a vast repertoire of virtual forms of resistance: Bonilla and Rosa (2015) and Casa and Webb Williams (2019) investigate hashtag campaigns in Ferguson and broader Black Lives Matter protests; Jackson and Welles (2015) study the hijacking of hashtags emanating from the state, specifically how activists spammed #myNYPD with messages calling to defund the police; Tiffany (2020) reported on how KPop fans spammed FBI channels to distract authorities from targeting Black Lives Matter protests in June 2020. Memes have been studied as a particular form political communication; see Chapter 6 for a review of the literature.

prodemocratic movements and also undermine democracy. They reference just two platforms – Twitter and Facebook – and do not account for how differences in the “technological architectures” of various social media could shape political behavior (Poell 2014).

These differences are meaningful insofar as platform-specific features make unique affordances, a term coined by Gibson (1977) that conveys the possible relationships and actions (Maddox 2021: 1121). Platforms are not neutral, and those designing platforms build algorithms to drive engagement and get users to spend time on their platform (Gillespie 2015). This calls for understanding how platforms push users toward certain types of practices and away from others (McVeigh-Schultz and Baym 2015). Affordances can shape discursive practices as well as political behavior. Scholarship has considered how genres of visual and written rhetoric are platform specific. Platforms’ unique affordances can affect users’ mobilizing capacity and campaigning goals (Rossini et al., 2018, Dollbaum 2020). For example, Božović et al. (2014) compare the tone of discourse around the trial of a Bosnian Serb general accused of war crimes, and they find varying invocations of “hero” versus “criminal” across Wikipedia, news blogs, and major social media platforms.

The dual functions of affordances – to shape practices of political action as well as discourse and rhetoric – calls for ethnographic interpretation to explain *how* political participation and social movement mobilization functions differently across platforms. This includes consideration of how online and offline actions alike shape a social movement or advocacy campaign and situating analysis in the cultural and sociopolitical context (Maddox 2021).²⁴³ I

²⁴³ Also see Holmes, Balnaves, and Wang’s 2015 article that analyzed the cultural features of the popular Chinese messaging app WeChat. The ability for users to send money to users in a “red envelope” facilitates culturally specific interactions.

adopt such an approach in this chapter, and in the next section I outline the affordances of four social media platforms in the Kazakhstani context.

Affordances of Apps in Kazakhstan

In this section, I investigate three social media platforms: YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. I opted to focus on Instagram, Youtube, and Facebook because of their widespread use in Kazakhstan (see Figure 5.1, with data from the 2019 wave of the Central Asia Barometer survey). Although Odnoklassniki and VKontakte are used more frequently than Facebook,²⁴⁴ I did not observe as much activity from civil society organizations I was following or communication between government officials and citizens as I did on Facebook. Government websites link to politicians and Ministries' accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and occasionally to their Telegram and YouTube channels, but never to Vkontakte pages (See Figure 5.1, a compilation of stills from the websites of the Almaty Akimat and the President's Official Website).

²⁴⁴ As Figure 5.1 shows, VKontakte use is driven by people aged 18-27. I suspect this is because of the platform allows users to listen to music and download pirated television and movies. See Kathryn Dowling, "VKontakte case puts Russian music piracy into spotlight," *BBC*, 11 August 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-28739602>

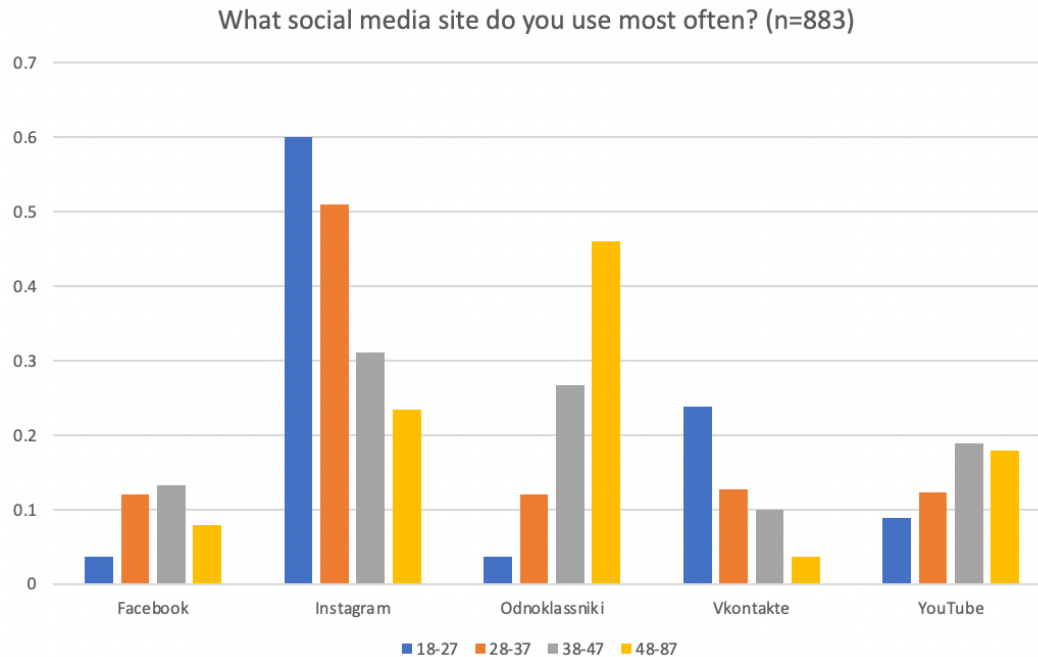


Figure 5.1: Survey data from Central Asia Barometer, 2019

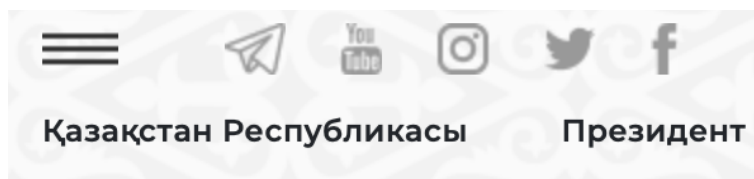


Figure 5.2: Header of the Official Website of the President of Kazakhstan, with icons for Telegram, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook (left to right)

YouTube

YouTube was not the first website developed to manage videos online, but it was unique in that the goal was for users to upload, share, and find videos (Soukup 2014). Burgess and Green (2009) describe YouTube as being in the “reach business,” with the site functioning both as a distributor of popular culture and as a space for bottom-up “vernacular creativity” (2009: 6). Despite the social element to the platform, ethnographic study of YouTube users has found that it encourages “privately public” behavior (Lange 2007). This means that content is widely accessible, but detailed information about the video producers’ and viewers’ or commenters’

identities is limited. Even with users able to interact with videos anonymously, digital studies scholars have argued that YouTube functions as a unique type of “archive” that combines algorithms and user-generated participation (Pietrobruno 2013).

Scholars in communications studies, digital studies, sociology, anthropology, and political science have explored a vast range of topics by looking at YouTube (see Arthurs, Drakopoulou, and Gandini 2018: 4 for an overview). A narrower body of literature has emerged that examines the use of YouTube specifically in the context of social movements and civic participation. This includes analysis of YouTube’s role in protest cycles and uprisings, such as the Arab Spring (Gerbaudo 2012); its role in facilitating democratic participation of rural and/or marginalized communities (Hahn 2016; Mohammed and Mohammed 2021); and the impact of “citizen journalism” on political beliefs and behavior (Allan and Thorsen 2014).

YouTube in Kazakhstan

Because YouTube encourages “privately public” behavior, it can be difficult to get a precise sense of how many Kazakhstanis use the app to produce and watch content. However, per the 2019 wave of the Central Asia Barometer, some 8.6 percent of respondents reported that YouTube was their most accessed social media site.²⁴⁵ While YouTube is largely a space for music videos and beauty influencers, YouTube has also emerged as a source of independent news and journalism in Kazakhstan.

In the last two decades, Kazakhstan’s leaders have tightened the screws on media outlets’ ability to report the news. In 2001, the government began requiring registration for mass media, and in 2005, outlets became vulnerable to audits with no warning from tax and law enforcement

²⁴⁵ Central Asia Barometer Data, Kazakhstan, Wave 5, 2019, available at <http://www.ca-barometer.org>. Central Asia Barometer only releases data two years after the completion of fieldwork.

agencies (Khashimov and Zhandayeva 2021). While these restrictions have starved the traditional media landscape, journalists and citizens with something to say have leveraged YouTube for discussing politics and launching journalistic investigations. Two of the most popular channels are “Za Nami Uzhe Vyekhali” (“They’re Coming After Us” in Russian), which has more than 315 thousand followers and almost 70 million views, and “Jurtyń Balasy” (“The People’s Son” in Kazakh) with 260 thousand followers and 25 million views. “Za Nami Uzhe Vyekhali” organizes their channel homepage by topic, with playlists for videos about corruption, local officials, the Eurasian Economic Union, and developments in Kazakhstan’s legal code. To give a sense of the channel’s popularity: a video uploaded on April 10, 2022, amassed 32 thousand views in 10 hours. Although the channel’s name is in Kazakh, “Jurtyń Balasy” publishes videos only in Russian; the site’s founder also manages a Kazakh-language version of “Jurtyń Balasy” with only 4,300 subscribers, demonstrating unequal access in alternative media for Kazakh speakers. Journalist Assem Zhapisheva founded “Til Kespek Zhok,”²⁴⁶ a Kazakh-language channel with the goal of filling the gap in critical political content across languages; since it was founded in late 2019, her channel has 95 thousand followers and 7.3 million views. Her most popular video, an investigation of former president Nazarbayev’s wealth, has 287 thousand views.²⁴⁷

Journalistic vlogging is quite popular in Kazakhstan, but other genres of YouTube channels communicate critical messages. The musical group Irina Kairatovna, made up of six members who previously performed together on a comedy show, gained an audience on YouTube with videos about booze and sex. Over time, they have shifted from muted political opinions to open criticism

²⁴⁶ The name comes from a Kazakh idiom, “Бас кеспек болса да, тіл кеспек жоқ” (*Bas kespek bolsa da, til kespek joq*), meaning “You can cut off the head, but you can’t cut off the tongue.”

²⁴⁷ Til Kespek Joq, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCk5jvk9fm_b72d77r1MhmdA/featured.

of the government and corruption (Zhanmukanova 2021).²⁴⁸ For example, their wildly popular video for the song “5000” has been watched 49 million times. The video mixes Kazakh and Russian lyrics and makes references to state violence and corruption spanning across Kazakhstan’s history. The tides turn when the crowd of those who were shot and punished push back against the men who harmed them, and the video ends with the corpses of men in suits laid out on a greyscale map of Kazakhstan.

Recognizing YouTube’s popularity among Kazakhstanis, the government set out to institutionalize social media production. Salem Social Media was founded in 2018, with the former press secretary of Nur Otan heading the organization. Per Kosnazarov (2019), “The agency has co-opted several successful projects and attracted very popular Instagram and YouTube celebrities to various shows, events, and video products. It now controls 8 major YouTube accounts with a total of 740,000 subscribers.” For example, Irina Kairatovna had been picked up by Salem, but they eventually parted ways because Salem pressured the group not to voice political views.²⁴⁹

Atajurt Eriktileri: Advocacy Campaign for Kazakhs in Xinjiang

I now turn to describe an advocacy project carried out on YouTube. The grassroots organization Atajurt Eriktileri (Kazakh for “Volunteers of the Fatherland”) has advocated for victims of human rights violations in Xinjiang since 2017. Since 2017, at least 1 million Turkic Muslims – mostly Uyghurs but also Kazakhs and Kyrgyz – have been detained in Xinjiang, China’s largest and westernmost province (Zenz 2019; Roberts 2018; Bunin 2019). The

²⁴⁸ Also see analysis by Alimana Zhanmukanova, “Irina Kairatovna and Political Art in Kazakhstan,” *Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs*, 3 June 2021, <https://oxussociety.org/irina-kairatovna-and-political-art-in-kazakhstan/>.

²⁴⁹ Kuanysh Beisekov explained that Irina Kairatovna signed an agreement with Salem Social Media that entailed handing over the channel “The Irina Kairatovna Show” («Шоу Ирины Кайратовны») and keep producing content. The group got frustrated by Salem’s demands for apolitical content only, and when they broke the contract, they lost their original channel. A transnational parallel is the Russian blogger collective “Thank you, Eva!” that was financed by Putin’s administrative office and had strong ties to the nationalist youth group Nashi. See ZonaKZ (2021).

obfuscation of data about the scope and purpose of mass detention has made it difficult to verify the egregious human rights abuses happening in Xinjiang. Atajurt relies heavily on digital messaging to organize and conduct its work. One key platform is WhatsApp, which is used for setting up meetings with people who are interested in recording testimony, and Facebook is used for small essays and livestreams, but YouTube is the cornerstone of Atajurt's advocacy. YouTube's technological architecture offers Atajurt several advantages over Instagram: it is difficult to upload videos to Instagram from a desktop, and Instagram limits videos to 60 seconds, which is far shorter than Atajurt's shortest videos.

Whenever I open Atajurt's YouTube channel, "ATAJURT KAZAKH HUMAN RIGHTS Serikzhan Bilash," I first rush to click "pause" on the embedded video featuring a young girl sobbing while saying she misses her family. As of April 2022, most of the videos featured in playlists automatically generated by YouTube – Recommendations and Popular Uploads – are between 10 months and 3 years old. I am familiar with the channel from earlier analysis, in which I scraped information for 5,739 videos uploaded between February 2018 and June 2019. 3,272 of these videos involve the presentation of an *aryz*, the Kazakh word for "petition" or "appeal" (Wood 2022). The appeal videos range from one-on-one interview testimonies, group testimonies filmed at conferences, and selfie videos submitted to Atajurt online. Across the appeal videos, testifiers use photographs of victims to assert the truthfulness of petitions and memorialize victims; emphasize the Kazakhstani citizenship of the person submitting an appeal (and occasionally the person detained in China); advance claims to multiple government bodies in Kazakhstan, as well as appeal to international organizations and media outlets to get the attention of Kazakhstani leaders; and multi-scale approach to claim-making; and "keep receipts" of documents to

demonstrate that they have gone through formal channels to communicate with Kazakhstani authorities.

Atajurt uses its channel to document the suffering of those whose loved ones have gone missing and to demonstrate that Kazakhstani citizens have gone through proper formal channels to request an intervention on behalf of the state. One thousand nine hundred twenty-seven of the videos are titled either as a number or a date, with no other identifying or searchable information. Many of the videos that are titled as a number use the preset title that comes from uploading a file from a camera memory card; these testimonies were conducted in bulk, suggesting that Atajurt volunteers prioritized getting the videos onto the internet rather than ensuring they would be seen or found by optimizing search engine results.

Table 5.1: Average number of views per testimony video

Language of video title	Number of testimony videos	Average number of views
Kazakh	962	2,942
Date	366	1,537
English	169	636
Number	1791	292
Other	50	1,416
Total	3272	1,246

Atajurt leverages its online presence to do more than just document a human rights tragedy that has been difficult to study systematically. The group also uses YouTube as an organizing tool. They advertise the group's services in assisting Kazakhstani citizens in submitting formal, printed petitions to the Kazakh government on behalf of detained family members in China.

Representatives show the range of documents and stamps needed to submit formal petitions to Kazakhstani authorities; this serves to coach viewers on how to complete the petition process themselves. For example, in one January 2019 video, the group's founder Serikzhan Bilash holds up a template of a letter to a group of testifiers and explains that someone making an appeal needs five facts: "Who are you? Who is the relative that's imprisoned in China? When did they disappear? Where did they disappear? What happened when they disappeared?" He then spends fifteen minutes walking an audience through the other questions on the form Atajurt created.²⁵⁰

Atajurt makes announcements (*jariyalau* in Kazakh) on its social media platforms to invite people to the office or to submit their own testimony videos. Additional, more subtle visual elements across petition videos guide viewers to Atajurt's office for further assistance. The backdrop for videos is a massive poster stretching from floor to ceiling that advertises Atajurt's logo and contact information. Interview-style testimonies filmed in front of this backdrop offer a way for viewers to get in touch with the organization if they themselves have questions or want to file a petition.

Uploads that are not testimonies – including these announcements and guides to filling out paperwork, as well as podcast-style recordings of conversations between Atajurt leaders about geopolitics and Kazakh culture – are more widely watched than testimonies. More than half of these videos are labeled in Kazakh, with each Kazakh-labeled video having an average of 16,174 views, which is higher about 6500 views more than the overall average views for non-testimonies.

²⁵⁰ "Tyn zhanalyk! Aryzdyn tyn ulgysyn toltiryndar [Breaking news! Fill out a new application form]," YouTube, January 12, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1qQkaT34K4&t=48s>.

Table 5.2: Average number of views per non-testimony video

Language of video title	Number of non-testimonies	Average number of views
Kazakh	1306	16,174
Date	79	9,467
English	838	686
Number	24	1,810
Other	220	6,105
Total	2467	9,660

In March 2019, Kazakhstan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Beibut Atamkulov, acknowledged the receipt of “more than 1,000 petitions (*zayavlenie*, the Russian equivalent of *aryz*) on behalf of Kazakhstani citizens who are in correctional institutions in China” (Mukanov 2019). This came just months after a January 2019 announcement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that China had agreed to allow 2,000 ethnic Kazakhs to renounce their Chinese citizenship and leave Xinjiang (Uteuova 2019). Although Atamkulov does not mention Atajurt by name, his reference to applications submitted by relatives suggests that Atajurt’s relentless, multi-scaled advocacy on behalf of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang has had some tangible impact for the diaspora. Indeed, a small genre of videos features recently reunited families gathering in Atajurt’s office to thank the group for their support.

Despite this policy achievement, Atajurt has been the target of state and corporate repression. In early 2019, Kazakhstani authorities attempted to undermine Atajurt’s activities by fining the group for working without formal NGO registration and by putting Atajurt’s leader, Serikzhan Bilash, under house arrest (Radio Free Europe 2019). In spite of the pressure, Atajurt

doubled down on its social media strategy and organized a global hashtag campaign to draw attention to Bilash's arrest. Following this campaign, which amassed several thousand tags on Instagram and more than a thousand video submissions uploaded to YouTube, authorities eventually freed Atajurt's leader under the condition that he would not engage in political activism for seven years (Feng 2019).²⁵¹ During the months of the Atajurt leader's legal troubles, the organization split into two factions; one group successfully secured registration from the government in September 2019 in a move the other faction framed as evidence of co-optation by the state (Pannier 2019).

In June 2021, Google suspended Atajurt's YouTube channel on the grounds that the channel had breached Google's privacy rules; Atajurt's leaders worried about the loss of the archive of appeal interviews. Most of the videos are backed up, but the files are saved on multiple devices which themselves are scattered across Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city. There are several reasons for this, including a split in the organization that happened in September 2019, frequent moves to new offices due to government pressure, and the seizure of equipment by local authorities. Atajurt's leader explained that National Security officers had refused to relinquish tech seized from Atajurt's office – including cell phones, several computers, lighting equipment, and printers (Wood 2022). There was no coordinated hashtag campaign in defense of Atajurt's YouTube channel, but a handful of viral tweets and numerous emails sent to Google and YouTube appear to have alerted the company to the problem. On June 18, some 48 hours after losing access

²⁵¹ During the months of the Atajurt leader's legal troubles, the organization split into two factions; one group successfully secured registration from the government in September 2019 in a move the other faction framed as evidence of co-optation by the state (Pannier 2019). This echoes debates about whether to register that I outlined in Chapter 3.

to the archive, YouTube restored Atajurt's channel with no explanation to Atajurt about what happened.

Instagram

Since Instagram was founded in 2010, users have shared more than 50 billion images (Aslam 2020). The app has added many features since it was first launched, when users could upload a single photograph at a time and interact with images in their feed. Instagram added 60-second video uploading capability in June 2013, a direct messaging component in December 2013, "stories" – posts that autodelete after 24 hours, unless the user aggregates them as a "highlight" that is accessed from their profile – in August 2016; Instagram TV/longer video component in 2018; and reels in August 2020. Although Instagram is primarily a visual app, with its algorithm prioritizing photographs of faces, since 2020 these templates have shifted from purely visual to visual mixed with text. The 10-image "carousel," allowing users to upload clusters of photos and videos as one post, was introduced in 2017 and has been "repurposed by activists, independent artists, advocacy groups, and well-meaning individuals as a means to educate and inform the masses," in what Nguyen calls "PowerPoint activism" (2020). PowerPoint activism speaks to what digital studies scholars Highfield, Leaver, and Abidin call *templatability*, or Instagram's primary affordance. Instagram privileges "visually memorable and memorizable visual stylings, settings, and practices that can be replicated with relative ease" (2021). Templatability works by setting the standard for "successful" content. By merging striking images with informative text, users can subvert the algorithm to spread (and sometimes unintentionally obfuscate) information and resources about important sociopolitical issues.

While political science has all but ignored Instagram,²⁵² communications and digital studies scholarship has examined the app's political dimensions. A major analytical focus is how politicians craft their public image on Instagram (Lalancette and Raynauld, 2019; Parmelee and Roman, 2019; Poulakidakos and Giannouli, 2019; Liebhart and Bernhardt, 2017). Others have analyzed Instagram's role in social movements, examining how hashtags and social movements interact (Afnan, Sclafani, and Bashir, 2019), how Instagram facilitates large protest events (Einwohner and Rochford, 2019), and how Instagram (re)produces nationalist symbols (Kudaibergenova 2019).

Instagram in Kazakhstan

Instagram is the most popular social media site in Kazakhstan, per the most recent available survey data from the Central Asian Barometer wave conducted in the spring of 2019. Although there are distinct patterns of use by age and region, Instagram was the most frequently used app in the country (see Figure 5.1). There are an estimated 10,250,000 users as of September 2021 (Dall'Agnola and Wood 2022), approximately 53 percent of Kazakhstan's population.

In Kazakhstan, Instagram is a popular app for leisure and business – including the growing industry of influencer marketing²⁵³ – but it is also a major source of news (Zhir-Lebed 2022) and updates from political figures. In April 2019, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev opened an Instagram account, citing the importance for government officials to be active on social media and

²⁵² Searches for “Instagram” in the American Journal of Political Science, American Political Science Review, and Comparative Political Studies – the leading field journals – did not result in any matches.

²⁵³ Maksim Bederov, “Top-10 Instagram-influenserov Kazakhstan: kto oni i skol'ko zarabatyvayut v Seti [Top 10 Instagram-influencers in Kazakhstan: Who are they and how much do they earn]” *Forbes.kz*, 30 October 2020, https://forbes.kz/life/hero/kto_takie_instagram-inflyuenseryi_i_skolko_oni_zarabatyvayut_v_kazahstane/

to build connections with citizens online.²⁵⁴ Governors and mayors use Instagram to communicate updates for their constituents, but the app has also led to backlash for some politicians – especially those who flaunt their wealth, as former mayor of Shymkent Gabidulla Abdrahimov did by posting a video from London to Instagram.²⁵⁵

Instagram has been an important tool for political participation and bottom-up social movement mobilization in Kazakhstan. Following a negligible sentencing of two train conductors who beat and raped a passenger in November 2018, women took to social media and used hashtags like #MeTooTalgo (the name of the passenger train where the woman was raped last winter) and #NeMolchiKZ (in Russian, #Don'tStayQuietKZ).²⁵⁶ Their demands to amend the law that makes rape a crime of “moderate” severity were eventually met by President Tokayev, who called for tougher penalties for sexual violence in September 2019. Instagram has facilitated several environmental campaigns, including efforts to block destruction of a reservoir in Astana and a 10-year fight to stop the construction of a ski resort in a national park outside Almaty.²⁵⁷ These campaigns leverage Instagram’s hashtag feature to aggregate photographs and powerful testimonies. Additionally, they share information about Kazakhstan’s legal code and opportunities to communicate demands with government officials, such as public hearings and petitions.

²⁵⁴ In a press conference commemorating the event, the president invited everyone to follow his account, @tokayev_online. “Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev zavel akkaunt v Instagram [Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev opened an Instagram account]” *TengriNews*, 1 April 2019, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/kasym-jomart-tokaev-zavel-akkaunt-v-instagram-366263/.

²⁵⁵ See research by the Organized Crime and Corruption Research Project that demonstrates how Kazakh oligarchs buy property and invest in London as a way to hide money abroad. For example, Will Neal, “UK Issues UWOs on Three Mansions Worth \$103m” 10 March 2022, *OCCRP*, <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/11782-uk-issues-uwo-on-three-mansions-worth-103m>

²⁵⁶ See Colleen Wood, “#MeTooTalgo: Kazakh Activists Push to Toughen Rape Law,” 29 August 2019, *The Diplomat*, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/metootalgo-kazakh-activists-push-to-toughen-rape-law/>

²⁵⁷ Colleen Wood, “SOS Taldykol: Art and Activism in in Kazakhstan” 31 August 2021, *The Diplomat*, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/sos-taldykol-art-and-activism-in-in-kazakhstan/>

Instagram played a significant role in monitoring the 2019 snap presidential elections, with celebrities and NGO affiliates alike livestreaming from polling stations to document irregularities. Given the app's role in mobilization, authorities have targeted activists, journalists, and average citizens for their activity on Instagram (Abilmazhitova 2017).

Comparative Analysis of Instagram for Campaigns

In this section, I compare the Instagram accounts of three civil society organizations with differing ties to the state: Oyan Qazaqstan is an unregistered civic movement that is critical of the country's political system; Youth Information Service of Kazakhstan (MISK in Russian) is a registered "Public Fund" that maintains autonomy from the state; and Civil Alliance is an umbrella NGO that is closely aligned with the Ministry of Information and Social Development.

Oyan Qazaqstan

On May 27, actor Anuar Nurpeisov posted a video to Instagram featuring prominent actors, singers, artists, and activists describing the country where they woke up: a place lacking political freedoms, frequent internet shutdowns, biased courts, and ecological degradation. The video, which quickly went viral, launched a hashtag campaign #menoyandym (#iwokeup in Kazakh). A group of activists, journalists, and academics collaborated to articulate their goals for political reform. The result was a manifesto that begins, "We are Kazakhstanis, free people who decide our own future. We love our country, we have the knowledge, potential, and strength to change our life for the better." The manifesto details nine specific demands for reform, including an end to political repression, reforming the distribution of power between the branches of government, a system of self-governance at the local level, and free elections in line with international standards. On June 5, 2019, just four days before snap presidential elections that were widely understood to

be rigged, six people announced the manifesto and the beginning of a civic movement called Oyan Qazaqstan.²⁵⁸

In 2019, Oyan Qazaqstan was involved in protests following presidential elections in June, and the group organized several demonstrations to demand political reforms. This included a gathering on August 30, Constitution Day; October 25, Republic Day; November 9; and December 16, which is both Independence Day and the anniversary of a state-sponsored massacre in Zhanaozen. In addition to protests, Oyan has organized a series of “walks” (derived from the Kazakh word *seruen*, meaning walk), information campaigns about activists’ detention or fines, and open-mic-style *juzdesu* (meaning meeting). Oyan Qazaqstan has no intentions to register, because the organizers believe that “civil society is not registered.” Some activists affiliated with Oyan described the group’s organization as “horizontal and informal” in interviews.²⁵⁹ There is no official leader, and although many of the activists live in Almaty, there are clusters of Oyan activists working in major cities across Kazakhstan. As of June 2022, Oyan remains active, with many members having participated in the January Events and protests in solidarity with victims of police violence and the war in Ukraine. Members face repression to the extent that individual members are arrested for picketing, and several reported finding spyware on their phones in November 2021.

MISK

The Molodyozhnaya Informatsionnaya Sluzhba Kazakhstana (The Youth Information Service of Kazakhstan in Russian; hereafter, MISK) began in 1998 as a campaign for discounted

²⁵⁸ “Grazhdanskije aktivisty prezentovali deklaratsiyu Oyan, Qazaqstan [Civic activists presented the manifesto of Oyan Qazaqstan],” *The Village-KZ*, 5 June 2019, <https://www.the-village-kz.com/village/city/news-city/5961-grazhdanskije-aktivisty-prezentovali-deklaratsiyu-oyan-kazahstan>.

²⁵⁹ Author interviews 28 April 2021, 9 May 2021, 12 May 2021. *

public transport for university students. In 1999, MISK sought registration as a non-governmental organization (*nepravitel'stvennogo uchrezhdeniya*) before re-registering as a public fund (*obshchestvennyj fond*) in 2002. Irina Mednikova, a journalist and activist who led MISK for 15 years, explained the importance of an organization like MISK: “Our country is young and is just getting built, really important processes are ongoing. Some of these processes won’t happen without our participation, so we should open them up and build them. To make our political rights work, we must require the state to participate in the management of state affairs, we must educate the youth, tell them what human rights are. If we don’t work toward this every day, then we could end up stuck in this post-Soviet stagnation for another 50 years.”²⁶⁰

MISK’s projects target civic participation of Kazakhstani youth, with the goal of educating young people about human rights and civil liberties. The League of Young Voters has organized election monitoring and informational campaigns about citizens’ right to vote since 1998. In 2010, MISK started running ZhasCamp (YouthCamp), which offers resources to young people who want to develop socially minded projects to improve their communities across Kazakhstan.

Structurally, MISK operates with its main office in Almaty and four branches in Astana, Petropavlovsk, Semey, and Shymkent. The filial offices are individually registered, and they have their own materials and financing and pursue their own projects. But the organization coordinates across branches on goalsetting and a collective vision for projects each year.²⁶¹

Civil Alliance of Kazakhstan

Finally, the Civil Alliance of Kazakhstan is an umbrella NGO that is closely aligned with the Ministry of Information and Development. Civil Alliance’s website prominently announces

²⁶⁰ Author interview, 14 May 2021.

²⁶¹ Author interview, 14 May 2021.

that “civil society is the locomotive of developing the government,” and the organization works to foster “mutually beneficial cooperation between public authorities and NGOs.” Civil Alliance offers consultation services for NGO leaders, sponsors professionalization trainings for NGOs and civil activists, and is working to develop a culture of volunteerism in Kazakhstan. Since 2011, Civil Alliance has organized Civic Forum, a massive conference with discussions between government officials and civil society leaders.²⁶²

More than 3000 Kazakhstani non-commercial organizations are members of Civil Alliance, and as members, they are eligible for consultations with Civil Alliance experts. The organization is based in Astana, but there are also 17 regional offices in each of Kazakhstan’s 14 oblasts and 3 cities, all of which are independently registered. Banu Nurgaziyeva – who has previously held a high role in the central office of the Nur-Otan party in addition to stints in local politics and heading the Ministry of Culture and Information – has served as Civil Alliance’s president since September 2020.

Having discussed data on language and funding in previous chapters, in this section I focus on visuals, themes, tactics, and references to law. Social media posts both document and constitute political activity. In coding for tactics across these groups’ 150 selected posts, I identified several relevant differences in how they use their main pages (see Table 5.4).

Oyan uses its account to promote planned demonstrations. Repeated reminders in Kazakh and Russian about upcoming protests, and illustrated guides of what to bring and how to prepare for arrest. Whereas Oyan posted frequent reminders of upcoming demonstrations, the account directs to other media outlets that covered the protests for documentation of the events themselves.

²⁶² “Dialog vlasti i obshchestva: startoval X Grazhdanskiy forum [Dialogue between government and society: The Tenth Civic Forum started] *kazinform*, 22 November 2021, https://www.inform.kz/ru/dialog-vlasti-i-obschestva-startoval-h-grazhdanskiy-forum_a3865186.

However, Oyan also uses the app to record instances of police violence, such as kettling or aggressive arrest. In the captions of these posts, they let followers know which particular police station activists have been brought to.

Civil Alliance rarely posts about upcoming events other than grant deadlines, and instead uses their page to document meetings with party officials, workshops for member NGOs, and the annual Civic Forum. The group uses its Instagram to spotlight initiatives of member organizations, such as the work of a Petropavlovsk-based NGO with improving the quality of life in apartment buildings with many units or the “Mother’s Heart” project that supports women who are raising children with special needs in Aktobe.²⁶³

MISK shares information about upcoming events and programming on their feed. This includes recurring events like Live Library, which is essentially a live lecture series, and the League of Young Voters. While they do not organize protests, several events gave a platform to activists who have been targeted for their involvement in protests.

All three groups use their pages to promote solidarity and community-building. Oyan and Civil Alliance wish their team members happy birthday, which serves to humanize the team and give space for followers to post comments of thanks or best wishes. In contrast, I observed that Civil Alliance commemorated the lives of central public figures after their passing.²⁶⁴ This sets a different tone, one of reverence more than strong ties of familiarity, and reflects the older age of government-affiliated public figures.

²⁶³ @civil.alliance, *Instagram*, 1 December 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BNeLLlpBmGs/>. @civil.alliance, *Instagram*, 1 December 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BNeI0PRBVSF/>.

²⁶⁴ @civil.alliance, *Instagram*, 28 July 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDLck2DDb1X/>.

One striking difference is the frequency of referencing “civil society” versus “politics” or “rights” more broadly. Although MISK would be the only organization counted as “real” civil society by narrow definitions that exclude GONGOs and unregistered movements, it is Civil Alliance that most frequently invokes the concept of civil society (*granzhdanskoe obshchestvo*) and local control (*obshchestvenyj kontrol*). MISK’s posts reference civil society more often than politics or rights, but they do not shy away from the latter two topics. Oyan’s posts relate to rights most often, and they also reference legal institutions more than MISK and Civil Alliance. This speaks to Oyan’s emphasis on political reform and the rights imbued in Kazakhstan’s Constitution.

Table 5.3: Topical references in Instagram posts by 3 civil society organizations

	Civil society	Rights	Politics	Constitution	Administrative Code	International Law
<i>Civil Alliance</i>	126	3	24	4	6	1
<i>MISK</i>	72	32	37	1	13	6
<i>Oyan</i>	35	69	60	12	11	1

Finally, each group leverages Instagram’s templatability in different ways. Oyan and MISK both frequently uses the carousel to post in the style of what Nguyen characterized as “PowerPoint activism.” However, the content of Oyan’s carousel posts is usually also contained in the caption, whereas MISK lays out background information about new policies and advice for university students. MISK’s template closely resembles the format that Kazakhstani media outlets use on Instagram, while Oyan uses a combination of striking photos, cartoons, and stylish layouts to

present information. Civil Alliance’s posts follow many different templates, with experimentation in design and branding.

Table 5.4: Tactical use of Instagram posts from 3 civil society organizations

Tactic	Civil Alliance	MISK	Oyan
Flashmob	0	2	5
Public art	0	6	9
Protest	0	4	33
Crowdfunding	0	2	2
Nur Otan legitimacy	4	0	0
Letter writing/petition	0	0	0
Info-sharing	23	63	14
Make demands	0	3	26
Election monitoring	7	12	0
Social project	22	38	0
Documenting police wrongdoing	0	1	15
Community-building/solidarity	7	25	38
Documenting an event	43	17	0
None	22	26	0

In sum, Instagram is the most popular app in Kazakhstan, and it is used by many different demographic groups. By comparing the Instagram feeds of three civil society groups with varying ties to the state and different levels of formalization, I have shown that *how* groups use Instagram can vary.

Facebook

Facebook was founded as a social networking website for university students in 2004. In 2006, Facebook allowed anyone with an email address to make an account (boyd and Ellison 2007) and by 2009 it had become the largest social network in the world, with some 300 million users (Harlow and Harp 2012: 198). In October 2012, Facebook surpassed 1 billion worldwide users (Marichal 2013). As of 2019, Facebook offered its 2.3 billion users features in more than 100 different languages.²⁶⁵

Marichal 2013 argues that “most political activity on Facebook is less intentional efforts to promote social and political change and more a discursive performance designed to express a political identity” (2013: page). He argues that this is because Facebook is a “nonymous” (as opposed to anonymous) environment (citing Zhao et al., 2008) that facilitates the construction of a political identity. Several specific Facebook products encourage political engagement: the 2007 introduction of the “Causes” application gave users an opportunity to signal investment in an issue whose page was managed by a non-profit. “Groups” give control over membership and visibility (Harlow 2012: 226). Groups are unique in that they have an administrator, who Gerbaudo argues “become ‘softleaders’ or choreographers, involved in setting the scene, and constructing an emotional space within which collective action can unfold” (2012: 5).

In addition to analyzing how Facebook contributes to polarization and democratic backsliding, Facebook has been closely studied for the role it plays in social movements and mass protest. Empirical studies of the Arab Spring (Lewiński and Mohammed, 2020; Rasha and Poell 2018), the Gezi Park protests that shook Turkey in 2013 (Švelch and Štětka 2016), and the

²⁶⁵ Maggie Fick and Paresh Dave, “Facebook’s flood of languages leave it struggling to monitor content,” *Reuters*, 23 April 2019 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-languages-insight/facebook-flood-of-languages-leaves-it-struggling-to-monitor-content-idUSKCN1RZ0DW>

Bolotnaya Square protests in Russia in 2011 (White and McAllister 2014; Gray 2016) study the platform's role in developing collective identities and easing the cost of organizing and communicating across many thousands of people. Other research is interested with less extraordinary moments of political participation, including politicians' communication with voters and constituents on Facebook (Steier et. al, 2018) and how the platform can encourage higher voter turnout (Haenschen 2016).

Facebook in Kazakhstan

Facebook is not the primary app of choice for most Kazakhstanis, but it remains an important digital space for communication between government officials, civil society leaders, and citizens. The Facebook pages of officials – including the president, the Minister of Information and Communication, mayors and governors, city halls, and citizens' councils – offer Kazakhstanis a chance to communicate directly with their representatives (Kosnazarov 2019; <https://avestnik.kz/fejs-akimatov-ili-naskolko-mio-online/>). Residents of major cities maintain public groups to “Protect Almaty!” or “Praise and Criticism of Karaganda.”²⁶⁶ Users share links to local news about construction and public initiatives and politicians' posts describing new decrees; they ask for advice on how to navigate the official e-government portal; they circulate flyers for missing neighbors and family members. In addition to public groups and politicians' public pages facilitating communication between government and citizens, individual civic leaders use their personal pages as microblogs and platforms for live streaming.

²⁶⁶ For details of offline activism stemming from the Facebook group: Ol'ga Loginova, “Zhiteli Bostandykskogo rajona Almaty vyshli na skhod protiv tochechnoj zastroiki [Residents of Bostandyk raion took to the streets against infill construction]” *Vlast'*, 20 February 2022, <https://vlast.kz/novosti/48743-ziteli-bostandykskogo-rajona-almaty-vysli-na-shod-protiv-tocechnoj-zastrojki.html>.

Facebook has been a common target for blocking content and monitoring citizens' activity.²⁶⁷ In late 2021, Facebook became a major news item when government officials claimed reaching an “exclusive” arrangement with Facebook for Kazakhstani users' data. Though Facebook denied the claims, one MP wrote – on Facebook, nonetheless – that “Everyone has bureaucracy and political games. Even Meta.”²⁶⁸

Facebook for Police Reform

I now turn to detail a campaign for police reform that took place on a Facebook group. The campaign began after Denis Ten – the first Kazakhstani to win an Olympic medal, a bronze in figure skating earned in 2014 – died on July 19, 2018. Ten was stabbed by a group of men attempting to steal the mirrors from his car, and his murder sparked countrywide reflections on what his Olympic win meant for them and decrying the inefficacy of the police to keep citizens safe. On July 21, activists started a group on Facebook called “Trebuem Reformu MVD KR!” (Russian for “We Demand Reform of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan!”)²⁶⁹ Within four days, more than 15,000 people had joined the group – including local representatives from the akimat and the Public Council.

The group fostered active discussion and debate on police reform in Kazakhstan that bridged online and offline environments. For example, 102 people attended a 4-hour public forum

²⁶⁷ Following several instances of Facebook being blocked in late 2018, which independent media attributed to Facebook Live sessions by an exiled opposition political party founder, the Information Minister declared, “The popularity of Facebook is on the wane. I think that Instagram is more popular now. Maybe that is the problem.” Almaz Kumenov, “Kazakhstan: Minister says Facebook is unpopular,” *Eurasianet*, 10 December 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-minister-says-facebook-not-blocked-just-unpopular>

²⁶⁸ Zholdas Orisbayev, “Facebook caught up in Kazakhstan internet crackdown,” *Eurasianet*, 2 November 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/facebook-caught-up-in-kazakhstan-internet-crackdown>

²⁶⁹ Trebuem Reformu MVD KR, *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/reformaMVDKR>.

on July 24 in Almaty.²⁷⁰ The event was organized in a hybrid manner, with 102 people attending in person and many more tuning into a live streamed version of it. Civic leaders and experts on law and policing gave short presentations, with the goal of submitting a formal proposal for reforms by September 1. Both in-person and online groups generated specific proposals for reform. Irina Mednikova, one of the campaign organizers, wrote a recap of the event, tagging it with #отчет and #чтомыделаем (Russian for #report and #whatarewedoing), which are navigable on the right-hand side of the group’s page. In total, “Trebuem Reformu MVD KR” put on 10 similar discussions between July 24 and August 28, 2018.



Figure 5.3: Screenshot of a Facebook post documenting a Public Forum organized by Trebuem Reformu MVD RK on July 24

The initiative put together a formal proposal with more than 300 suggestions for reform, which were crowdsourced from average citizens and legal experts alike through Google Forms

²⁷⁰ Irina Mednikova, public post in Trebuem Reformu MVD KR, *Facebook*, 24 July 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/reformaMVDKR/posts/265537870700366/>.

and town halls. Representatives from Reform MVD submitted their proposal to Nursultan Nazarbayev and presented the report at a press conference for national media on August 29.²⁷¹ The 300 proposals were grouped into 3 broad categories – structural reform, new personnel policies, and mechanisms for accountability and transparency – that were further broken down in 16 areas of emphasis.

Following the delivery of the proposal that was crowdsourced on Facebook to the President’s office, it did not take long for high-level talks of policy reform to emerge. In September 2018, Kazakhstan’s president Nursultan Nazarbayev – who had run the country since it was still a Soviet Socialist Republic – delivered a speech about police reform, drawing on 20 percent of the policy recommendations made in Reform MVD’s proposal.²⁷² After Nazarbayev’s speech in 2018, Trebue Reformu MVD KR remained active on Facebook, and leaders continued to organize meetings with local and national authorities. The goal was to establish a working group that would involve Kazakhstan’s Security Council, Parliament, and civil society actors; Reform MVD achieved this in September 2021, when Akorda announced the creation of a formal working group under Kazakhstan’s Security Council.

To summarize, Facebook may not be the most widely used app among Kazakhstanis, but it is a platform where political communication happens. Government officials and local governance bodies maintain public accounts where they share updates in text, photo, and video form. Citizens can write comments, ask questions, and offer support on these pages, but they can also create standalone groups for working toward specific advocacy goals.

²⁷¹ Irina Mednikova, public post in Trebue Reformu MVD KR, *Facebook*, 29 August 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/reformaMVDKR/posts/295472794373540/>.

²⁷² Khadisha Akayeva, “Reforma politsii Kazakhstana: na sluzhbe u avtoritarnogo rezhima [Police reform in Kazakhstan: in service of an authoritarian regime]” *Central Asia Bureau of Analytical Reporting*, 12 January 2021, <https://cabar.asia/ru/reforma-politsii-kazahstana-na-sluzhbe-u-avtoritarnogo-rezhima>

Conclusion

In this chapter, I opened the black box of “social media” to explore the spaces where civil society actors do politics online. In contrast to much of the political science literature that treats social media and the internet as monoliths, I focused on differences in app infrastructure and patterns of use in Kazakhstan to understand what politics looks like across platforms. What does it look like for activists or an NGO to turn to Facebook versus YouTube, and what can this choice tell us about these groups’ understandings of state-society relations?

YouTube in Kazakhstan is a platform for archiving records of investigations, independent news coverage, and evidence of rights violations. Features of the design of YouTube channels give creators control over how to organize their videos, which shapes both the viewers’ experience (what are they drawn to) but also a quasi-storage system. Although Atajurt’s videos directly appeal to government actors, the assumption is not so much that authorities will watch directly. The platform does not offer much in the way of direct dialogue with authorities, and the group is not including links to specific videos in the paper appeals they submit to government bodies. But authorities are watching, evidenced by the arrest of Atajurt’s founder and pressure on the group’s operations. This is not unique to Kazakhstan. In Russia, for example, more than 1 million people subscribed to opposition politician Aleksei Navalny’s YouTube channel. A documentary investigating alleged corruption by then-Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev amassed 20 million views and sparked massive protests in March 2017 (Glazunova 2022). Russian journalist Yuri Dud’s YouTube channel has more than 10 million followers. His videos include interviews with public figures and documentaries on sensitive subjects like HIV in Russia and the history of forced labor during Stalin’s rule. As his channel grew in popularity, Dud began experiencing political

pressure: In June 2021, Russian authorities opened a criminal investigation against Dud for allegedly publishing drug propaganda, and in April 2022 he was declared a “foreign agent.”²⁷³

Instagram is the most popular app in Kazakhstan, and the three groups whose accounts I explored use the app as a tool for communication with fellow citizens rather than a way to engage in dialogue with authorities. Civil Alliance posts photographs of members with government officials, but captions on these posts are not direct appeals for support or transcripts of what was said; rather, these images serve as a source of legitimacy, evidence that Civil Alliance enjoys close ties with the government and has the power to shape civil society. The templatability and carousel activism that define Instagram enable independent NGOs, media outlets, and activist networks to communicate complicated ideas – breaking down proposed legal reform into bite-sized analysis.

In contrast with YouTube and Instagram, Facebook is a platform of direct engagement with government officials. Facebook is not as widely used as other social media platforms, but many politicians and government bodies – like Public Councils, Ministries, the Ombudsman, Akorda – have pages where users can post comments or send direct messages. At minimum, this can enable feelings or perceptions of direct contact between state and society. But in the case of Reforma MVD, there was real contact between policymakers and Almaty residents – including seasoned civil society actors as well as engaged citizens – to crowdsource proposals for police reform that eventually made its way to the President’s Office. Other examples of direct communication between citizens and local government or national officials may not be as weighty as this – for

²⁷³ “Russian authorities open court case against journalist Yury Dud for distributing ‘drug propaganda’” *Committee for the Protection of Journalists*, 17 June 2021, <https://cpj.org/2021/06/russian-authorities-open-court-case-against-journalist-yury-dud-for-distributing-drug-propaganda/>. “Russia Adds Prominent Journalists, LGBT Activists to Registry Of ‘Foreign Agents’” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 16 April 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-foreign-agents-journalists-lgbt/31805529.html>.

example, residents comment on the page of Almaty’s Public Council with requests to fill potholes or repair crumbling playgrounds.

This chapter demonstrates that politics is happening beyond Facebook and Twitter, which have been the primary apps of analysis in political science research. Media scholars are analyzing a wide range of platforms including TikTok (Kennedy 2021), SnapChat (Wilken and Humphreys), Discord servers (Jiang et al. 2019), Telegram (Urman and Katz 2022), and even the video game Animal Crossing (Pearce et al. 2021). Political ethnography of these sites could offer insights on disinformation and polarization – common topics for research on social media in political science journals – but also experiences of war, identity politics, policing, and elections.

Another avenue for further research is deeper participant observation of “backstage” interactions, such as instant messaging on Instagram or Facebook and the use of apps like WhatsApp and Telegram. The case studies presented here make for a richer understanding of interactions and processes across different corners of the internet, but all three are explicitly “on stage” (Goffman 1959). This project would have looked very different if I had pursued access to private group chats where civil society actors organize events and discuss tactics. This would have required a much higher level of trust from interlocutors, which could have been possible with a different degree of pre-existing relationships or more fervent networking. Studies of “backstage” processes online present some practical and ethical concerns about informed consent and the researcher’s ability to maintain interlocutors’ digital security.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Just six months after Bloody January, Kazakhstanis voted on a long list of constitutional reforms that Tokayev touted as ushering in a “New Kazakhstan.” Unlike the January events, there were no sweeping internet blackouts or police violence. There were no mass protests as there were after 2019 snap presidential elections; nor were there clashes between activists, counter-activists, and police, as after the January 2021 parliamentary elections. Despite the relative calm, there are important parallels between public response to this election and recent political catalysts: the government relied on a National Council to facilitate “dialogue” between state and society to craft the language of reforms, and civil society actors made normative claims about the stakes of working within or outside the system. An authoritarian government, in the name of reform, looked to civil society for the shape and language of reform. Some – but certainly not all – civil society actors, in the quest for reform away from a superpresidential system, leaned into institutional channels offered by the state.

Differences in approaches reflect debates over strategy and principle that were the focus of this dissertation. Was it better to boycott the referendum and not vote at all? Should an activist volunteer as an independent election monitor to record inconsistencies, or should they organize a single-person picket? In the six weeks between Tokayev’s announcement of a referendum and the vote itself, civil society took to social media. Prominent activists, human rights organizations, and government-affiliated groups used Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube among other platforms to both record politics and to *do* politics. Civil society actors expressed opinions about the proposed changes, tried to persuade followers how to vote, photographed graffiti, shared pictures of their

spoiled ballots, and recorded videos of polling stations where ballot boxes had been stuffed. This activity straddled virtual and analog spheres, and it reflected the vigorous debates about how best to effect change in an authoritarian context.

These debates echo the questions that motivated this dissertation. I asked how civil society actors navigate different channels to pursue their advocacy goals. To pursue advocacy causes, should an activist or rights defender work within the system or outside it? In advocating for a cause, why do civil society actors seek out visibility, given the risks of repression?

Revisiting the findings

Using a three-pronged approach to data collection, including semi-structured interviews, visual analysis, and digital participant observation from November 2020-April 2022, I found that Kazakhstani civil society actors engage in complicated debates about tactics and principles. Even though the realm of civil society is quite small, actors have different identities, goals, and normative understandings of state-society relations that guide their approach.

With regard to deciding whether to engage with government officials through formal institutions and protocol, I identified four prominent sites of reform: registering as a non-government organization, seeking approval to protest, contributing to the lawmaking process, and pursuing litigation. Some activist groups refused on principle to register while others went through the procedure to avoid legal charges, and some pushed for legal reform through the streets while others took a seat at the table with party officials to negotiate new bills. Despite the differences in within- and outside-system tactics, I interpreted civil society actors' actions broadly as jurisgenerative politics. They use the language and institutions of law as tools of reform. I observed this in fidelity to the law on receiving approval from local government to hold a peaceful demonstration, as with the case of the activist who applied 36 times for a gathering in honor of a

murdered public figure. But civil society actors also leverage the power differentials across levels of law – local to national, national to international – to pursue their advocacy goals. For example, rights defenders train activists and journalists on how to submit independent complaints to UN Committees for international agreements Kazakhstan is a party to, and an organization proposed reforms to the Election Law to bring Kazakhstan in line with the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

The second half of the dissertation examines how civil society actors use social media. Although the literature on contentious politics in repressive contexts largely expects dissent to be driven underground, activists and civil society organizations do not always hide their criticism or demands for change. I argue that it is analytically productive to think about “visibility” as an asset to civil society actors through three metaphors: virality, palimpsest, and pixelization.

Virality draws on the process of spreading infectious diseases to describe the way images circulate rapidly across the internet. Kazakhstani meme makers do not have massive followings on social media, but they flex their awareness of how algorithms work and use “insider humor” to poke holes in the sanctimonious self-presentation of political elites. There is a growing appetite for political content, and meme makers challenge the “red line” of topics that are considered off limits; they see this work as having an educational bent.

As an artifact, palimpsest refers to parchment that has been scraped off and rewritten; as a metaphor, it depicts an open-ended historical process in which different authors vie for discursive control. Art activists have curated a store of symbols and language to represent the wave of protests that began with Nazarbayev’s resignation. These symbols mirror global movements (the link between Kazakh Spring and Arab Spring), reclaim historical figures (such as the poet Abai or 1917

political party Alash Orda), and took on meaning beyond the original protest action (as with #ForFreeElections).

Finally, pixelization draws on a visual rhyme between the pixel cells of a computer screen with the windows of Khrushchovka apartment blocks that litter cities across Eurasia; the metaphor helps to understand the diffuse relationship between bodies, digital devices, and social movements. There is not a neat cleave between “online” and “offline” activism, or “virtual” and “real” civil society. As with Protest Körpe’s campaign, activists used Instagram to build solidarity for a jailed activist and to encourage atomized collective action through writing to government officials. The campaign facilitated a virtual and in-person audience for the activist’s trial, and focusing on only one or the other would omit an important dimension of how this event was visible.

I then asked what role various social media platforms play in different logics of visibility. I compared demographics of userships of YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook in Kazakhstan and examined campaigns conducted on each platform. YouTube in Kazakhstan is a platform for archiving records of investigations, independent news coverage, and evidence of rights violations. Instagram is the most popular app in Kazakhstan, and the three groups whose accounts I explored use the app as a tool for communication with fellow citizens rather than a way to engage in dialogue with authorities. Facebook is not as widely used as other social media platforms, but many politicians and government bodies – like Public Councils, Ministries, the Ombudsman, the President – have pages where users can post comments or send direct messages.

The Big Picture: Implications of this Research

Many graduate students vacillate wildly between grandiose beliefs that their research will change the world and fears that the pronouncement of their findings will not reach any ears beyond the tiny corner they have staked out in a scholarly community. I am no exception. In an effort to

bridge the two ends of this spectrum, I embrace the exercise of thinking through the theoretical, methodological, and policy implications of my findings.

Theoretical Implications

Rather than squash any and all associational life, authoritarian regimes manage civil society by encouraging within-system engagement that suits their purposes. My findings offer an explanation different from previously theorized processes that define how civil society functions within an authoritarian system.

Research from anthropology, legal studies, and political science on legal pluralism offers important insights on how individuals and groups navigate multiple institutional orders. However, much of the work in political science focuses on decision-making within the state. But civil society actors also draw on international law and organizations to advance their local advocacy goals. The predominant explanation for how this multi-scale activism works comes from Keck and Sikkink's book on transnational advocacy networks. Their boomerang theory posits that values-driven NGOs working in a closed context bypass channels to engage with their own state and tap into a transnational network of peer NGOs to pressure their governments to intervene. However, as I demonstrated in Chapter 3, many civil society actors in Kazakhstan do not bypass the state. Rather, they wield the letter of the law (or work to change it) to hold authorities accountable. As one interlocutor told me, "The law is our only hope."

Even activists who refuse to meet with government officials, register their group with the state, or follow legal protocol for organizing public gatherings see the law as a source of hope. Kazakhstani activists engage in jurisgenerative politics by pointing to the differences between the Constitutions of 1993 and 1995. The 1993 Constitution was adopted through democratic procedure, whereas the Constitution that Nazarbayev shoved through in 1995 concentrated power

in the presidency. This document has been used to restrict freedoms and silence dissent, but the text guarantees lofty rights of assembly, association, and free expression. Activists point to the letter of the law as a guiding beacon of political hope.

By pulling the concept of jurisgenerative politics from the realm of political theory to inform empirical studies of civil society and social movements, political scientists can more properly account for grassroots actors' agency. Jurisgenerative politics as a theoretical framework offers a useful corrective to structural analyses which posit that some correct combination of necessary and sufficient conditions *facilitates* protest. The framing of mass mobilization as being *facilitated* implies passivity on the part of civil society actors and obscures the ways these actors create their own opportunities for resistance and reform.

Activists and rights defenders use different tactics to achieve reform, and as I demonstrated in Chapters 2 and 3, civil society actors deliberate about the advantages of working within authoritarian institutions to advance their claims. This looks like applying for sanctioned protest 36 times to catch the state at its word. This looks like taking advantage of intraparty competition for clout and working with ruling party MPs to overturn sexist laws imported from Soviet times. This looks like ten years of work to introduce juries to trials. But it also looks like government-funded trainings for village public councils and the pomp and circumstance of annual conferences where village activists receive awards for building a community center. Although I was unable to conduct interviews with representatives from organizations that receive state funding or are led by political elites, the shorter case studies of the Civil Alliance and Strong Mother's Nursultan suggest the need for more research on the implications of cooptation of civil society in authoritarian regimes. A relatively recent bent in the literature on cooptation has focused on non-elites, but many studies of Eurasia assume that groups which work with or benefit from the state are hollow or

disingenuous. Further research in the vein of Hemment’s analysis of the state-affiliated youth organization Nashi that approaches state-affiliated organizations with an assumption of agency would advance our understanding of the full spectrum of associational life.

Ontological Implications

My endeavor to bridge big data with an ethnographic sensibility fits into a growing approach to research that takes a critical eye to massive datasets. Using big datasets – millions of tweets scraped and cleaned, for example – without reflecting on what we are counting could lead to “measuring a banana in miles per hour.”²⁷⁴ Differences in researchers’ positionality means that the questions of what is worth looking for and what should be trimmed or omitted are not objective. Age is an important component; scholars who grew up with the internet and have only experienced their field site with a smart phone will have different priors and blinders from researchers who did not. I contend that rather than scrap the endeavor of big data to study politics, a more productive corrective is to embrace an ethnographic sensibility. In addition to making space for reflecting on positionality, a central tenet of the ethnographic tradition is concerned with *meaning making* and what political actors are doing with words (and emojis). Incorporating an ethnographic sensibility compels a researcher to think about what they are really analyzing through operationalized variables that might mask localized meanings.²⁷⁵ For example, Fred Schaffer’s work on how “democracy” is understood by interlocutors demonstrates gaps in meaning between researchers and the communities they’re researching. In a 2014 article, he interrogates the language of a

²⁷⁴ I thank Jeremy Menchik for this quip, spoken at the Descriptive Research Conference held at the University of Massachusetts Boston held 22-23 April 2022.

²⁷⁵ Inference problems are especially pronounced in multilingual communities, as Schaffer demonstrates in his 2001 book about differences in meaning of “democracy,” “la démocratie,” and “demokaraasi” (in English, French, and Wolof respectively).

popular question in the Global Barometer Survey: “What for you is the meaning of the word ‘democracy?’” (306). Based on interviews in the Philippines, Schaffer argues that the Global Barometer Survey flattens nuance between words that could translate as “democracy.”

I am not alone in advancing this approach. Lerner has argued for quantitative analysis of the massive archives of Holocaust materials (2021, 2022). She acknowledges that researchers may inaccurately interpret data, such as identifying a testimony as coming from a “bystander” as opposed to a “perpetrator” of genocide (2022: 364), but she contends that this potential loss of nuance is outweighed by the normative and theoretical gains from a big data approach. Murib’s work that scraped 60,000 comments from three YouTube videos to understand the evolution of discourse about LGBT (2022: 9). This careful attention to meaning is an effort to bridge the language of interlocutors with the political science conceptual buckets we’re trying to fit our findings into. This is a matter of analytical accuracy, but also a signal of respect for the people and communities we study. Broache et al. (2022) review largescale datasets that record state-sponsored violence against civilians; they find significant discrepancies in the number of violations and the actors who perpetuate it. Miscounting is not just a statistical problem; it means erasing the experiences of individuals who suffered. Ultimately, bringing rich description and an ethnographic sensibility to big data will center human dignity.

An ethnographic approach to studying the political effects of social media can strengthen the internal validity of quantitative research designs. As I demonstrate in Chapter 5, different platforms facilitate different types of engagement. Before we can explain the effect of social media on political outcomes broadly, it is imperative to understand how platforms are used in specific contexts. In addition to questions that can be answered with demographic data – such as who’s on these platforms, what proportion of the population, how old are they? – an ethnographic sensibility

will encourage researchers to identify the prominent discursive trends and talking points. What features does the platform offer for these trends and talking points to emerge?

Bridging digital ethnography with big data opens questions about how scholars record instances of protest. For example, the Oxus Society's Central Asia Protest Tracker is an original dataset that uses online published material to describe political dissent in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. They explicitly "exclude online protests, such as posts on the social media about a particular issue, petitions, letters of complaint, or boycotts."²⁷⁶ However, the metaphor of pixelization I advance in Chapter 4 challenges the cleaved conceptualization of online versus offline protests. As Tilly argued, event catalogs are theories (2002). As a descriptive enterprise, aiming to capture and categorize instances of the phenomenon under investigation. The problems of "selectivity, reliability, verifiability, comparability, bounding, and inclusiveness" that affect any event catalog (Tilly 2002: 250) are not evenly distributed, but are shaped by the researcher's perspective and position (Davenport 2010: 39). In a world that ever more intensely knits in-person and online interaction, an event tracker that doesn't account for contention expressed online massively underestimates the scale and tone of dissent. For example, by overlooking the diffuse relationship between bodies and digital devices, a row in the dataset capturing the number of people who showed up in person to support Asya Tulseova misses the full scope of that event.

Methodological Implications

This dissertation has demonstrated that an ethnographic sensibility does not require lengthy, uninterrupted, in-person fieldwork in far-away places. It is an example of "patchwork

²⁷⁶ "Central Asia Protest Tracker Codebook." The Oxus Society of Central Asian Affairs. <https://oxussociety.org/viz/protest-tracker/data/CAPT%20Code%20Book.pdf>

ethnography,” which Günel, Varma, and Watanabe (2020) conceptualize as the product of “fragmentary yet rigorous data.” Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and severe medical problems, I could not spend a year in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as I had hoped. But I drew on previous field experience in the region, years of language study, and a professional network and social media feed developed through three years of journalistic writing about Central Asian politics to create a plan for data collection that could be done from my living room. Ed Schatz describes his “analytic eclecticism” via a cooking metaphor: “If some ingredients simply should not be mixed into the same batter, you could still consider distinct preparations before serving them on the same plate.” I managed to fill my plate with transcripts from semi-structured interviews, a dataset of Instagram posts scraped using Python, a folder of screenshots I took of political jokes, memes, and blog posts, and 45,000 words of typed fieldnotes that describe livestreams, Zoom events, YouTube videos, and presidential press conferences.

It is difficult to compare how this dinner plate might have looked different if I had conducted this research from Kazakhstan. The “offline” ethnographer working in this hypothetical situation would probably have a larger serving of interview transcripts and fieldnotes describing dinner parties and poster-making sessions. Realistically, this ethnographer would also have spent a lot of time online – using WhatsApp or Telegram to schedule meetings and scrolling Instagram to find in-person events to attend, much like I did. And while I often saved posts that advertised virtual or hybrid events with a tinge of sadness to be missing out on “real fieldwork,” I have realized it is counterproductive to think of digital ethnography in terms of limitations or absences. The work of watching civil society from afar pushed my thinking on visibility and virtual platforms. The project’s biggest scope condition – that everything I analyzed happened publicly and online – was also an opportunity for theoretical innovation.

Beyond the benefits to theory building, patchwork ethnography is an equitable methodological approach. Scholars who cannot afford to travel to the field, are tied to their home campus because of teaching obligations, have caretaking responsibilities or health challenges should be able to conduct ethnographic research. Patchwork ethnography reframes these “limitations” as opportunities, and it provides a rubric for evaluating data and insights generated through fragmentary exposures to the field.

Policy Implications

Ostensibly, there are many actors who might glean insight from this dissertation. On the off chance that a Kazakhstani bureaucrat has been assigned to read this, I hope you inform your superiors that the letter of the Constitution guarantees citizens’ rights to assembly and expression. I plan to share a condensed version of my findings in Russian and Kazakh for my interlocutors, many of whom mentioned in interviews that they would appreciate an outsider’s insights on their strategies. But in this final section, I focus my reflections on social media companies and the United States government.

Although companies make these platforms available across borders, an increasing number of governments worldwide strive to secure a “sovereign internet” through regulation and infrastructure. In some cases, foreign governments’ efforts to censor social media platforms can produce prosocial outcomes. For example, in March 2022, Brazil’s Supreme Court blocked Telegram for failing to respond to court orders to combat misinformation. It took two days for Telegram executives to apologize and change their policy, leading to a swift lift of the ban (Nicas and Spigariol 2022).

However, in increasingly more cases, social media platforms’ transnational reach complicates the protection of free speech. For example, in 2020, users in China complained that

YouTube was deleting comments that were critical of the CCP. YouTube pointed to a “bug” in its algorithm to explain the deletions (Vincent 2020). However, algorithms and automated filters are anything but apolitical. Although YouTube is blocked in China, Google has been sharply criticized over the last 15 years for accommodating Chinese internet censorship (Sheehan 2018).

Although platforms ostensibly desire to limit content that intentionally divides and misinforms, heavy-handed moderation tactics like deplatforming politicians and removing content does little to address underlying sociopolitical conditions that foster misinformation. Furthermore, algorithm-driven content removal can backfire because of the difficulty for AI to distinguish between content that records violence or human rights abuses and content that calls for violence. Other options for handling inflammatory content exist. Platforms’ unique technological infrastructures undermine a “one-size-fits-all” regulation of social media companies’ content moderation policies. As I demonstrated in Chapter 5, the way an Instagram post goes viral and the way a tweet goes viral look different, which means that social media companies should approach moderating politicians’ content in different ways. Some creative solutions include limiting the number of times an account can share a post, nudging users to read an article or watch a video in full before commenting or sharing, and deamplifying toxic content by tweaking the algorithm to reduce engagement in specific locations. It will be important that social media companies present their approaches to content moderation in a transparent way, so as to avoid claims of undue censorship.

Let me close on somewhat of a mournful, conflicted note. I have written this dissertation entirely in the United States throughout civic unrest, an endless onslaught of police brutality and mass shootings, an attempted coup, and a rogue Supreme Court packed by leaders who were not elected by popular majority. I observed firsthand how police used tear gas and beatings in an

attempt to break protesters' will. Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Intelligence, and police departments across the U.S. surveil grassroots organizers (Funk 2020). In May 2020, two protesters were arrested on extremism charges for throwing a Molotov cocktail into an empty car, while Oklahoma passed legislation granting immunity to drivers who hurt or kill protesters who are in the street (Temple-Raston 2020; Pahwa 2021). These are the same tactics I described in Chapter 2, which is framed as an analysis of top-down mechanisms to constrain civil society in authoritarian regimes. I have struggled with whether a framework that distinguishes democracies from authoritarian regimes is productive.

As the U.S. government and law enforcement trample on human rights and civil society, we continue to promote democratic best practices abroad. Scholar-practitioners fiercely debated how to deal with this paradox, with some insisting we “get our house in order” before projecting onto others (Ashford 2021). Others fiercely rejected this position, arguing that “to be so ashamed by our own shortcomings that we refrain from calling out abuses abroad, and thus to withhold our solidarity from the abused, would itself be an act of moral abdication” (Cofman Wittes 2020). My sympathies lean toward the former position, but I have also seen the benefits of USAID programming and NED grants. Citizens of other countries that are organizing to build something better should not be deprived of that material support because U.S. domestic politics are imploding.

Indeed, the material support the U.S. provides is no pittance. Between 2010-2022, the United States spent more than \$3 billion on civil society worldwide, making it the largest financial backer of civil society worldwide. Much of that spending is targeted at supporting “traditional” civil society, mostly institutionalized NGOs. But it also includes spending on digital literacy programs and microblogging courses for activists. Those distributing grants should consider ways to support civil society actors without being marked as a foreign agent. This could be accomplished

through capacity- and community-oriented programming, in line with the training models of the Soros School for Future Rights Defenders or MISK's School of Human Rights. These suggestions are narrow, but in the broader picture of U.S. spending, our support of civil society is also narrow. In the same period, the Department of Defense was budgeted \$7.5 trillion, some 2500 times more than the \$3 billion spent on civil society worldwide. Perhaps refraining from calling out abuses abroad is a moral abdication, but so is the persistence with which we invest in tools and infrastructure of military violence.

In the final days of editing and formatting this dissertation, news broke that the U.S. Supreme Court had overturned *Roe v. Wade*. The immediate or imminent criminalization of abortion in 16 states stands to harm people who can become pregnant in physical, psychological, economic, and social terms. A more insidious form of harm is civic, insofar as the upending of reproductive rights consigns more than half the population to a lower tier of citizenship deprived of fundamental rights to bodily autonomy. My digital feeds are curated such that I only saw social media posts expressing outrage, disgust, and despondency. Friends and strangers debated the efficacy of within-system tactics like voting and investing in progressive candidates' campaigns for local office. People discussed whether Congress could be pressured to pass legislation codifying the right to abortion, or whether the president could be compelled to issue an executive order. In addition to big picture questions about how to resist repression, users turned to social media platforms to offer their homes to strangers in states with trigger laws where abortion became illegal overnight; they used Reddit to connect pregnant people with abortion pills; they shared art and memes and photos of graffiti that lambasted the Supreme Court on Instagram and TikTok.

Many of these posts' authors took to the streets in protest, but they also pursue small-scale, action-oriented activism. Grassroots organizations are not only working on reproductive rights,

but they have been doing the slow, hard work to end gun violence, to destigmatize AIDS, and to fight ever-rising rates of incarceration. Beyond the steady work of organizing, activists do the work of maintaining hope and imagination needed to build the world we deserve. I admire my fellow Americans who do this work, but I also deeply respect the bravery, creativity, and persistence of Kazakhstan's civil society – not only the activists and rights defenders, but the mothers in small towns who run community centers and the teenagers outside the hub of progressive society who advocate for better public transportation.

There are lessons to be learned about activism and advocacy from countries that have long been categorized as authoritarian. We too can adopt the jurisgenerative politics practiced by Kazakhstani activists and rights defenders. Though, rather than placing our hope in the law in the hands of nationally elected officials, we must seize the institutions of justice and security for ourselves.

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