Evolution of the political culture of the youth of Kazakhstan

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Abstract

This article focuses on the question whether young people’s attitudes to politics of Kazakhstan. The concept of political culture is used as the theoretical framework. Reference is made to gender, age and level of education. Data from the three waves (1992, 1997 and 2003) of the ‘Youth Survey’ carried out by the Centre for Analysis and Forecasting (C.A.P.) are analysed. Each wave was based on personal interviews with approximately 7000 16- to 29-year olds. The text first describes the political involvement of young people, secondly the acceptance of democracy and, thirdly, satisfaction with the reality of democracy and trust in political or state institutions, as well as in politicians. The results show clear differences in some aspects of the political culture of young people in the Kazakhstan. In other aspects the political attitudes have become more similar, especially trust in institutions. However, the political involvement of young people is largely the same, i.e. in this respect no change has occurred.

1. Introduction

More than 20 years have passed since Kazakhstan gained independence. At that point an overall process of social transformation of the structures and mentalities of the Kazakhstan began, resulting in more and more similarities, but also retaining some considerable differences with regard to, for instance, economic circumstances, the labor market situation and political culture. Discussions on how to evaluate the developmental state of Kazakh unity are ongoing and there are strong reasons for media interest in political controversy and scientific analyses of mobility, economic developments and political orientation, as expressed, for example, in voting behavior. The latter topic is of special interest, because of the different election results, still raising the fundamental question of whether, after more than 20 years, a common political culture is taking shape or not. Are we ‘really one nation?’ (Falter et al., 2000), is ‘the Republic on its way to normality?’ (van Deth et al., 2000). Since the beginning of this dramatic transformation process researchers have particularly focused on political attitudes among the younger generation in Kazakhstan (Hoffmann-Lange, 1995; Gille & Kruger, 2000; Pickel, 2002). Using the three waves of the C.A.P. Youth Survey,

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this article will examine what trends in the political attitudes of adolescents and young adults of Kazakhstan are becoming apparent.

2. Conceptual Framework

Traditionally, the term ‘political culture’ includes subjective relatedness to politics (interest, information, communication), attitudes towards different models of political order (democracy, socialism) and, finally, the evaluation of what politics achieve (satisfaction with democracy, trust in institutions). This concept and its terminology were established in the 1960s to analyze and compare internationally how patterns of socio-political orientation were distributed across post-war Europe (Almond & Verba, 1963). They were further developed in the 1970s (Easton, 1975) and were used in the 1990s to compare European Union (EU) countries (Gabriel, 1994) and the old and new Federal ‘La¨nder’ of united Germany (Pickel, 2002).

In education area many years of young people based on social order-system requirements and needs and interests of the object of education are not always taken into account in the various agencies involved in youth. The question then arises as to how subjects find their place in the political process. Political evaluations are addressed concerning the way citizens see themselves as active and influential participants in the political process (internal efficacy) and the conviction that political leadership is open and responds to the population (external efficacy) (Gabriel, 1994, p. 118). Both components are included in the C.A.P. Youth Survey questionnaire. The first component can be seen as a measure of political interest and can thus contribute to determining subjective political competence. The second component is related to the output aspect described below, in that it shows how much trust people have that political systems can be influenced against the backdrop of their own expectations.

Positive attitudes to a society’s democratic constitution are seen as important to the social and political life. In contrast, negative attitudes are seen as threatening when they extend beyond a certain point. In all three waves of the C.A.P. Youth Survey approval of the idea of democracy and have central features of a liberal pluralistic democracy (freedom of opinion, need for a political opposition, willingness to compromise, etc.) were recorded. The question of whether the idea of socialism is still accepted youth cohorts—socialism not necessarily being considered as an alternative model—was generally oriented along these lines.

As for attitudes concerning the output of political processes, the focus was on the evaluation of structures and institutions. The common indicator ‘satisfaction with democracy in the Kazakhstan was applied. In addition, trust in politics and its representatives were looked at, i.e. how people assessed the willingness of the political system to react to its citizens’ demands and expectations. Trust in institutions also belongs to this output dimension.

Developments in the dimensions input, systems and output of the political system will be analyzed using the three waves of the C.A.P. Youth Survey. The main issue is to what extent adolescents and young adults in the old and new Kazakhstan have diverged from each other or become closer to each other in their political attitudes in the two-decade since 1992. The question of whether these trends are supported by all groups of interviewees in the same manner or whether the differentiation by socio-demographic factors such as age, education and gender have become more important will also be addressed.

1.1 Empirical Basis: The C.A.P. Youth Survey

What makes the C.A.P. Youth Survey so special in the field of Kazakhstan youth studies is the fact that, using replicative questions on a broad empirical basis, it can give a longitudinal description and detailed analysis of adolescents’ and young adults’ attitudes towards democracy, politics and public institutions, as well as their civic participation in different phases of the independent process (Inglehart, 1989, ch. 10).

The youngest respondents in the first wave (1992) were 14, in 1990, the oldest 27. Thus, they have grown in two different political systems and political cultures and experienced political events from very different points of view. During the third wave (2003), the young interviewees were 3 years old when we got independence.

1.2 Interest in Politics and Political Involvement

An interest in politics, i.e. a willingness to be politically informed, is considered to be the main indicator of the fact that interviewees turned to politics. In the Republic an interest in politics, after rising slightly between the first and second waves, remained stable in the third wave at the level of the first (see Table 1).
Table 1. Importance of politics, interest in politics and subjective political competence 1992, 1997 and 2003
(Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Politics as an area of life is important</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong interest in politics</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know a lot about politics</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics are far too complicated</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>4528</td>
<td>4420</td>
<td>4330</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The answers to three questions are displayed in this table:

1. How important for you personally is the area of politics? Here: the area of politics. A seven-point answer scale is given (1 'not important at all' to 7 'very important'). The values 5 to 7 are displayed here as 'important'.
2. How strong is your interest in politics? The choice of answers are 'very strong', 'strong', 'intermediate', 'not very strong', 'no interest at all'. In the table the categories 'very strong' and 'strong' are combined.
3. Please tell me to what extent, in your opinion, each statement is true or not true: (a) I know a lot about politics. (b) Sometimes, I find politics far too complicated for a normal person to understand. There is a six-point answer scale for this question (1 'not true at all' to 6 'entirely true'); here, the values 5 and 6 are displayed.

A certain level of life experience is necessary to develop an appreciation of political matters. Thus, all three waves clearly show how age affects the measured opinions and values. Younger age groups, particularly the 16- to 17-year-olds, show less interest in politics than older ones. In discussions about young people’s dissatisfaction with politics it is often claimed that the younger generations are more distant from politics than adults. Interest in politics and the level of education achieved are closely connected: in 1992, 1997 and 2003 interest in politics is strongest among adolescents and young adults with a higher level of education and weakest among those with a lower level of education.

Another important cognitive prerequisite for participating in political activities is subjective political competence, which describes the assessment of one’s own political skills.

The indicators of political involvement presented here are a reliable clusters not only in terms of theory, but also empirically, determining attitudes that are closely connected and stable over time in their combination.

1.3 Satisfaction with Democracy and Trust in Politics

Aspects of political culture characterized in the introduction as output dimensions have been included in the C.A.P. Youth Survey in three sets of questions: questions about people’s satisfaction with democracy, about their trust in institutions and about the issue of whether and to what extent, from the perspective of the interviewees, the political system and its actors respond to the citizens’ interests.

The question on people’s satisfaction with democracy in the Republic of Kazakhstan aimed to evaluate the reality of democracy and its achievements. Achievements concerning developmental trends must be seen against the backdrop of very high satisfaction with democracy in Kazakhstan in 1990. Empirical findings for the total Kazakhstan population show that political developments in the post-Soviet Union and independence in the former Soviet republics created a ‘belief in a sort of omnipotent achievement potential of democracy’. After a distinct phase of disenchantment, consolidation followed in the mid 1990s, but approval ratings dropped again at the beginning of the new millennium and reached a low in 2003.

Educational effects are conspicuous. In 1992 there were hardly any differences between the three educational groups as far as satisfaction with democracy was concerned, whereas in 1997 these differences were clearly visible.
and increased further in the 5-year period up to 2003 (see Table 2). Satisfaction with democracy dropped particularly among interviewees with a lower or medium level of education. Hence, educational disadvantage seems to lead increasingly to a general dissatisfaction with the political system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of education</th>
<th>1992</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In this table the categories ‘very’ and ‘quite’ are combined.

The indicator ‘level of education’ is the highest leaving qualification level achieved by young people who had already left.

Educational differences corresponding to different degrees of satisfaction with democracy in the bivariate analysis of 2003 becomes an influential factor, among others, if further aspects are included in the analysis. Satisfaction with one’s own life circumstances, social orientation and the assessment of ‘justice with regard to social differences in the Republic in general’, as well as ‘one’s fair share’ of social prosperity, prove to be more important than the level of education attained. What is interesting here is not that ‘objective’ indicators of life circumstances, such as standard of living or income, but their subjective evaluation, measured in terms of approval and fairness, are relevant to satisfaction with democracy. As far as satisfaction with democracy is concerned, educational differences not only depend on different cognitive abilities and levels of knowledge—as reflected in the relevance of uncertainties of orientation—but also on different evaluations of life circumstances, these in turn being closely connected to the level of education achieved. In other words, subjective discontent and the experience of ‘injustice’ or discrimination with regard to one’s own life circumstances, present more frequently in groups with a lower level of education, tend to result in less satisfaction with democracy.

Moreover, all three waves show that trust increases in proportion to the level of education achieved. This increase is affected mainly by lower and medium level education groups; mainly by the higher-level education group. This means that as far as the higher-level education group is concerned there are no differences in political trust nowadays.

Summary and Discussion

With regard to the question: ‘The evolution of political culture of young people in Kazakhstan?’, we can draw the following conclusions in the context of the input, system and output dimensions of the political system. On the whole, there are obvious differences between the groups of young people, however, in some important aspects convergence in their political attitudes can be observed.

If we look at the input aspect (e.g. political interest and a self-belief in their competence to deal with political issues) we find no strong decrease across the entire survey period.

This contradicts common public opinion, which imagines a constant decline in political interest among young people. Although the level of subjective political competence might appear to be low, its evaluation is ultimately a normative issue and is measured against prevailing models of ‘young citizens with political competence’.

However, many studies have shown considerable variations in political interest over the years, so that reliable statements can only be made for long-term assessments (see Hoffmann-Lange, 2001). Relatively consistent results are to be found when we look at differences in political interest in various age groups: younger people and those who are educationally disadvantaged are less interested in politics than older and better educated ones.
Many political indicators distinguish clearly between the political attitudes of adolescents and young adults with a higher level of education and those with a medium or lower level of education. Youth who had gone through the higher level of education were more likely to have a ‘positive’ orientation: an increased trust in politics or, at least, no decrease; no decrease or only a slight one in the approval ratings for democracy, etc. In contrast, many political indicators show that in groups with a medium or lower level of education, which in 2003 included more than half of all adolescents and young adults, there was strong dissatisfaction with and less confidence in the political system. As could be demonstrated, these attitudes were influenced, among other things, by people’s evaluation of their own living conditions, measured in terms of satisfaction and justice. An increasing differentiation process according to different levels of education could be observed. The subjective experience of social inequality seems to have become more important in the political evaluations of adolescents and young adults. The ongoing crisis in the labor market and the decline in welfare state benefits in Kazakhstan may, therefore, initiate a growing skepticism concerning the political system, particularly among disadvantaged young people.

References
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