Political Opposition versus Sources of Power in Central Asia

A Case Study of Kazakhstan

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January, 2025

Declaration of Work

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Acknowledgements

During the challenging yet enriching years of my doctoral studies, I had the privilege of meeting incredible individuals who played a crucial role in my academic journey. I am particularly grateful for the unique opportunity to conduct this research as part of the Innovative Training Network (ITN) CASPIAN project, generously supported under the Marie Curie scheme, along with a scholarship from the School of Law and Government at Dublin City University (DCU).

My deepest appreciation goes to my principal supervisor, Dr. Donnacha Ó Beacháin, for his unwavering guidance and feedback at every stage of my research project. His support and encouragement in those moments when moving ahead seemed extremely hard was crucial for me. Your mentorship has been invaluable, and I am thankful for the encouragement to explore new ideas and overcome challenges.

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my external supervisor, Dr. Rico Isaacs whose guidance, expertise, and steadfast support have been instrumental throughout this academic path. Your enthusiasm and interest in my research topic was an additional motivation for me to constantly move forward and progress in my research.

A special note of thanks goes to Prof. Eileen Connolly, Prof. John Doyle, Dr. Alex Baturo, and Prof. Iain McMenamin for their valuable feedback and guidance throughout the research process. I would also like to thank my colleagues, especially Mariat Imayeva, Maira Zeynilova, Aytan Gahramanova and Cristina Boboc for their support, encouragement, and inspiration throughout my years of PhD studies. I feel very lucky that I had a chance to have your support and to share so many wonderful moments with you.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family, my husband, my daughter and my parents for their immense support and encouragement, providing strength and motivation throughout my entire PhD journey. Special thanks to my collogues at work who supported by PhD journey with unwavering assistance, encouragement and understanding.

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List of Abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
CEC	Central Election Commission
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
DVK	Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan
EIU	Economist Intelligence Unit
GONGO	Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations
ILIF	International Legal Initiative Foundation
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IRPT	Islamic Renaissance Party
KIBHR	Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law"
NCPT	National Council of Public Trust
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OSDP	The All-National Social Democratic Party
RNPK	Republican People's Party of Kazakhstan
SDPK	Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan
UTO	United Tajik Opposition

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Abstract

Political Opposition versus Sources of Power in Central Asia

A Case Study of Kazakhstan

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This study undertakes a comprehensive examination of the evolution and transformation of political opposition in Kazakhstan over the past three decades. By adopting a tripartite typology introduced by Kazakh political scientist Andrey Chebotarev, the study classifies the chronological development of Kazakh political opposition into three distinct periods: the initial decade of independence (1991-1998) represented through *Institutional Opposition,* a subsequent phase (1998-2012) focusing on *Individual Opposition,* and the most recent decade (2012-2022), emphasizing the emergence of *Civic Opposition.* The primary objective is to shed light on the opposition's developmental path through examining trends, identifying distinctive features, and investigating the complex dynamics of its interaction with the Kazakh regime.

The research argues that the evolution and transformation of political opposition in Kazakhstan throughout the past three decades are fundamentally linked to its complex relationship with the governing authorities. Notably, the elimination of *Institutional Opposition* paved the way for the emergence of *Individual Opposition,* and subsequently, the eradication of both *Institutional* and *Individual Opposition* gave rise to spontaneous forms of opposition activism, particularly in the form of the so called *Civic Opposition.* This dynamic interplay has not only shaped the regime responses to the opposition's actions, but it has also played an important role in shaping the trajectory and adaptability of Kazakh political opposition, within the diverse landscape of local politics.

The central argument of this research states that in the context of Kazakhstan complete eradication of both *Institutional* and *Individual Opposition* by the Kazakh regime catalysed the emergence of the *Civic Opposition,* manifested primarily as unforeseen and uncontrollable instances of widespread public unrests and spontaneous protests, posing a serious threat to the stability and longevity of the Kazakh regime. Although authoritarian regimes may initially seek to remove dissent in order to consolidate power, empirical findings from the case of Kazakhstan suggests that even a vocal opposition can serve as an avenue to address social grievances, while also potentially contributing to regime stability by offering a platform for dissent and preventing large scale mobilisation against the authoritarian regime.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The examination of political opposition is an essential component in the broader exploration of political dynamics within any given political system. Scholars, such as Ionescu and de Madariaga,[1] exemplify the fundamental role of opposition agency in shaping the course of governance, policymaking and societal change. They argue that opposition is an instinct aspect rooted in human nature and consider it a "logically and morphologically, the dialectic counterpart of power in the most advanced and institutionalised form of political conflict."

However, within the authoritarian settings, understanding the concept and practice of political opposition becomes especially complex, where the very existence of opposition forces is often met with resistance, repression and coercion by the ruling authorities. Notably, despite the coercive measures frequently enforced by authoritarian regimes, political opposition manages to maintain its political activity, albeit through alternative, more informal, and underground forms and manifestations. This phenomenon is particularly evident in non-democratic environments where opposition forces seek unconventional means to express their grievances and confront the authoritarian governments.

While there is a substantial volume of research dedicated to defining and conceptualising political opposition in both democratic and non-democratic settings, a more detailed examination of the early social science literature reveals notable limitations in understanding the essence of political opposition within an authoritarian environment, particularly in the context of countries of Central Asian, such as Kazakhstan.

As will be elaborated in greater detail in Chapter Two - *Conceptual Framework and Literature Review* - the classical scholarship, particularly those authored by Dahl,[2] Ionescu and de Madariaga,[3] Schapiro,[4] Barker,[5] Helms[6] and others, have undeniably enriched our understanding of political opposition in democracies by shedding light on the organizational

[1] Ghiţă Ionescu and Isabel de Madariaga, *Opposition: Past and Present of a Political Institution* (London: Watts, 1968).
[2] Robert A. Dahl, "Political Opposition in Western Democracies," In *Comparative Government: A Reader*, ed. J. Blondel (London: Macmillan Education UK, 1969), 229–234.
[3] Ionescu and de Madariaga. "Opposition."
[4] Brigid Laffan, "Collective Power Europe? (The Government and Opposition/Leonard Schapiro Lecture 2022)," *Government and Opposition* (2023): 1–18.
[5] Rodney S. Barker, "Studies in Opposition" (London: Macmillan, 1971), 1–30
[6] Ludger Helms, "Five Ways of Institutionalising Political Opposition: Lessons from the Advanced Democracies," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 1 (2004): 22–54.

features of opposition, as well as the patterns of relationship between the government and opposition groups. However, these seminal works often fall short in providing a comprehensive theoretical examination of the concept and rationale of political opposition in non-democratic contexts, primarily defining opposition within established democratic systems as seeking power and influencing legislative processes.

The traditional scholarly approach often analyzes political opposition almost exclusively through the lens of political party systems and party competition, leaning heavily towards an institutional[7] and normative emphasis.[8] Moreover, the classical literature tends to narrow its focus on specific categories of opposition activity, namely parliamentary opposition, overlooking extra-parliamentary forms, such as political movements, informal organizations, or individual activists.[9] The majority of these studies tend to concentrate on the functioning of political regimes, rather than investigating the actions and influence of political opposition. Often opposition has been observed within the context of its potential role in democratisation processes or as a co-subject under the political regime, rather than being considered as an autonomous and independent phenomenon.[10]

However, there exists a relatively small yet significant body of theoretical research on political opposition within non-democratic and non-competitive political systems, which has primarily explored the diverse forms and methods through which dissent is articulated in authoritarian settings. For instance, Giovanni Sartori[11] has highlighted diverse manifestations of political opposition that extend beyond political parties. In a similar manner, authors such as Blondel[12] and Helms[13] have stressed the significance of the extra-parliamentary traits of political opposition within non-democratic systems. The complex interaction between the regimes and the diverse features, actions and typologies of political opposition in non-democratic contexts has been a central focus of scholars such as Blondel and Lust-Okar. Notably, Lust-Okar's seminal work in 2005 pertaining to authoritarianism in the Arab world introduced the pivotal

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7 Ionescu and de Madariaga, "Opposition."
8 Roger Southall, "Opposition in South Africa: Issues and Problems," *Democratization* 8, no. 1 (2001): 1–24.
9 Ionescu and de Madariaga, "Opposition."
10 Lust-Okar, Ellen. Structuring conflict in the Arab world: Incumbents, opponents, and institutions. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
11 Giovanni Sartori, "Opposition and Control: Problems and Prospects," In *Studies in Opposition*, ed. Rodney Barker (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1971), 31–37."
12 Jean Blondel, "Political Opposition in the Contemporary World," *Government and Opposition* 32, no. 4 (1997): 462–486.
13 Helms, "Five Ways of Institutionalizing Political Opposition."

concept of the "structure of contestation" as a determinant of which actors are prohibited from engaging in the political arena.[14]

Scholars such as Barbara Junisbai[15] and well as Ryan Kennedy[16] researching on political opposition in the countries of former Soviet Union and specifically Kazakhstan also tended to focus on the inner workings and dynamics of political regimes, although allocating less emphasis to the actions and agency of political opposition itself. Frequently, the role of opposition has been examined within the context of its potential impact on democratisation processes or as a secondary component, sharing the spotlight with the political regime, rather than being analyzed as a self-standing and autonomous phenomenon.

Furthermore, research by Natalie Brack and Sharon Weinblum has expanded the definition of political opposition within authoritarian contexts to include organized actors beyond political parties, advocating for a broader understanding of opposition.[17] Vladimir Gelman,[18] William Foltz,[19] and Bassam Tibi[20] have also delved into the varied forms of political opposition within non-democratic systems, with an emphasis on factors such as parties, politicians and cleavages. Rico Isaac's latest book, "Political Opposition in Authoritarianism Exit, Voice and Loyalty in Kazakhstan" represents another significant contribution to the existing literature on political opposition within authoritarian settings, with a particular focus on Kazakhstan, and examines the different typology of Kazakh political opposition and the degree to which opposition has shaped the dynamics of the authoritarian regime in Kazakhstan over the past three decades.[21]

Thus, expanding upon the existing conceptual framework, this thesis seeks to conceptualise the diverse roles and functions undertaken by political opposition in Kazakhstan and redirect the focus on opposition as a vital part of the political system. The study aims to take a step further from the existing literature and bridge the gap between the limited notion of political opposition,

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14 Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World*.
15 Junisbai, Barbara, and Azamat Junisbai. "The Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan: A Case Study in Economic Liberalization, Intraelite Cleavage, and Political Opposition." Demokratizatsiya 13, no. 3 (2005).
16 Kennedy, Ryan. "A colorless election: The 2005 presidential election in Kazakhstan, and what it means for the future of the opposition." Problems of Post-Communism 53, no. 6 (2006): 46-58.
17 Nathalie Brack and Sharon Weinblum, "What Do We Mean by 'Political Opposition': A Theoretical Perspective," *Journal of Legislative Studies* 14, no. 1 (2008): 6–19.
18 Sulaimanova, Elnura. "The Portrait of Kyrgyz Politics through the Prism of Opposition Activism." (2010).
19 William Foltz, (1973) "Political Oppositions in Single Party States of Tropical Africa," in *Regimes and Oppositions*, ed. Robert Dahl (New Haven: Yale University Press), 143–170.
20 Tibi Bassam, "Politische Opposition in Westasien und in Afrika; Einige vergleichende und typisierende Betrachtungen," in *Politische Opposition in Deutschland und im internationalen Vergleich*, ed. Walter Euchner, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 155–172.
21 Rico Isaacs, *Political Opposition in Authoritarianism: Exit, Voice and Loyalty in Kazakhstan* (Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2022).

including institutionalised forms and the broader spectrum of opposition activities. By expanding the scope of the research, the study aims to examine diverse forms of opposition beyond political parties, including opposition and social movements, opposition networks, political groups, civic activists and trade unions and analyze what constitutes political opposition in non-competitive regimes and particularly Kazakhstan and their complex interplay with the Kazakh government over the years.

Furthermore, the study seeks to systematically analyze regime's reactions to various forms of opposition manifestation over the years, allowing to present a broader picture of opposition activity as well as authoritarian responses to various forms of opposition activity. As a concluding analysis, the study attempts to uncover, how and if the agency of opposition might contribute to the durability of the regime in Kazakhstan. This comprehensive examination of political opposition extends beyond the specific case of Kazakhstan, holding broader implications for understanding opposition dynamics in wider authoritarian context.

The primary research questions to be addressed are as follows:

(1) *What are the nature and forms of political opposition in Kazakhstan, and how it has evolved overtime?*

(2) How has the Kazakh regime responded to these different forms of political opposition?

(3) To what extent might opposition agency shape regime durability in Kazakhstan?

Hence, to attain these objectives, the initial step involves examining and mapping out the trajectory of evolution and transformation undergone by political opposition in Kazakhstan from 1989 to 2022. This will be achieved through the division of the timeline into three distinct periods: 1989–1998, 1998–2011 and 2011–2022, while also identifying varying types of political opposition characterising each era of opposition activity. The categorisation of political opposition in Kazakhstan and its evolutionary analysis relies on a comprehensive threefold typology of *Institutional, Individual* and *Civic Opposition,* introduced by Kazakh political scientist Andrey Chebotarev. The typology provides a nuanced lens through which to understand the multifaceted landscape of political opposition in Kazakhstan.

The threefold classification system considers the diverse approaches and attitudes of opposition groups, offering a more context-specific analysis tailored to the intricate dynamics of the

Kazakh political environment.[22] By emphasizing the evolving character of political opposition in relation to changing presidential leadership, the typology allows for a comprehensive examination of how opposition forces adapt and respond to shifts in political power, spanning both the tenure of the first President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and the current leadership under the second President, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. This approach not only improves our understanding of the Kazakh political scene, but it also contributes to the broader discourse on political opposition in authoritarian regimes by giving a case-specific framework that captures the distinctive problems and dynamics of the Kazakh environment.

The first category, *Institutional Opposition*, includes political parties, political movements, organizations, and any type of bloc or alliance created between political parties. This category refers to the period from 1989 to 1998, which witnessed the emergence of grassroots political movements and the formation of the first political parties in the early 1990s. The research will focus on analyzing the organizational structures, ideology, and strategies used by political parties and movements, as well as exploring the dynamics of cooperation and competition with the Kazakh regime throughout this period.

The second category, *Individual Opposition*, comprises of individuals who express their discontent with the system. This category primarily includes former government elite members and defectors, as well as individuals representing the *Oligarchic Opposition*.[23] Spanning from 1998 to 2011, the research will examine the role of individual opposition figures who were once part of the ruling regime but later turned against it. The study will dig into the motivations, techniques, and influence of these opposition figures in their fight against the Kazakh government.

The third category, *Civic Opposition*, refers to a self-organized opposition force that lacks any institutional or organizational form. This category, known as *Narodnaya Opozitsia*, ("*Civic Opposition*") represents the period from 2011 to 2022. Civic activists and grassroots movements have emerged as major subjects in Kazakhstan's political landscape in recent years, marking a shift toward more decentralised and spontaneous forms of resistance. During this phase, the investigation will examine the history and development of grassroots movements, protest

[22] Andrey Chebotarev, Political thought of Sovereign Kazakhstan, Origins, Evolution, Modernity (2021) https://www.nlrk.kz/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4099:politicheskaya-mysl-suverennogo-kazakhstana-istoki-evolyutsiya-sovremennost&catid=131&lang=en&Itemid=491
[23] Isaacs, *Political Opposition in Authoritarianism*.

actions, and civil society initiatives that have become powerful channels for dissent against the current government.

Through the analysis of distinct types and the nature of political opposition within each historical period, the research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the developmental trajectory of the opposition and its transformation over time. The investigation aims to determine trends and defining features of opposition activities and examine the specific responses of the regime and the nature of the relationship between the opposition and the ruling regime throughout the years. The analysis seeks to shed light on the ways in which opposition have been structured, shaped, and managed by the Kazakh regime and how that can explain the varying paths of opposition and the evolving dynamics of their interaction with the Kazakh regime across different eras.

As the following chapters will uncover in more detail, the presented research argues that the evolution and transformation of Kazakh political opposition throughout the past three decades are fundamentally linked to its complex relationship with the governing authorities. This dynamic interplay has not only shaped the regime's responses to the opposition's actions, but it has also played an important role in shaping the trajectory and adaptability of Kazakh political opposition, within the diverse landscape of local politics. The relationship between the government and the opposition has been instrumental in defining the various nature and forms of local political opposition over the years. Notably, the elimination of *Institutional Opposition* paved the way for the emergence of *Individual Opposition*, and subsequently, the eradication of both *Institutional* and *Individual Opposition* gave rise to spontaneous forms of opposition activism, particularly in the form of *Civic Opposition*, currently being the most prevalent form of dissent in Kazakhstan.

While analyzing the history of political opposition during the three distinct eras of opposition activism in Kazakhstan, several noteworthy observations come to light. The early manifestation of Kazakh political opposition, represented through *Institutional Opposition* in the form of political parties and movements, served as a source of legitimacy for the government, supporting its policies during the early years of the country's independence. President Nazarbayev adopted a strategic approach that avoided overt violent crackdowns in favor of subtler methods such as referenda and constitutional changes to neutralise the opposition. This strategy led to the gradual

weakening and eventual elimination of parliamentary political opposition, leading to its decline and loss of influence.

In the second era of opposition activism, the emergence of the so called *Individual Opposition* was a direct consequence of the Nazarbayev regime's efforts to eradicate *Institutional Opposition*, strengthen presidential authority, and expand control over resources. This newer form of opposition posed a substantial threat to the regime, prompting a multifaceted response that included highly repressive measures, including personal and organizational sanctions, targeting leading opposition figures and their affiliated parties.

In case of the third phase of opposition activism, the absence of active opposition forces as a result of almost full elimination of *Institutional* and *Individual Opposition* triggered the formation of the *Civic Opposition*, which drove ordinary civil society members to engage in street protests to defend their rights. It led to the emergence of a different form of opposition, characterised by grassroots, spontaneous, and activist-based movements, represented by civil society groups and protest movements, making it challenging for the regime to predict and control the societal dissent.

Drawing upon the empirical findings laid out in this thesis, the central argument of this research states that the absence of credible opposition in Kazakhstan, stemming from the near-complete elimination of both *Institutional* and *Individual Opposition* over the past two decades, has given rise to what is referred to as *Civic Opposition*. The lack of a viable alternative has had two implications. The Kazakh state has lost an essential communication channel with civil society, which was formerly maintained through opposition groups. Second, dissatisfied citizens, who no longer trust opposition leaders to address their grievances, have become increasingly proactive, pushing for their rights. This shift has been visible in the increasing frequency of protests and civic uprisings since 2011, which has gained significant traction, notably since 2019 and the events that occurred during the January 2022 (“Bloody January”) protests that swept across the country.

Recent widespread public protests and demonstrations in Kazakhstan illustrate the unforeseen and far-reaching consequences of suppressing political opposition. While authoritarian governments may strive to consolidate power by eliminating resistance, empirical data demonstrates that the absence of a credible opposition might have unintended repercussions. This calls into question the widely accepted concept that authoritarian regimes benefit from the

elimination of all forms of dissent in order to sustain their authority. In case of Kazakhstan, the government's strategy of isolating and destroying opposition members had unexpected consequences. Authorities wrongly assumed that the absence of opposition would cease protests, leaving them without a dialogue partner.

The events in Kazakhstan demonstrate the complex link that exists between political authority and societal stability. While suppressing opposition may appear to be beneficial for short-term stability, it might inadvertently produce conditions conducive to widespread turmoil and public mobilisation. Kazakhstan's turmoil shows that the opposition not only functions as a check on governmental power, but also as a channel for citizens' concerns and grievances. In its absence, discontent may explode into large-scale protests, showing the delicate balance authoritarian regimes must maintain in order to sustain control and stability. While authoritarian regimes may initially seek to remove dissent in order to consolidate power, empirical findings from this study show that a complete absence of opposition can accidentally fuel civic uprisings, leading to new dangers to regime stability. As a result, even the vocal opposition can serve as an avenue for addressing social grievances while also potentially contributing to regime stability by offering a platform for dissent and preventing large scale mobilisation against the ruling regime.

The case of Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan has been selected as a well-suited case for the investigation into the emergence and evolution of political opposition in authoritarian settings. This choice is motivated by Kazakhstan's distinctive political trajectory and its evolution towards an authoritarian model of governance, since gaining its independence. On the other hand, the rationale behind examining the development of opposition in this type of authoritarian settings was driven by the necessity to analyze the complex environment within which Kazakh opposition has operated over the years and its overall dynamic with the Kazakh government.

In response to an unexpected transition in early 1990s, the country rapidly adapted and managed to establish what is known as a "facade democracy."[24] This transformation involved adopting a development model influenced by Western principles, embracing elements of democratic governance, a market economy, elections, opposition political parties, the rule of law, and civil rights. Thus, following the adoption of the new Constitution in 1995, which gave significant

[24] Merritt, Robin Nicole. "Facade Democracy: Democratic Transition In Kazakhstan And Uzbekistan." (2004). https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/143

authority to the president, Nazarbaev built a strong and personalised presidential regime. He was commonly regarded as a "visionary" leader, "founder of the nation," and a "wise father,"[25] who rescued the country from political instability and placed it on a path of effective socio-economic transformation. However, this period of leadership also witnessed the consistent deterioration of civil liberties, freedom of media, and the active suppression of all forms of political opposition.[26]

Since the early 1990s, Nazarbaev gradually destroyed independent thinking, civic participation, democratic activism, and freedom of media through different coercive and repressive methods as well as effectively secured the loyalty of his in-group supporter and marginalised and isolated all forms of political competitors. Even with the transition of power in 2019 and the appointment of the new leader of the country—Kassym-Jomart Tokayev—along with the introduction of several democratic reforms,[27] the overall situation has undergone minimal change as indicated by Freedom House ranking Kazakhstan as a "Not Free".[28]

In contrast to other states in the region, Kazakhstan has a proven distinct pattern of patronage politics, political leadership, economic resources, and ethnic relations, which has resulted in a particular form of legitimacy and authoritarian stability within the country. The president has capitalised on the country's independence to advance his own interests, utilising the Soviet apparatus to regulate his political influence, as well as harness the country's vast natural resources through patronage politics to consolidate and manage his political power. Economic prosperity has become a cornerstone of Kazakhstan's vision of the country's future, at the same time rejecting the notion of a universal model of democracy or path to democratisation for the country. This gave Nazarbayev a considerable resource to promote economic well-being and facilitate social stability for certain groups of the population, in exchange for political freedoms, relying upon formal and informal patronage networks.

In the meantime, the Kazakh political opposition has faced systematic marginalisation, severe repression, and manipulation at the hands of the government. Political opposition can hardly be

[25] Mariya Y. Omelicheva, *Democracy in Central Asia: Competing perspectives and alternative strategies* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 75.
[26] "Kazakhstan: Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report," Freedom House, https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/freedom-world/2023. (Access date 01.09.2023)
[27] S. E Cornell, S. F. Starr, and A. Barro, "Political and Economic Reforms in Kazakhstan Under President Tokayev." Silk Road Papers (2021).
[28] Kazakhstan: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report
https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/freedom-world/2022

described as robust against the existing regime, promoting a strong ideological agenda, or having broad public support, currently with no significant representation in the parliament or any influence on the ruling regime.

Accordingly, the political environment in which Kazakh political opposition currently finds itself has transformed and adapted political opposition and the culture of opposing the regime into various forms and ways of expression other than the standard institutional forms of political parties and movements. In brief, after three decades, despite initial hopeful expectations and efforts of the West, instead of undergoing a transitional phase, Kazakhstan has undergone a process of adaptation to maintain authoritarian stability, and as a result, remains firmly categorized as a "Not Free" country.[29] Consequently, the exploration of this single case study of Kazakhstan serves as a window into the broader authoritarian context, shedding light on the peculiarities of opposition and their interrelation with the Kazakhstan's authoritarian regime.

Kazakhstan serves as a compelling case study that contribute to our understanding of the dynamics taking place within authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet setting. In terms of political development, economic dependencies, and power consolidation tactics, Kazakhstan provides key case study for trends it has set for Central Asia and the greater post-Soviet region. The situation in Kazakhstan exemplifies a common legacy of Soviet governance: the process of adjusting to autonomy and involvement with international power relations, hence it is a very typical example of the prevailing framework of authoritarianism within the given context.

The political development of Kazakhstan mirrors that of other post-Soviet countries, being greatly influenced by its historical connection with the Soviet regime. The political systems have retained part of the centralized authority and reliance on informal networks—a legacy that continues to influence its political environment. In fact, the continued emphasis on stability rather than democratic principles reveals the tenacity of Soviet political culture throughout Central Asia.

From an economic perspective, Kazakhstan, like most of the resource-abundant countries in Central Asia, leans heavily on natural resources, especially oil and gas, as a source for underpinning authority. The control over the revenues generated by those resources has allowed the regime to build the patronage systems that underpin its stability while foreclosing options

[29] Kazakhstan: Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report
https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/freedom-world/2023

for political opposition. This dynamic has come to symbolize many post-Soviet countries, especially those in Central Asia, like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where dependence on resources is central to the survival of their regimes and limits options for economic diversification, making them vulnerable to external shocks.

The Kazakh regime also exemplifies the approach to authoritarian governance through co-optation, repression, and controlled pluralism, becoming hallmarks in the Kazakh regime's authoritarian mode of governance. Government sustains an appearance of stability and legitimacy through the suppression of institutional opposition and managing dissent via a combination of incentives and restraints. While the rise of civic protest movements has presented some challenges, it has not really changed the nature of the regime's hold on power, further underlining the representativeness of Kazakhstan within the authoritarian framework.

Kazakhstan represents a case that can help explore the multifaceted nature of authoritarianism in post-Soviet countries, especially those with a strong tradition of centralized power. Studying Kazakhstan contributes not only to the comprehension of internal processes within its government but also to the understanding of the resistance and adaptability of authoritarian regimes in comparable contexts as well as to outline specific national adaptations of the shared historical and geopolitical challenge.

Structure of the thesis

The thesis is structured into eight chapters, with the introductory chapter serving as the foundation of the study.

Chapter 2 - Conceptual Framework and Literature Review: The aim of this chapter is to present existing conceptual framework on political opposition and their forms and nature in authoritarian settings. The chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the existing body of literature on political opposition within authoritarian regimes and the complex dynamics affecting relationships with the authoritarian governments. Furthermore, it highlights notable gaps in the literature in this field, in which this research seeks to make a valuable contribution to the established body of knowledge on this particular subject.

The conceptual chapter comprises two main sections addressing the central research questions of the dissertation. The first section establishes the conceptual framework for understanding the diverse forms and nature of political opposition in authoritarian settings. By applying the existing conceptualisations of political opposition in democratic and non-democratic settings to

the case study of Kazakhstan, the study aims to provide answers to the questions regarding the characteristics and forms of political opposition in Kazakhstan and how these has evolved over time. The analysis delves into the ways in which political opposition has been defined and conceptualised in authoritarian regimes, both within traditional political studies and in contemporary scholarship that focuses on opposition within authoritarian settings.

The second section explores how the regime responds to these opposition forms. It traces the evolution of scholarly thinking on authoritarian politics and examines the strategies and methods employed by authoritarian regimes against different forms of political opposition. These tactics are systematically structured around the "Three Pillars of Stability" (repression, legitimation, and co-optation) and the 'Menu of Manipulation.' The latter involves manipulative mechanisms within democratic institutions, such as electoral fraud, misuse of state resources, and legal obstacles, aimed at isolating opposition groups.

By scrutinizing these tactics and strategies, the study attempts to analyze the agency of political opposition within authoritarian regimes and explore its potential implications for the regime's survival in Kazakhstan. Drawing upon a broader body of literature on democracy, authoritarianism and the role of opposition within non-competitive regimes, the goal is to develop applicable criteria within the broader authoritarian context that can be applied to the specific case of Kazakhstan.

Chapter 3 - Methodological Issues and Research Framework: Following the conceptualisation of the key terms in the theoretical and literature review chapter, the methodology section outlines the research methodology, which involves a combination of qualitative, inductive, and single case study approaches. Fieldwork for this study was conducted over an extended period from 2016 to 2018, encompassing Kazakhstan, but also Kyrgyzstan. Throughout this extensive research undertaking, a total of 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse group of participants, including party officials, MPs, local government representatives, civil society members, journalists, and more. The employment of an inductive approach was particularly crucial in understanding the complexity of Kazakhstan's opposition beyond its formal, institutionalised manifestations, revealing informal aspects of political opposition in authoritarian settings and particularly Kazakhstan.

Chapter 4 - Divergence of Authoritarian Regimes and Nature of Political Opposition in Central Asia and Kazakhstan: This chapter provides a general overview of the development

of authoritarianism in Central Asia, and particularly Kazakhstan. It investigates the historical remnants of the pre-Soviet, Soviet, as well as post-Soviet politics, examining how these historical legacies have shaped the character and dynamics of authoritarian regimes and political opposition in the region.

Later, the chapter scrutinizes the diversity of political regimes across Central Asia, identifying the key factors that have given rise to varying forms of authoritarian governance in the region. This contextual understanding of authoritarianism in Kazakhstan offers valuable insight into the challenges and opportunities encountered by political opposition groups and civil society actors over the years.

As a conclusion, the chapter offers a comprehensive analysis, encompassing the general attributes and various dimensions of political opposition within the Central Asian region, with a specific focus on Kazakhstan. Overall, this chapter lays crucial groundwork by examining the historical context, the nature of the regime that has evolved in Kazakhstan, and its overarching impact on the composition and character of opposition political forces within the country, particularly certain alternative and informal methods of challenging the regime that Kazakh political opposition has transformed into over the years.

Chapter 5 - Mapping the Landscape of Political Opposition in Kazakhstan (1989–1998) - Institutionally Organized Opposition: Chapter 5 offers a comprehensive exploration of the initial phase of the Kazakh political opposition following independence in 1991. The chapter investigates the emergence of the institutional forms of opposition to the government, mostly represented through political parties and movements. Since the institutionalised opposition was mainly concentrated in Parliament and posed the most significant challenge to the president's authority, the primary focus of this chapter's analysis revolves around the dynamic interaction between these two branches of government: the presidency and the *Institutional Opposition* embedded within the political framework. This period of opposition activism has been marked by the gradual consolidation of control over the legislature, Nazarbayev's reinforcement of presidential powers, tightened restrictions on political participation, and the elimination of *Institutional Opposition*—parliamentary opposition.

This chapter introduces a central argument that emphasizes the complex evolution of Kazakhstan's early political opposition. Despite maintaining opposing views on certain government initiatives, the newly formed Kazakh opposition served as a source of legitimacy

within the Parliament and frequently aligned with government agendas during the early years of independence. In response, President Nazarbayev did not see parliamentary opposition as an imminent threat, preferring subtler methods over overt and violent crackdowns.

The president methodically eliminated parliamentary opposition by employing indirect and quasi-legal tactics such as referendums and constitutional changes. This planned approach gradually weakened and left political parties and movements ineffective. These strategic efforts undermined their power and credibility, showing a deliberate effort to restructure the political landscape in favor of the ruling regime.

Therefore, given the lack of serious institutional opposition inside the parliament, the landscape of political opposition in Kazakhstan has shifted, diversifying into new forms. This included individuals who have defected from political circles as well as figures from the business elite. This group collectively constitutes what is commonly referred to as the *Individual Opposition,* which is central focus of the forthcoming chapter.

Chapter 6 - Mapping the Landscape of Political Opposition in Kazakhstan (1998–2011) - Individual Political Opposition: Chapter 6 focuses on a subsequent period, spanning from 1998 to 2012, where new dynamics and challenges influenced the nature of political opposition. The second phase of Kazakhstan's political trajectory has been marked by the emergence of new influential groups within the ruling elite, who were dissatisfied with the government's policies. They gradually competed to expand their spheres of interest and influence, with the primary goal of exerting control over the president and gaining access to economic resources, leading to significant disruptions in the balance of power among the political elite and escalating tensions between the government and opposition entities.

The government responded with a combination of highly repressive measures, including personal and organizational sanctions against leading opposition figures and their political parties, as well as institutional adaptations such as changes in key laws and the constitution to weaken opposition elements.[30] The regime also effectively isolated opposition parties from society through strict laws that hindered their ability to organize rallies and engage with citizens. Furthermore, the regime created a divided political environment within the opposition, instilling fear of repression while offering co-optation to opposition parties, which led many opposition leaders to either become loyal to the regime or withdraw from politics. Nazarbayev's strategy of

[30] Rico Isaacs "Political Opposition in Authoritarianism Exit, Voice and Loyalty in Kazakhstan", 2022

nurturing systemic political opposition, in the form of regime-sustaining political parties, aimed to maintain a facade of democratic legitimacy while tightly controlling the political landscape and preserving the regime's power.

The structure established by Nazarbayev, characterised by centralisation, political space purging, control over independent media, and mild authoritarianism with a balance among elites, while maintaining checks and balances, has not proven effective. By reducing both institutional opposition and disloyal elements within the political and business spheres, Nazarbayev aimed at ensuring short-term stability. However, this approach inadvertently led to the emergence of a distinct form of opposition - grassroots, spontaneous, and activist-driven. This opposition is represented by civil society groups and protest movements, posing challenges for the regime in terms of predictability and control, as extensively examined in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter 7 - Mapping the Landscape of Political Opposition in Kazakhstan (2012–2022) - Civic Political Opposition. Chapter 7 concentrates on the most recent period, 2012–2022 encompassing the last decade of Kazakhstan's political landscape. By analyzing the characteristics and variations of political opposition during this period, the research provides insights into the present state of opposition activity in Kazakhstan.

The political upheaval in Kazakhstan since 2011 has marked a significant shift in opposition dynamics, with the emergence of *Civic Opposition* led by ordinary citizens and grassroots movements driven primarily by economic and social grievances. This transformation highlighted the central role of economic inequality and public frustration as a catalyst for protests. The regime's heavy-handed use of repressive measures backfired, resulting in uncontrolled mass mobilisation and exposing the fragility of the authoritarian rule-economic prosperity narrative. The repression of opposition entities had weakened them, leading civil society members to take to the streets to fight for their rights.

Thus, the chapter provides several key observations from the above-mentioned analysis: economic grievances and social issues emerged as the primary triggers for public protests in Kazakhstan, playing one of the central role in fueling public discontent over time; the regime's heavy reliance on repressive measures backfired, leading to uncontrolled mass mobilisation and widespread public uprisings, exposing the fragility of the Nazarbayev's success narrative of political stability; and the eradication of active opposition forces and opposition leaders pushed ordinary civil society members to engage in street protests to defend their rights.

Chapter 8 - Conclusion: The study concludes with an extensive evaluation of the empirical findings collected through a thorough examination of the evolution of political opposition in Kazakhstan over the last three decades. The goal is to provide a systematic examination of the complex dynamics that determine the relationship between the regime and opposition groups within the Kazakh political landscape. The concluding chapter addresses the primary research questions, providing an understanding of Kazakhstan's complicated interplay between political opposition and governing authority.

Additionally, the research highlights the theoretical contribution made by the study and paves the way for further research on the subject of political opposition within the context of authoritarian regimes across the post-Soviet landscape. Furthermore, the chapter serves as a bridge to future research efforts, proposing potential avenues for scholars to explore in order to acquire a deeper understanding of political opposition dynamics in authoritarian regimes. This study, by reflecting on the specifics of the Kazakh example, opens up the possibility to comparative studies across different post-Soviet nations, allowing for the identification of trends and differences in the formation of political opposition in non-democratic settings.

Chapter 2

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

Understanding the concept and practice of political opposition in authoritarian settings is a complex phenomenon. As Leonard Shapiro observes "The process of government must be studied with regard to those who oppose the of it, or whose interests and resistance to be conciliated before those in power can act."[31] Hence, over the years, the examination of political opposition has been thoroughly researched in order to unpack its layers of opposition as a key to unraveling a country's internal political dynamics.

The definition of political opposition has different meanings in different regimes. Robert Dahl defined political party opposition as the "most advanced and institutionalised form of political conflict" with an "ultimate goal for opposition in all democracies must be to influence

[31] Brigid Laffan, "Collective Power Europe? (The *Government and Opposition*/Leonard Schapiro Lecture 2022)," *Government and Opposition* 58, no. 4 (2023): 2. doi:10.1017/gov.2022.52.

mainstream politics and the policy priorities in a given country."[32] However, political opposition in authoritarian settings serve functions entirely different from those in liberal democracies, making them less applicable for explaining political phenomena in non-democratic environment.

In an authoritarian setting, where regimes frequently employ extensive repression and coercive tactics, the institutionalisation of political opposition is one of the components absent among the regime's challengers. Instead, the opposition's stance is predominantly manifested through anti-system arrangements, characterised by less structured and institutionalised modes of public dissent.[33] Despite the harsh repressive measures implemented by authoritarian regimes, these governments are often unable to completely suppress the emergence and existence of various forms of political activism. Thus, opposition persists as a sustained and an integral force, often represented through modified, underground organizational structures.

Therefore, through the construction of a conceptual framework, this research seeks to redirect the focus on opposition as an integral part of the political system and inquire into various forms, roles, and the functions of political opposition in Kazakhstan and a wider authoritarian context. By broadening the scope of the research, the study will examine forms of political opposition beyond political parties, including opposition networks, political groups, social movements, and individual activists and analyze what constitutes political opposition in non-competitive regimes. The variation of roles and patterns of opposition will delve deeper into the conceptual and empirical dimensions of agency[34] and the different forms of political opposition within the context of Central Asia, with a specific emphasis on Kazakhstan.

The chapter is structured into two core sections. The first relates to defining and establishing the conceptual framework for understanding the diverse forms and nature of political opposition in both democratic and non-democratic environments. The investigation goes into how political opposition has been defined and understood, both in classic political studies and in contemporary scholarship focusing on opposition within authoritarian settings. By applying existing conceptualisations to the case study of Kazakhstan, the research aims to examine the

[32] Robert A. Dahl, ed., *Political Oppositions in Western Democracies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).
[33] Blondel, "Political Opposition in the Contemporary World."
[34] Giddens, Anthony. "The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration: Elements of the theory of structuration." In *Practicing History*, pp. 121-142. Routledge, 2004.

existing characteristics and forms of political opposition in Kazakhstan and how it has evolved over time.

Furthermore, this chapter introduces a three-fold typology, as proposed by Kazakh political scientist Andrey Chebotarev, to better understand different types of opposition actors in non-democratic settings, particularly Kazakhstan.[35] The first category, referred to as *Institutional Opposition*, encompasses political parties, political movements, organizations and any form of blocs and coalitions formed among political parties. The second category, classified as *Individual Opposition*, represents certain individuals who voice their dissent against the ruling regime. This category primarily consists of former high-ranking government officials, members of political elite and defectors from the government, along with individuals associated with the so called oligarchic opposition.[36] The third category, labeled *Civic Opposition*, refers to a self-organized opposition force that lacks any formal institutional or organizational structure, known as *Narodnaya Opozitsia* (*Civic Opposition*), mostly represented through mass protests and demonstrations.

Meanwhile the second section traces down the evolution in scholarly thinking and debate on approaches to authoritarian politics and existing definitions used to classify non-democratic regimes and apply these concepts to the specific case study of Kazakhstan. This exploration is complemented by an analysis of the diverse strategies and tools employed by authoritarian regimes against various forms of opposition. The deliberate and consistent tactics revolve around a set of strategies known as the "Three Pillars of Stability," encompassing repression, legitimation, and co-optation, in addition to the 'Menu of Manipulation.' The latter includes various manipulative mechanisms within democratic institutions, such as electoral fraud, the misuse of state resources, and legal obstacles that isolate opposition groups, hindering and limiting the opportunities and functionality of non-systemic political opposition and preventing them from effectively challenging the regime. Through an examination of these tactics and strategies this study seeks to conceptualise the agency of political opposition in authoritarian regimes and investigate its potential consequences for the regime's survival in Kazakhstan. It

[35] Andrey Chebatarev, "Political Opposition in Kazakhstan: Current State and Perspectives." https://www.nlrk.kz/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4099:politicheskaya-mysl-suverennogo-kazakhstana-istoki-evolyutsiya-sovremennost&catid=131&lang=en&Itemid=491
[36] Isaacs, *Political Opposition in Authoritarianism*.

aims to provide a deeper understanding of the interplay between opposition actions and regime resilience in Kazakhstan's distinctive sociopolitical landscape.

Drawing upon a broader body of literature on democracy, authoritarianism and the role of opposition within non-competitive regimes, the goal is to develop a workable set of criteria. These criteria can then be systematically applied to the specific case of Kazakhstan, offering valuable insights not only into the nuances of this particular nation but also shedding light on the broader dynamics within authoritarian contexts.

Conceptualising Political Opposition

Within the early conceptual literature on political opposition, Dahl's contribution emerges prominently, capturing the diverse function and forms that opposition can adopt within the Western democratic settings as well as in non-competitive political systems.[37] By identifying three distinctive functions in the polyarchies,[38] Dahl characterises opposition in a comprehensive manner: (1) overseeing the control of the incumbents' power and its execution, (2) representing the interests and preferences of political minorities and social actors which are not represented in government, and (3) identifying an institutionalised alternative in a competitive political system. As previously mentioned, Dahl's framework characterises political party opposition as the most effective and structured form of opposition within democratic systems - "most advanced and institutionalised form of political conflict," with its overarching objective in all democracies being to exert influence over mainstream politics and shape policy priorities within a given nation.[39]

Rodney Barker, also sheds light on the multifaceted implications of opposition and identifies six different meanings of political opposition: total resistance to the form and basis of the state and a determination to overthrow; resistance to the power of the state when it is viewed as an oppressive institution; resistance to the group in command of the state; opposition may be used to denote a loyal opposition, but recognize its legitimacy and the constitution; a system of checks and balances and finally the term may describe the modifying actions against an oppressive government.[40] In their classical volume, Ionescu and de Madariaga similarly delve into the deeply rooted nature of opposition and recognize opposition as an instinct rooted in human

[37] Dahl, *Political Oppositions in Western Democracies*.
[38] Sartori, "Opposition and Control," (1966).
[39] Ionescu and de Madariaga, "Opposition."
[40] Barker, *Studies in Opposition*, 1–30.

nature, arguing that it is "rightly understood to be part and parcel of the political process as a whole, indeed, it is the 'altera pars' of government or power." They view it as the logical and structural counterpart to power within "the most advanced and institutionalised form of political conflict," particularly within democratic systems.[41]

While a substantial body of research has been devoted to defining, understanding and examining the role and function of political opposition, a more thorough examination of early social science literature reveals a number of notable limitations when it comes to exploring the essence of political opposition within authoritarian contexts, leaving the understanding of political opposition poorly conceptualised and under-investigated.

Firstly, a notable limitation lies in the prime focus on democratic settings, particularly within Western democratic frameworks. Early scholarship often failed and neglected theoretical and conceptual aspects of political opposition in non-democratic settings, analyzing it almost exclusively through the lens of political party systems and party competition. Secondly, a critical area of concern is the pronounced overemphasis on political party systems and the competitive dynamics of party politics when analyzing opposition within non-democratic frameworks. This narrow lens often sidelines other crucial dimensions of opposition, thus limiting the comprehensiveness of our understanding.

The classical literature to which Dahl,[42] Ionescu and de Madariaga,[43] Sartori,[44] Schapiro,[45] Barker,[46] Helms[47] and others contributed to "remain informative on organizational characteristics, ideational predicaments and the patterns of contestation between governments and oppositions,"[48] but it fails to offer theoretical reflection on the notion and logic of political opposition in non-democratic settings and tends to comprehend political opposition with a very institutional[49] and normative emphasis, mostly from a neo-institutional perspective.[50]

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41 Ionescu, and de Madariaga, "Opposition."
42 Robert A. Dahl, "Political Opposition in Western Democracies," In *Comparative Government: A Reader*, ed. J. Blondel (London: Macmillan Education UK, 1969), 229–234.
43 Ionescu and de Madariaga, "Opposition."
44 Sartori, "Opposition and Control," (1971).
45 Leonard Schapiro, "Forward," *Government and Opposition* 1, no. 1, (1966), 2.
46 Alberto Marradi, "Rodney Barker (ed.), *Studies in Opposition*, London, Macmillan, 1971, pp. 338," *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* 2, no. 3 (1972): 655–658.
47 Helms, "Five Ways of Institutionalizing Political Opposition."
48 Holger Albrecht, "Political Opposition and Authoritarian Rule in Egypt" (PhD diss., Universität Tübingen, 2008).
49 Ionescu and de Madariaga, "Opposition."
50 Southall, "Opposition in South Africa."

Furthermore, the tendency to perceive political opposition primarily as objects of analysis, rather than subjects with agency, is a limitation that reduces the scope of our understanding of opposition.[51] As Brack and Weinblum[52] as well as Norton[53] argue, early social science literature also did not fully establish the notion of political opposition as an independent subject of the analysis. Political opposition has overwhelmingly been defined in a very specific role and with the goal of "seeking to take power and to influence the legislative processes, taking place in established democratic systems."[54] Moreover, there has been a trend by scholars to limit the scope of their study to specific actors categorised under the label of "political opposition," such as parliamentary opposition, overlooking opposition in regional and local levels, as well as extra parliamentary opposition, represented by small opposition political parties, movements or other more informal forms of opposing the government.

Additionally, the classical body of scholarly work has shown a tendency to overlook the active agency of political opposition. The primary focus within this literature has predominantly revolved around the institutionalisation of political opposition, placing significant emphasis on the roles played by formal political entities, such as legally recognized political parties. However, this emphasis has resulted in a marked neglect of the contributions and influences wielded by informal opposition actors, including opposition movements and individual activists.[55]

The identified weaknesses underscore the pressing need for a more comprehensive and nuanced exploration of political opposition, offering a new perspective of opposition particularly within non-democratic contexts. This is essential to better understand the different dynamics of authoritarian systems, to develop a clearer understanding of the various types and patterns of political opposition in authoritarian settings and to gain a deeper insight into opposition politics and its potential for social and political change within a broader authoritarian context. Such an approach would also contribute to enriching the theoretical understanding of political opposition in countries such as Kazakhstan.

Political Opposition in Authoritarian Regimes

A limited but significant body of theoretical research has been conducted on opposition within

[51] Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World*.
[52] Brack and Weinblu, "What Do We Mean by 'Political Opposition'."
[53] Philip Norton, "Making Sense of Opposition," *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 14, no. 1–2 (2008): 236–250.
[54] Brack and Weinblu, "What Do We Mean by 'Political Opposition'."
[55] Ionescu and de Madariaga, "Opposition."

non-democratic and non-competitive political systems, focusing primarily on the variety of their forms and channels of expression in an authoritarian context. However, many of these studies have tended to concentrate on the functioning of political regimes, rather than delving into the actions and agency of political opposition itself. Often opposition has been observed within the context of its potential role in democratisation processes or as a co-subject under the political regime, rather than being considered as an autonomous and independent phenomenon.[56]

And only small number of scholars have delved an "authoritarian logic of opposition" politics. In this regard Giovanni Sartori attempts to develop a concept of political opposition to denote what it is and what it is not and argues that "any means of 'opposing' is not what we usually call 'opposition'" as opposition may take different forms other than political parties, "Opposition may also take part in the political communication function, that is, its primary role may be confined to providing a channel of information … or it may only be a safety valve, a merely verbal outlet, in the sense that opposition is tolerated only to placate opposition."[57]

The significance of the extra-parliamentary dimension of political opposition within non-democratic regimes and the role of civil society within this context have been underscored by authors like Blondel[58] and Helms.[59] Additionally, the complicated interplay between regimes and the different characteristics, actions, and forms of political opposition in non-democratic settings has been the focus of Jean Blondel and Ellen Lust-Okar.[60] Among these works, Lust-Okar's 2005 article on authoritarianism in the Arab world stands as a noteworthy contribution to the growing literature on interrelation between authoritarian regimes and opposition actors in non-democratic context, identifying the concept of 'structure of contestation'[61] as a key determinant of which actors are permitted or prohibited from engaging in the political sphere.[62]

Natalie Brack and Sharon Weinblum's analysis of political opposition within authoritarian settings emphasizes the different nature and forms of opposition present in non-democracies.

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[56] Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World*.
[57] Sartori, Giovanni. "Opposition and control problems and prospects." Government and Opposition 1, no. 2 (1966): 149-154.
[58] Blondel, Jean. "Political opposition in the contemporary world." Government and opposition 32, no. 4 (1997): 462-486.
[59] Helms, Ludger. "Five ways of institutionalizing political opposition: lessons from the advanced democracies." Government and opposition 39, no. 1 (2004): 22-54.
[60] Lust-Okar, Ellen. Structuring conflict in the Arab world: Incumbents, opponents, and institutions. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
[61] Ibid
[62] The concept to be further elaborated in the coming section

Their perspective broadens the definition of opposition to encompass organized actors beyond political parties, incorporating entities such as "any organized actor, represented political parties, non-represented political forces, trade unions and social movements."[63] This perspective advocates for a wider definition of opposition: "disagreement within the government or its policies, the political elite or the political regime as a whole, expressed in the public sphere, by an organized actor through different modes of action".[64]

Other notable exceptions, such as Vladimir Gelman,[65] William Foltz[66] and Bassam Tibi,[67] have also shed light on various forms and natures of political opposition within non-democratic systems. These scholars have significantly enriched our understanding of how opposition operates and manifests itself in political contexts that lack democracy. They emphasize elements such as "parties, politicians, cliques and clans*"* as well as "tribal, ethnic, and religious cleavages"[68] as important factors for the formation of political opposition in non-democratic regimes. In these settings, individuals can often function as opposition actors and pursue their goals by creating political parties and organizations, which are mostly centered around one individual and the leader of the political group.

Alexander Makarov and Romana Careja also address the inherent challenges in researching political opposition within non-democratic contexts. They define opposition as encompassing diverse groups of political parties, interest groups and individuals: "an actor is considered to be in opposition if it does not share in a broad sense the tactics, strategy and/or values of the actor who is responsible for making binding decisions."[69]

A select group of exceptional studies shed light on political opposition as an analytical framework to comprehend the dynamics of authoritarian regimes. Edward Aspinall's work on Sahuros Indonesia[70] and David White's exploration of opposition in Russia[71] exemplify such

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63 Brack and Weinblu, "What Do We Mean by 'Political Opposition'."
64 Sharon Weinblum and Nathalie Brack. "'Political Opposition': Towards a Renewed Research Agenda," *Interdisciplinary Political Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 69.
65 Vladimir Gelman, "The Extinction of Political Opposition in Russia," Vol. 340. Ponars Policy Memo, (2004).
66 Foltz, "Political Oppositions in Single Party States of Tropical Africa."
67 Bassam, "Politische Opposition in Westasien und in Afrika."
68 Vladimir Gel'man, "Political Opposition in Russia: A Dying Species?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 21, no. 3 (2005): 226–246.
69Alexander Markarov and Romana Careja, "Political Opposition within Hybrid Regimes: Concept and Actors," in *Stumbling but Struggling: Political Opposition in Four Post-Soviet Countries*, ed. R. Careja (Moscow: Strategy Publishing House, 2004), 40.
70 Edward Aspinall, *Opposing Suharto: Compromise, Resistance, and Regime Change in Indonesia* (Standford: Stanford University Press, 2005).
71 David White, "Political Opposition in Russia: The Challenges of Mobilisation and the Political–civil Society Nexus," *East European Politics* 31, no. 3 (2015): 314–325.

exceptional studies. White's perspective on Russia's quasi-dominant party system highlights the need for the opposition to focus on aspects such as activist recruitment, ideological positioning and coalition-building. These studies contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between political opposition and authoritarian contexts.

Conceptualizing resistance in authoritarian regimes involves understanding the complex interaction between state repression and societal responses, from individual to collective action, keeping in mind the broader socio-political context in which such interaction takes place. Resistance under such regimes, therefore, becomes a subject of the mechanisms through which opposition movements come into being, operate, and react both to opportunities and threats operating in environments characterized by manipulated elections, coerced civil society, and other political freedoms curtailed. While state repression might be a serious obstacle, such times of crisis and instability do provide avenues for the mobilization of the collective, hence showing how resistance movements are resilient, even within the most difficult of circumstances.

One of the defining features of competitive authoritarian regimes are electoral mechanisms that serve as façade legitimacy, while at the same time securing the predominance of the ruling party. Howard and Roessler, in their article "Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes," investigate electoral dynamics within competitive authoritarian regimes characterized by regular elections that are both competitive and marred by coercion, intimidation, and electoral fraud employed by the incumbent government in holding onto power. [72]

Despite all these limitations, elections remain pivotal moments for opposition groups to mobilize support and voice dissent, potentially creating opportunities for resistance. The work of Almeida has underlined how political opportunities, such as those offered by elections, shape protest dynamics. He has further argued that opposition movements treat elections as junctures of public discontent, allowing broader mobilization against the authoritarian constraints of these events. Along with the grassroots mobilization, the tactics of opposition groups are framed by the political context characterized by varying degrees of opportunity and risk. Periods of economic crisis or political instability can provide sparks to collective mobilization, making people more willing to challenge the ruling powers in response to deteriorating conditions.

[72] Howard, M. M., & Roessler, P. G. "Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes." American Journal of Political Science 50, no. 2 (2006): 365–381.

However, the probability of radical movements often depends on the erosion of rights and the intensification of state repression, dynamics that can push groups into more confrontational tactics.[73]

Sika's research on the Egyptian youth movement, underlines how state repression through censorship, surveillance, and brutal crackdowns-restricts the effectiveness of electoral mobilization, even during periods of political crisis. These means of repression have shown that not only are opposition attempts weakened before and during elections but also that civil society and opposition groups are greatly divided. Through fragmenting movements, authoritarian regimes make it difficult for opposition to demonstrate unity, and thus undermine the overall effectiveness of such resistance. This fragmentation is thus a product of the dynamic interplay between repression and cooptation, which restricts civil society's potentially cohesive role in the mobilization against authoritarian rule. In fact, Sika's findings reflect the precariousness of unity and coordination in opposition by civil society organizations operating under repressive conditions.[74]

To comprehensively explore the role of civil society in understanding resistance within authoritarian regimes, particularly in the context of state cooptation and repression, the work of Gandhi, J., & Lust, E, stipulates how authoritarian regimes manipulate electoral processes as a way to retain control over politics while allowing a degree of civil society engagement to take place-an analysis of implications of those manipulations for civil society organizations and their potential for mobilization. They further claim that though the civil society organizations can serve as platforms for mobilization, they usually have to bear state co-optation and repression, which complicates their effectiveness in challenging the regime.[75]

Analysis by Tarrow also underlines how these opportunities are used to influence collective action, such as the opposition groups that are mobilized around perceived declines in state strength or legitimacy. Tarrow views political opportunities as those critical moments when changes in policies, the emergence of allies, or a decline in state repression create favorable conditions for mobilization. These openings allow movements to effectively challenge

[73] Almeida, P. "Opportunity Organizations and Threat-Induced Contention: Protest Waves in Authoritarian Settings." American Journal of Sociology 109, no. 2 (2003): 345–400.
[74] Sika, N. (2018). "Repression, Cooptation, and Movement Fragmentation in Authoritarian Regimes: Evidence from the Youth Movement in Egypt." Political Studies, 66(1), 1-20.
[75] Gandhi, Jennifer, and Ellen Lust. "Elections Under Authoritarianism." Annual Review of Political Science 12 (2009): 403–422.

authority. At the heart of this process is collective action, where co-acting individuals, galvanized by shared grievances, social networks, and organizational structures, pursue common goals, thereby fostering solidarity and identity within movements.[76]

Olar's study of the diffusion of repression across authoritarian regimes illustrates how often authoritarian governments learn from one another to take up effective repressive techniques that neutralize dissent. The political context is again at the forefront of determining effectiveness and application, based on the democratic levels of the surrounding neighboring states, international alliances, and economic conditions, as factors dictating how and when regimes deploy their repressive measures against opposition forces.[77]

This adaptive nature of authoritarian governance is also discussed by Lawrence, where he explores how generational transmission of activism affects the willingness to resist. In his work on Arab Springs, Lawrence's shows that repression in the past can foster a resilient activist culture, with new generations drawing on the tactics and motivations of previous movements. The author posits that state repression can paradoxically strengthen activist resolve while engendering greater public support for their cause, thus mobilization begets more mobilization.[78] In addition, Franklin's (2001) research on party-led dissent underscores the role of political parties in the redemocratization process, suggesting that organized political structures are essential for facilitating resistance. He emphasizes how organized political structures can mobilize dissent and contribute to the democratic processes in authoritarian settings.[79]

Classifying Political Opposition in Authoritarian Regimes

In classical literature, the challenge of precisely and clearly defining and classifying the idea of political opposition has been inherently difficult and nuanced. Dahl's contribution offers a broader definition that encompasses a diverse array of oppositional manifestations: "there is opposition, when B is opposed to the conduct of government A", proposing six characteristics of opposition types: "organizational cohesion, the competitiveness of opposition, the site of competition between government and opposition, the distinctiveness of opposition goals and

[76] Tarrow, Sidney. Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
[77] Olar, Mariana. "The Diffusion of Repression among Authoritarian Regimes." Journal of Peace Research 56, no. 5 (2019): 675–689.
[78] Lawrence, Regina G. "Repression and Activism among the Arab Spring's First Movers: Evidence from Morocco's February 20th Movement." British Journal of Political Science 46, no. 3 (2016): 1–20.
[79] Franklin, Mark N. "Electoral Participation." In Comparative Politics: A Reader, 155–170. New York: Routledge, 2001.

strategies," depending on the character of the regime within a given systemic setting.[80] Nevertheless, it's important to acknowledge that Dahl's typology has not been without criticism. Scholars such as Barbara McLennan, and also Barker have challenged its applicability by arguing that while Dahl's typology remains informative on the question of what opposition does and how it behaves, he "has avoided the difficulty of comparing competitive systems to non-competitive ones, and his approach, so dependent on the descriptive analysis of particular Western states, offers no clue as to how to proceed to broaden the realm of comparison."[81]

In addition, the typologies offered by classical authors also emphasize the normative aspect of political opposition and neglect the various nuances and types of political dissent, especially within authoritarian settings. The classical and contemporary literature on typologies of political opposition within non-democratic systems provides a systematic classification framework grounded in two principal criteria. Firstly, this framework centers on the goal and purpose of opposition, spanning around governmental policies, socio-economic concerns or even the fundamental transformation of the prevailing regime structure. Secondly, the classification system takes into account the opposition's multifaceted approach, encompassing their strategies, methods, aims and the means employed to pursue their stated goals, underscoring the wide-ranging spectrum of tactics that opposition entities can deploy to advance their cause within non-democratic systems. This underscores the wide-ranging spectrum of tactics that opposition entities can deploy to advance their cause within non-democratic systems.

A useful starting point for an examination of the opposition's typology in non-democratic settings and, specifically, former Soviet states are the influential analyses of non-democratic regimes offered by several prominent scholars such as Juan Linz,[82] Gordon Skilling,[83] Vladimir Gelman,[84] Leonard Schapiro,[85] Gita Ionescu[86] and others. These authors tend to differentiate between three basic types of political opposition. Firstly, there is the so-called "semi-opposition" [87] which are the "legal opposition parties and groups which exist as part of a regime

[80] Dahl, *Political Oppositions in Western Democracies*.
[81] Barbara N. McLennan, *Political Opposition and Dissent* (New York: Dunellen Pub. Co., 1973).
[82] Juan J. Linz and Robert A. Dhal, *Opposition in and under an Authoritarian Regime: The case of Spain* (New Haven: University of Yale Press, 1973).
[83] Gordon Skilling, "Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 10, no. 4 (1968): 409–429.
[84] Gelman, "The Extinction of Political Opposition in Russia."
[85] Peter A. Hall, "The Shifting Relationship between Post-war Capitalism and Democracy (The *Government and Opposition*/Leonard Schapiro Lecture, 2021)," *Government and Opposition* 57, no. 1 (2022): 1–30.
[86] Ionescu and de Madariaga, "Opposition."
[87] Different terminology is applied by other authors: "Loyal Opposition" in Otto Kircheimer, "The Waning of Opposition in Parliamentary Regimes," *Social Research* 24 (1957): 127–56 and "Factional Opposition" in F. C. Barghoorn,

but are not part of its leadership and have no formal post within it, which acknowledge the legitimacy of the regime. These groups criticize specific actions by the regime and look out for their partisan interests."[88] Despite the lack of conceptual interpretation of the nature and dynamic of opposition in authoritarian context, Linz's classification of semi-opposition, which describes "those who may disagree with the policies or tactics of the ruling group but who are nonetheless 'willing to participate in power without fundamentally challenging the regime" [89] can serve studies of post-communist politics and the case study of Kazakhstan. However, this offers only a detailed empirical case, rather than conceptual interpretation of the nature and dynamics of opposition in authoritarian contexts.

The concept of "pseudo-opposition"[90] represents a heightened and more radical variant of the semi-opposition category. Semi-opposition itself entails entities that advocate for substantial changes within the existing regime while remaining open to relinquishing or modifying certain demands in exchange for preferential treatment from the ruling authorities. However, the notion of pseudo-opposition takes this stance even further, embodying a more uncompromising and steadfast approach towards its goals for systemic transformation. Pseudo-opposition actors are driven by the pursuit of fundamental change within the regime, yet they exhibit a strategic willingness to make concessions or compromises to secure favorable treatment from the governing powers. This nuanced approach underscores the complex and calculated strategies that opposition entities employ to achieve their objectives within challenging political environments.

Conversely, at the other end of the spectrum lies the concept of the "Principal Opposition." [91] This extreme manifestation of opposition represents political actors who are resolute in their quest for profound and sweeping changes to both the political regime itself and its policies. These actors stand at the utmost maximalist pole of the continuum, driven by an unyielding determination to enact radical shifts within the political landscape. Unlike other forms of

"Factional, Sectoral, and Subversive Opposition in Soviet Politics," in *Regimes and Oppositions*, ed. R. A. Dahl (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973) and Skilling, "Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution."

[88] Linz and Dhal, *Opposition in and under an Authoritarian Regime*.

[89] Linz and Dhal, *Opposition in and under an Authoritarian Regime*.

[90] Different terminology is used by other authors: "Sectoral and Subversive Opposition" Barghoorn, "Factional, Sectoral, and Subversive Opposition in Soviet Politics;" "Fundamental Opposition" in Skilling, "Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution;" and "Semi-loyal Opposition" in Kircheimer, "The Waning of Opposition in Parliamentary Regimes."

[91] Different terminology is applied by other authors: "A Legal Opposition" Linz 1970; "Principal Opposition" Kircheimer, "The Waning of Opposition in Parliamentary Regimes;" "Anti-System Opposition" in Sartori, "Opposition and Control," (1966); "Integral Opposition" in Skilling, "Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution;" and 1973; "Subversive Opposition" in Barghoorn, "Factional, Sectoral, and Subversive Opposition in Soviet Politics;" and "Extra System Opposition" offered by Sartori (1966).

opposition that may incorporate varying degrees of negotiation or compromise, Principal Opposition adopts an uncompromising stance, demanding far-reaching alterations to the foundations of the current governance structure. This rigid posture highlights the dichotomy between the more moderate approaches of other opposition categories and the fervently transformative aspirations of the Principal Opposition.

More recent literature has sought to demonstrate the wider range of opposition actors in authoritarian contexts. As mentioned by Robert Aspinall (2005) another interesting way of classifying opposition is suggested by Peukert, underlying the importance of informal (individual) opposition such as "ranging through satire and jokes, refusal to participate in regime programs, and other forms of passive **resistance** and non-conformity".[92] As Aspinall mentioned, this type of typology is "useful for reminding us that while one end of the opposition spectrum is represents by organized, collective and public actions, the other dissolves into a range of more individual, private and equivocal acts".[93] Cavatorta emphasizes the crucial role of civil society groups and activists in authoritarian settings, "from resistance to support for the political system in place."[94] Rico Isaacs in his book Film and Identity in Kazakhstan: Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture in Central Asia highlights how cinema has become a platform for expressing dissent against the authoritarian rule of President Nazarbayev.[95]

The categorisation offered by Holger Albrecht of political opposition in the case of "liberalised authoritarianism" in the Arab world is one of the most sufficient conceptualisations that captures the different types of opposition in countries of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan. Albrecht defines opposition as an independent organizational body, which is outside the realm of governance and engages in contentious politics with the incumbent regime, "as a procedural mechanism which has organizational capacity which: engages in competitive interactions with the incumbent regime; has political professionals; financial support and which exists outside of the regime."[96] Albrecht distinguishes between three types of opposition according to their level of competition with the regime—(1) regime-loyal, in the form of legalised political parties that works within the confines of the authoritarian regime, (2) tolerated opposition in the form of

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92 Detlev J. K. Peukert and Richard Deveson, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
93 Aspinall, *Opposing Suharto*.
94 Francesco Cavatorta, ed., *Civil Society Activism under Authoritarian Rule: A Comparative Perspective* (New York, London: Routledge, 2012).
95 Rico Isaacs, "Film and Identity in Kazakhstan Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture in Central Asia (podcast)." 2019.
96 Holger Albrecht, "How Can Opposition Support Authoritarianism? Lessons from Egypt," *Democratization* 12, no. 3 (2005): 378–397.

civil society and public protests and (3) anti-system opposition—as an "opposition of principal" mainly driven by movements. These categories provide a comprehensive framework for evaluating and analyzing the complex nature of political opposition in authoritarian contexts.

Rico Isaac's most recent publication, "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty in Kazakhstan: Political Opposition in Authoritarianism," stands as a noteworthy addition to the body of literature concerning political opposition in authoritarian environments. Isaac's work specifically centers on Kazakhstan and investigates the novel typology of Kazakh political opposition - *Individual, Organizational* and *Grass-roots Opposition.* It also assesses the extent to which opposition forces have influenced the dynamics of the authoritarian regime in Kazakhstan during the past thirty years.[97]

So how can we best conceptualise the nature and agency of political opposition in Kazakhstan, given that the widely accepted typologies of opposition developed in the study of democracy do not travel easily to the authoritarian context of Central Asia? Through the development of a conceptual framework, this research attempts to redirect the focus on opposition as an integral part of the political system and inquire into different forms, roles and the functions of political opposition in authoritarian settings such as Kazakhstan.

By expanding the scope of the research, the study goes beyond examining political parties and includes other forms of opposition, such as opposition networks, political groups, social movements and individual activists and analyze what constitutes political opposition in non-competitive regimes. The variation of roles and patterns of opposition will inquire more in depth into conceptual and empirical dimension of the nature of agency and forms of political contestation in the context of Central Asia and Kazakhstan specifically. The investigation into the various roles and patterns of opposition will delve deeper into both conceptual and empirical dimensions, providing insights into the nature of agency and forms of political contestation peculiar to Central Asia and, more specifically, Kazakhstan.

Consequently, in order to provide a broader framework of political opposition in Central Asia and Kazakhstan, specifically, and to understand various forms of expression in post-Soviet and authoritarian context (also taking into consideration certain peculiarities and differences between the general political environment and state of opposition), I take the above-mentioned approaches of Albrecht and Zartman as a conceptual point of departure to account for an

[97] Isaacs, *Political Opposition in Authoritarianism.*

"authoritarian opposition" in the case study of Kazakhstan and define political opposition as follows:

> *A non-institutional organizational body within a political system, but outside of the realm of governance that has decisive organizational capacities comprised of political parties, social movements, organizations, trade unions, individuals or group of individuals who may or may not have a goal to attain power but engage in competitive interactions with incumbents in power, publicly criticize the government and oppose regime's certain decision making.*

As noted earlier, this research suggests a tripartite categorisation of Kazakh political opposition, as put forth by political scholar Andrey Chebotarev. This classification explains the different nature and function of political opposition within Kazakhstan's authoritarian context.

The first category, referred to as *Institutional Opposition*, encompasses political parties, political movements, organizations, and any form of blocs and coalitions formed among political parties. This category pertains specifically to the period spanning from 1989 to 1998, a time marked by the rise of grassroots movements and the formation of the first political parties and movements in the early 1990s. Throughout this phase, the research will concentrate on the examination of the organizational frameworks, ideologies, and strategies employed by political parties and movements, as well as exploring the dynamics of cooperation and competition with the ruling regime.

The second category, classified as *Individual Opposition*, represents certain individuals who voice their dissent against the ruling regime. This category primarily consists of former high-ranking government officials, members of the political elite, and defectors from the government, along with individuals associated with the so called "oligarchic opposition."[98] Spanning from 1998 to 2011, this phase of analysis will entail an exploration of the roles of individual opposition leaders who were previously affiliated with the ruling establishment but later became challengers of the regime.

The recent tendency of the development of the political opposition in case of Kazakhstan also demonstrates the shift of the opposition political forces from the classical institutionalised form of opposing such as opposition political parties and movements to the emergence of the co called

[98] Isaacs, *Political Opposition in Authoritarianism.*

Civic Opposition expressed through mass protest and demonstrations (mostly driven by social and economic issues), slow but steady surfacing of nationalist/populist narrative as well as mass mobilisation against the regime through social media platform.[99] Thus, the third category, labeled as *Civic Opposition*, refers to a self-organized opposition force that lacks any formal institutional or organizational structure. This category, known as *Narodnaya Opozitsia*, *(Civic Opposition)* represents the timeframe spanning from 2011 to 2022. Thus, the research will center on the active civil society members who resist various decisions and policies of the regime. The analysis will explore the grassroots movements, protests, and civil society initiatives that have played a significant role in expressing opposition to the ruling regime during this era.

The classification of Kazakh political opposition introduced by Chebotarev manifests itself most clearly in the evaluation of political parties based on their stance toward the ruling regime, specifically the first President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and the current leadership led by the second President, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. This classification system serves as a solid and thorough framework, providing significant insights into the diverse nature and evolution of Kazakhstan's political opposition during the last three decades. Thus, the proposed classification of opposition will be applied to the case of Kazakhstan to provide a more profound insight into the development and devolution of Kazakh political opposition over time. This approach aims to identify patterns and unique characteristics of opposition activities and examine the nature of the relationship between the opposition and the ruling regimes throughout the years.

The dynamics of opposition-regime relations within authoritarian regimes

Conceptualising Non-Democratic Regimes

As Jean Blondel put it in his seminal work "Political Opposition in Contemporary World," "the character of the opposition is tied to the character of the government. The only way to discover the true character of opposition is by examining first the government, rule authority or state."[100] Thus, to analyze the essence of political opposition, it is important to examine political structures and general political environment within which opposition under authoritarianism operates.

There has been considerable academic attention towards identifying and classifying both authoritarian regimes and the "hybrid" regimes located in the gray zone between democracy and

[99] Najmin Kamilsoy and Sofie Bedford, "Digital Authoritarianism and Activist Perceptions of Social Media in Azerbaijan," Baku Research Institute (August 21, 2023).
[100] Blondel, "Political Opposition in the Contemporary World."

authoritarianism. Subsequent studies of authoritarian politics have sought to analyze what an authoritarian regime is, how to define the existing forms, and to explore the diversity and division of those forms, their nature and causality.

Prominent scholars such as Linz and Stepan,[101] Linz,[102] Snyder and Mahoney,[103] Geddes,[104] Diamond,[105] Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way,[106] Schedler,[107] and Pepinsky[108] have extensively examined these issues, shedding light on the nuances, variations, and underlying factors that characterise different forms of authoritarian rule. Their works will be examined in detail below, as they provide valuable insights into various aspects of authoritarian regimes, their characteristics, and the dynamics that underpin them.

The literature on authoritarian regimes has developed in two distinct perspectives with divergent views on institutional aspects of political regimes. The classical studies on authoritarianism from 60s and 70s, to which authors such as Friedrich and Brzezinski,[109] Arendt,[110] Linz,[111] Huntington,[112] O'Donnell,[113] and Apter[114] contributed to were largely based on a distinction between totalitarianism and authoritarianism, primarily interested in the socio-economic conditions that shaped the authoritarian rule.

Despite various attempts of early literature to conceptualise an authoritarian form of rule, Juan José Linz[115] offered the most systematic definition of an ideal type of authoritarian regime and captured the whole range of non-democratic regimes, providing the basis for the later work on authoritarianism. In his 1970 article, "An Authoritarian Regime in Spain,"[116] Linz was the first

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101 Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, "Toward Consolidated Democracies," *Journal of Democracy* 7 (1996): 14.
102 Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000).
103 Richard Snyder and James Mahoney, "The Missing Variable: Institutions and the Study of Regime Change," *Comparative Politics* 32, no. 1 (Oct. 1999): 103–122.
104 Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 115–144.
105 Larry Diamond, "Thinking About Hybrid Regimes," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2002): 21.
106 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "Elections without Democracy; The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," Journal of Democracy 13 (2002): 51.
107 Andreas Schedler, "Elections without Democracy; The Menu of Manipulation," Journal of Democracy 13 (2002): 36.
108 Thomas Pepinsky, "The Institutional Turn in Comparative Authoritarianism," *British Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 3 (2014): 631–653.
109 Carl Joachim Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).
110 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973).
111 Linz and Dhal, *Opposition in and under an Authoritarian Regime*.
112 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).
113 Gullermo O'Donnell, "Reflections on the Patterns of Change in the Bureaucratic-Authoritarian State," *Latin American Research Review* 13, no. 1 (1978): 3–38.
114 David Ernest Apter, *The Politics of Modernization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).
115 Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*.
116 Linz and Dhal, *Opposition in and under an Authoritarian Regime*.

to challenge the existing classification between totalitarian and democratic regimes. He argued that this classification fell short in explaining the "grey zone" regimes and offered the most systematic definition of an ideal type of authoritarian regime, capturing the whole range of non-democratic regimes and providing the basis for the later work on authoritarianism: "unless we examine the features unique to them, the conditions under which they emerge, the conceptions of power held by those who shape them, regimes which are not clearly either democratic or totalitarian will be treated merely as deviations from these ideal types and will not be studied systematically and comparatively."[117] Linz proposed an alternative concept of political rule—"Authoritarian Regime"—a regime

> *…with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without neither extensive nor intensive political mobilisation, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power, within formally ill-defined limits but quite predictable ones.*[118]

However, Linz's approach to conceptualise authoritarian regime as a distinct category of nondemocratic systems, including cases such as Franco's regime, faced harsh criticism for several reasons. Critics argued that Linz's approach was lacking generalisation, with limited empirical foundation and applicability to different contexts. Mostly derived from the experience of Latin America and Africa, the early conceptual scholarship also lacked an analysis on the range of authoritarian regimes and focused instead on specific subtypes. In response to these critiques, Linz,[119] as well as Linz and Stepan,[120] have later refined the typology by adding the categories of "post-totalitarianism" and "sultanism"[121] to the classical distinction to describe extremely patrimonial type of political rule. In addition, Houchang E. Chehabi and Linz[122] devoted a special volume to sultanistic regimes, which was published in 1998.

The first wave of scholarship to which authors such as Huntington,[123] Huntington and

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[117] Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-communist Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996).
[118] Juan J. Linz, *An Authoritarian Regime: Spain* (Finland: Tidnings och Tryckeri Aktiebolag, 1964).
[119] Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*.
[120] Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*.
[121] Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, 2.
[122] Houchang E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz, eds., *Sultanistic Regimes* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998).
[123] Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

Dominguez,[124] Apter,[125] and others contributed to have been largely influenced by modernisation theory, analyzing non-democratic regimes in relation to socio-economic conditions. In regard to the specific regime types, the main focus was on three, such as military regimes, single party regimes, and neopatrimonialism or personalist rule.[126] Huntington, influenced by modernisation theory, argued in case of military authoritarianism that "military interventions are inseparable part of political modernisation whatever the continent and whatever the country." In case of single party regimes, Huntington observes that single-party regimes "are always the product of nationalist and revolutionary movements from below which had to fight the power."[127] One of the first authors to discuss neopatrimonialism and personalist rule were Guenther Roth[128] as well as John T. Ishimaya[129] describing a system of the so called "fake democracy": "a typology of beliefs and organizational practices that can be found at any point of a continuum of political regimes, and thus does not describe a specific type of political rule"[130]

Drawing partly on Huntington, Geddes[131] and Barbara Geddes highlight qualitative distinctions among authoritarian regimes and distinguishes between personalist (dominated by single ruler), military (dominated by military generals), and single-party regimes (dominated by single party) but also includes "amalgams" as an additional subtype.[132] Analyzing authoritarian regimes since 1946, Geddes attempts to measure the longevity of those regimes and argues that some types of regimes often vary in durability. Military regimes are the most fragile, personalist regimes typically structured on a clientelistic basis tend to last longer, and the most long-lived are the one-party states, whereas military dictatorships are the least durable, emphasizing longevity of the institutionalised form of authoritarianism.[133] Hadenius and Teorell (2007), by combining the earlier work of Geddes as well as the work of Schedler, Levitsky, and Way and Diamond, created their own classificatory scheme by adding new categories—monarchical, military, and

[124] Samuel P. Huntington and J. I. Dominguez, "Political Development" in *Handbook of Political Science*, eds., F. I. Greenstein and N. Polsby (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1975): 1–114.
[125] Apter, *The Politics of Modernization*.
[126] Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*.
[127] Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*.
[128] Guenther Roth, "Personal Rulership, Patrimonialism, and Empire-building in the New States," *World Politics* 20, no. 2 (1968): 194–206.
[129] John T. Ishiyama, "Communist Parties in Transition: Structures, Leaders, and Processes of Democratization in Eastern Europe," *Comparative Politics* (1995): 147–166.
[130] Roth, "Personal Rulership."
[131] Geddes, "What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?"
[132] Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 2 (2014): 313–331.
[133] Geddes, "What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?"

electoral regimes, which is subdivided into no-party, one-party, and limited multiparty regimes.[134]

Overall, the first wave literature focused on the broad array of factors that triggered authoritarianism in specific countries by analyzing the origins of specific forms of authoritarian rule from social and economic points of view, while political factors were viewed from a relatively narrow perspective, mainly as a dependent variable. Early literature also lacked a comparative element in their analysis to explain the differences not just between countries, but rather between different types of authoritarian rule.

Second Wave of Authoritarian Studies: Empirically, in the wake of the third wave of democratisation,[135] unlike the early literature, theoretical approaches from the late 1990ss tended to focus on the significance of institutional characteristics of authoritarian regimes and the "durability" of authoritarianism, drawing on the emergence and variation among the new forms of "grey zone" and "incomplete democracies"[136] that did not fit into the classical categories of one-party, military, and personalist forms of rule.

The significant transitions that occurred in Southern Europe (1970s), Latin and Central America (1980s), East and Central Europe (1990s) as well as Soviet states (1990s) has aggravated large amounts of literature on the existing forms and nature of the respective regimes. After the demise of the Soviet Union, the dominant conceptual and theoretical approach that applied to the newly independent states was democratisation theory through the framework of "transitology," perceiving these states as the ultimate agency of potential democratic change in the region. The conventional transitology literature contributed by the authors such as O'Donnell and Schmitter, Przeworski, Huntington, Linz and Stepan, Schmitter and Karl, and Collier and Levitsky,[137] has received harsh criticism, being challenged in Thomas Carothers's famous article "The End of the Transition Paradigm"[138] which became the dominant theoretical lens in the study of authoritarian rule and "grey zone" countries. The author argues that successful democratisation was not the only possible outcome of the post-Cold War wave, and many of the countries labeled as transitioning into democracy were a mixed form of authoritarian and democratic rule.

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134 Geddes, "What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?"
135 Huntington, *The Third Wave*.
136 Guillermo A. O'Donnell, "Illusions and Conceptual Flaws," *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 4 (1996): 160–168.
137 O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, Przeworski 1991, Huntington 1991, Linz and Stepan 1996, Schmitter and Karl 1991, and David Collier and Steven Levitsky, "Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research," *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (1997): 430–451.
138 Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2002): 5.

The above-mentioned works signalled the beginning of the new literature attempting to explain the stability and longevity of non-democratic regimes and triggered a series of new debates on a conceptual level. Scholars began to develop new classification tools to deal with the allegedly novel nature of regime types, shifting from democratisation theory to the contradictory types of non-democratic regimes. The classifications ranged from the so called "adjective democracies"[139] to hybrid regimes and "new authoritarianism,"[140] characterised with elements of façade democracies, such as formal institutions (election, protection of human rights etc.) and authoritarian aspects, namely cohesive and repressive measures, the deterioration of civil liberties, freedom of speech, and active suppression of all forms of political contestation.[141]

By recognizing diminished subtypes of authoritarianism, scholars have shifted their attention to the nondemocratic aspects of rule in hybrid regimes and gradually replaced the term "democracy" with "authoritarianism" as the focal point of departure. In contrast to earlier studies, the new scholarship emphasized the authoritarian nature of hybrid regimes, being explained as partial or diminished forms of democracy moving toward consolidation.

In the framework of "democracies with adjectives,"[142] scholars began to develop new classificatory tools to deal with the hybrid nature through the work of democratic theorists, analyzing hybrid regimes with "a substantial degree of democracy and illiberalism"[143] using concepts such as "illiberal democracy,"[144] "defective democracy,"[145] "delegative democracy,"[146] "semi-democracy,"[147] "qualified democracy,"[148] "neopatrimonial democracy,"[149] "pseudo-democracy,"[150] and "diminished democracy" to characterise them as stuck half-way between democracy and authoritarianism.

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139 Collier and Levitsky. "Democracy with Adjectives."
140 Jerzy J. Wiatr, *New Authoritarianism: Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century*. (Germany: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2019).
141 Marina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-authoritarianism* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013).
142 Collier and Levitsky. "Democracy with Adjectives."
143 Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (1997): 22.
144 Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy."
145 Wolfgang Merkel, "Embedded and Defective Democracies," *Democratization* 11, no. 5 (2004): 33–58.
146 Guillermo A. O'Donell, "Delegative Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 1 (January 1994): 55–69.
147 Diamond, Larry, Juan Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds. Democracy in developing countries: Latin America. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1989.
148 Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm."
149 Collier and Levitsky. "Democracy with Adjectives."
150 Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1999).

Ottaway and Olcott[151] join Carothers by suggesting "semi-authoritarianism" as an appropriate framework for investigating hybrid regimes. Ottaway defines semi-authoritarian regimes as systems that combine the "rhetorical acceptance of liberal democracy"[152] with illiberal or authoritarian character. This is to say that "semi-authoritarian regimes are not democracies in transition, but rather, they are authoritarian regimes that are carefully constructed and maintained, with façade elections and fictional competition."[153]

Thus, theorists of the so-called "new authoritarianisms," such as Schedler, introduced the "electoral authoritarian" regime type—"a new form of authoritarianism behind electoral facades, have contributed to differentiation of more obvious authoritarian regimes."[154] The theory constitutes subtypes of authoritarian regimes that allow for some degree of political participation, showing the presence of façade democratic institutions such as elections, parties, or legislatures. These types of regimes neither practice democracy nor resort regularly to open repression, but they are ones "in which opposition parties loose elections."[155]

Barbara Geddes and Andreas Schedler also agree that "most authoritarian governments that hold elections are not hybrids but simply successful, well institutionalised authoritarian regimes."[156] These are regimes that do not make elections the "only game in town," but rather seek to control the outcome of the elections by navigating through democratic restrictions.[157] However authors such as Hadenius and Teorell[158] and Levitsky and Way[159] contend that authoritarian "electoral regimes" are weak and more vulnerable to collapse.

In case of the alternative term "competitive authoritarianism," as suggested by Levistly and Way,[160] authors term the new form of regime as a diminished subtype of authoritarianism—a "Civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents' abuse of the state places them at a

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151 Martha Brill Olcott and Marina Ottaway, *Challenge of Semi-authoritarianism* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999).
152 Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged*.
153 Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged*.
154 Andreas Schedler, *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006).
155 Schedler, *Electoral Authoritarianism*.
156 Barbara Geddes, "Why Parties and Elections in Authoritarian Regimes?" (Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2005), 6.
https://kevinkoehler.org/Putting_Institutions_into_Perspective.pdf
157 Schedler, *Electoral Authoritarianism*.
158 Axel Hadenius and Jan Teorell, "Authoritarian Regimes: Stability, Change and Pathways to Democracy (1972–2003)," *Kellog Institute for International Studies*, Working Paper 331 (November 2006), 147.
159 Levitsky and Way, "Elections Without Democracy," 52.
160 Levitsky and Way, "Elections Without Democracy," 52.

significant advantage vis-à-vis the opposition.[161] The major difference between the competitive and electoral authoritarianism is that governments in competitive states do not engage in open electoral fraud, but rather "abuse state resources, deny opposition media coverage, harass opposition and manipulate results."[162]

Understanding how authoritarian regimes function and where Kazakhstan fits in the existing authoritarian typologies and wider literature on authoritarianism is important for this research. One approach to classifying Central Asian republics is by assessing their general political characteristics, specifically in terms of whether these regimes allow for a peaceful transition of power and whether they permit legitimate opposition to operate freely and participate in elections. However, Kazakhstan's unique political structure complicates its straightforward classification. On one hand, it exhibits many elements of authoritarianism, with significant power concentrated within the ruling elite; on the other hand, the regime presents itself as a democracy, at least in a formal sense.

When categorising the contemporary form of the regime in Kazakhstan, one could argue, drawing on the work of Hadenius and Teorell (2007), that Kazakhstan falls under the category of non-competitive or electoral authoritarianism. This classification is based on the regime's adoption of formal political institutions, such as elections and the existence of institutionalised parliamentary opposition political parties, albeit often described as "façade" opposition. It is important to note that these elections are typically far from being considered competitive.[163]

In this context, Linz's classical definition of authoritarian regimes becomes particularly relevant. Linz defines authoritarian regimes as those characterised by "limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without either extensive or intensive political mobilisation, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power, within formally ill-defined limits but quite predictable ones."[164]

This definition resonates with the case of Kazakhstan, providing a framework that helps explain its political dynamics. It fits into the ongoing scholarly debate on authoritarianism and offers

[161] Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3.
[162] Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 3.
[163] David G. Lewis, "Varieties of Authoritarianism in Central Asia," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Central Asia* ed. Rico Isaacs and Erica Marat (London: Routledge, 2021): 73–86.
[164] Linz, Juan J. An authoritarian regime: Spain. Tidnings och Tryckeri Aktiebolag, 1964. P.255

valuable insights into the unique characteristics of Kazakhstan's regime, which straddles the line between authoritarianism and democratic façade.

Authoritarian Regime Tactics and Strategies

As previously indicated, political opposition in authoritarian regimes serves functions entirely different from those in liberal democracies where opposition constantly challenges the regime. In non-democratic settings, opposition actors operate within political environment characterised by fundamentally different dynamics between the government and opposition, as well as within the opposition itself, compared to well-established democracies.

The origin of the complex relationship between the authoritarian governments and the political opposition is a strong inequality between the competing forces. As Lust-Okar said, the authoritarian ruler's strategies of repression, weakening and fragmentation of oppositional forces shape the "structures of contestation" based on which regimes determine the institutional rules of oppositional activity … "incumbents cannot dictate their opponents' actions, but they can influence them. Through the rules they make and the institutions they establish, governments help determine which opposition groups exist and how these groups interact with each other."[165]

Intriguingly, within this context, it becomes evident that while authoritarian incumbents cannot outright dictate the actions of their opponents, they wield significant influence over them. This influence is wielded through the intricate mechanisms of shaping the environment in which opposition operates. By crafting rules, regulations, and institutional frameworks, governments effectively mold the landscape of oppositional activities. In doing so, they exert a substantial control over which opposition groups come into existence and how these groups interact with one another. Thus, the degree of opportunities, the overall nature, form, characteristics, and functions of oppositional activism is designated by the strategies and tactics orchestrated by the authoritarian regimes to keep their power secure.

The authoritarian rulers' deliberate and consistent tactics revolve around a set of strategies, known as the "Three Pillars of Stability"[166] (repression, legitimation, and co-optation) as well as 'Menu of Manipulation'[167] hindering and limiting opportunities and functionality of

[165] Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World*, 68.
[166] Johannes Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-optation in Autocratic Regimes," *Democratization* 20, no. 1 (2013): 13–38, DOI:10.1080/13510347.2013.738860.
[167] Schedler, "Elections Without Democracy."

non-systemic political opposition.[168] As part of the Menu of Manipulation, they utilise various mechanisms within democratic institutions, such as electoral fraud, abuse of state recourses, and opposition isolation from politics through other legal obstacles[169] to prevent political opposition groups from effectively challenging the regime.[170]

All these strategies work in harmony, collectively forming a toolkit employed by authoritarian leaders against their political challengers. These strategies can be classified into distinct categories:[171] the "hard" methods encompassing severe repression and coercion, directly aimed at fragmenting and weakening opposition groups to the extent that they could be excluded from the political arena, and the "soft" mechanisms that include co-optation and various manipulative tactics. These softer approaches are leveraged by regimes through administrative and economic resources, serving as central control mechanisms over opposition forces. Remarkably, these strategies undermine the opposition's political effectiveness without resorting to outright bans or brutal suppression, instead, preferring a combination of formal and informal means to diminish the impact of opposition forces.

Therefore, this subsection elaborates the diverse set of sources to examine the fundamental strategies and tactics deployed by authoritarian rulers against political opposition. These strategies serve as the foundation for sustaining a regime's power and effectively isolating opposition—particularly in the context of institutional political parties from the broader society and eliminating their presence in the Parliament and the overall polity. Thus, this analysis seeks to uncover how regimes respond to various types of opposition, how they navigate and control these different factions, and how opposition can inadvertently align with authoritarian regimes while also influencing their resilience.

Consequently, the research focuses on three primary techniques of power preservation employed by non-competitive regimes: coercive and repressive measures, a technique that involves the use of force, repression, and coercion to suppress opposition entities, ultimately

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168 Barbara Geddes and John Zaller, "Sources of Popular Support for Authoritarian Regimes," *American Journal of Political Science* (1989): 319–347.

169 Oliver Schlumberger, *Puzzles of Political Change in the Middle East: Political Liberalisation, Authoritarian Resilience and the Question of Systemic Change*, Discussion Paper No. 5 (Germany: Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), (2021).

170 M. M. Howard and P. G. Roessler, "Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 2 (2006).

171 Maria Josua and Mirjam Edel, "To Repress or Not to Repress—Regime Survival Strategies in the Arab Spring," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 27, no. 2 (2014): 283–309.

diminishing their ability to challenge the authority of the regime;[172] co-optation and patronage politics which involve assimilating elements of the opposition into the existing power structure, by offering incentives, rewards, or positions of influence to key opposition figures in exchange for their loyalty or a more conciliatory stance;[173] and the "Menu of Manipulation," a strategy that deploys various manipulative mechanisms to control and manage opposition activities. This can include the manipulation of electoral processes, the strategic use of state resources, and the creation of legal barriers to hamper the opposition's effectiveness.[174]

It is important to note that none of these strategies are particularly new or innovative, and they largely align with well-established methods of power preservation that have been utilised by number of authoritarian regimes. However, when these strategies interlink and are undertaken in a certain combination, they yield outcomes that contribute to the persistence of authoritarian rule and the isolation of opposition political forces.[175] In the case of Kazakhstan, it's imperative to thoroughly analyze and evaluate the entire political context and policy actions of the regime against certain opposition actors and forms of contestation. Furthermore, a nuanced understanding of how the regime has responded to various political crises over the years is essential for comprehending the country's evolving power landscape.

Coercion and Repression of Political Opposition

Studies, conducted by scholars such as Way and Levitsky,[176] Bove and Rivera,[177] Gerschewski,[178] and others suggest that for many authoritarian rulers, heavy reliance on repressive and coercive measures against political opposition serves as the ultimate guarantee for regime survival.

Indeed, various authors employ different concepts to differentiate between the types and methods of repression within authoritarian regimes. These distinctions—violent and non-violent

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[172] Christian Davenport, "State Repression and Political Order," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10, no. 1(2007): 1–23.
[173] Maria Josua, *Co-optation as a Strategy of Authoritarian Legitimation Success and Failure in the Arab World*. 6th ECPR General Conference, Reykjavik (August 25–27, 2011).
[174] Schedler, "Elections without Democracy."
[175] Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Post-Communist Countries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
[176] Lucan A. Way and Steven Levitsky, "The Dynamics of Autocratic Coercion after the Cold War," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39, no. 3 (2006): 387–410.
[177] Vincenzo Bove and Mauricio Rivera, "Elite Co-optation, Repression, and Coups in Autocracies," *International Interactions* 41, no. 3 (2015): 453–479.
[178] Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability."

repression,[179] high and low-intensity repression,[180] and hard and soft repression[181]—are used in different combinations and proportions depending on the specific needs, the type of threat to regime stability, and the political crisis at hand in a given country. Also, Devenport in his contribution on the strategies and tactics of authoritarian regimes also touches upon the types of repression and "the targeted and strategic nature" of those measures, indicating the regime's strength and principal position on disloyalty and dissent.[182] Thus, in most cases, authoritarian leaders carefully choose the target, the timing of repression, and the specific methods of coercion.[183] One useful differentiation, as proposed by Bhasin and Gandhi,[184] involves categorizing repressive measures into two main types: those directed against civilians, such as students, farmers, and educators, and those aimed at opposition politicians and active electoral challengers, including political parties, opposition groups, and candidates. This distinction helps to further understand the specific targets and objectives of repression within authoritarian regimes.

However, it's worth noting, as highlighted by Devenport[185] and also Albrecht, that a high dependence and extensive use of repressive measures can be risky to the regime's stability, leading to increased mobilisation and mass demonstrations, while also negatively impacting states' image, both domestically and internationally - "I assume that hardly any authoritarian regime can, in the long run, avoid the emergence of such oppositions without employing a degree of coercion which may well, in the end, seal its fate and lead to the breakdown of the respective regime."[186]

Kazakhstan, which will be explored in greater detail in the upcoming chapter, has for more than three decades maintained a distinctively authoritarian character, characterised by hostile policies against political opposition and readiness to repress and coerce all forms of political contestation. Since the mid-1990s, the Kazakh political opposition has been systematically

[179] Bove and Rivera, "Elite Co-optation, Repression, and Coups in Autocracies."
[180] Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability."
[181] Josua and Edel, "To Repress or Not to Repress."
[182] Davenport, Christian 2007. "State Repression and Political Orde." Annual Review of Political Science, 10 (1): 1-23
[183] Josua and Edel, "To Repress or Not to Repress."
[184] Bhasin, Tavishi, and Jennifer Gandhi. "Timing and targeting of state repression in authoritarian elections." Electoral Studies 32, no. 4 (2013): 620-631.
[185] Davenport, "State Repression and Political Order."
[186] Albrecht, "Political Opposition and Authoritarian Rule in Egypt," 92.

marginalised, the subject of harsh suppression and manipulation by the regime, and completely blocked from the political scene.[187]

The analysis of the repressive and coercive measures employed by the Kazakh regimes against the different forms of opposition reveals the diverse spectrum of attitudes and ways of targeting those measures. The research suggests that the use of repressive measures by Kazakh leaders experienced certain modifications over the years, and they were tailored to align with the evolving the forms and nature of opposition in Kazakhstan.

As previously mentioned, this research centers on three different categories of political opposition actively present in Kazakhstan—*Institutional*, *Individual*, and *Civic Opposition.* As will be discussed in the following chapters on the example of Kazakhstan, the extensive use of repressive measures may have inadvertently triggered the counterproductive outcome, leading to the mobilisation of opposition groups and civil society. This observation underscores the complex dynamics inherent in the strategies employed by authoritarian governments to sustain their grip on power.

Co-optation of Political Opposition

The existing body of literature on non-competitive regimes places significant emphasis on the mechanisms of co-option of opposition elites, considering it as "decisive causal mechanism"[188] in dealing with opposition political forces in exchange of the regime support and loyalty. These studies delve into the mechanism of co-optation to understand its impact on opposition fragmentation mass protests and regime survival.

As Svolik argues "The very resources that enable the regime's repressive agents to suppress its opposition also empower them to act against the regime itself."[189] This perspective highlights a critical point: autocracies that rely on coercion and repression alone are in a relatively unstable situation with a greater risk of opposition backlash.[190] Consequently, scholars such as Zartman[191] have begun to examine other means and mechanisms "beyond repression and coercion" that rulers employ to maintain opposition fragmentation and prevent opposition from

[187] Geddes and Zaller, "Sources of Popular Support for Authoritarian Regimes."
[188] Geddes, "What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?" and Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles; Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).
[189] Milan Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 17.
[190] Andreas Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 70.
[191] William Zartman, "Opposition as Support of the State," in *Beyond Coercion. The Durability of the Arab State*, eds. Adeed Dawisha and William Zartman (London and New York: Croom Helm, 1988), 61–87.

effectively challenging the regime, while also avoiding the costly use of repression: "Government and oppositions have interests to pursue within the political system, and this complementarity of pursuit reinforces the state. Neither uses the other, but each serves the other's interests in performing its own role."[192] Gerschewski also claims that authoritarian regimes partially rest on co-optation as one out of three "pillars of stability," defining co-optation as "the capacity to tie strategically relevant actors (or groups of actors) to the regime elite in such a way that they are persuaded not to exercise their power against the regime and instead use their resources in line with the ruling elite's demands in exchange for material or other types of benefits."[193]

Lust-Okar, in the case of authoritarian regimes in Egypt, also contends that the regime has maintained its survival by fostering a fragmented political environment between the legal and illegal opposition through co-option and the establishment of legal political parties, through which regimes can structure the boundaries for opposition and determine which parties are permitted to operate within this framework.[194]

Authoritarian rulers use various formal and informal mechanisms of opposition co-optation. The existing literature, such as Gandhi and Przeworski,[195] Magaloni and Kricheli,[196] and Frantz and Kendall-Taylor,[197] identify formal mechanisms of co-optation, such as creation and support of loyal political parties; the utilisation of legislatures and elections to distribute political and monetary rewards, such as policy concessions, state salaries, and privileged access to government contracts other material benefits; and the granting of patronage to regime supporters.[198]

As for informal means, authorities distribute material benefits to their targets through informal networks, patronage, clientelism, and corruption, granting access to rents and bribes.[199] In exchange for these material benefits, opposition leaders are expected to demonstrate full loyalty, readiness to cooperate with the incumbents by supporting their policy initiatives, and preventing

[192] Zartman, "Opposition as Support of the State."
[193] Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability."
[194] Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World*, 34–3.
[195] Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, "Cooperation, Cooptation, and Rebellion under Dictatorships," *Economics & Politics* 18, no. 1 (2006): 1–26.
[196] Beatriz Magaloni and Ruth Kricheli, "Political Order and One-party Rule," *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010): 123–143.
[197] Erica Frantz and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "A Dictator's Toolkit: Understanding How Co-optation Affects Repression in Autocracies," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 3 (2014): 332–346.
[199] Gandhi and Przeworski, "Cooperation, Cooptation, and Rebellion under Dictatorships."

anti-regime collective action. Traditionally, regimes distribute economic rewards in a targeted way to specific individuals or groups that pose certain threat to the regime—political elite members,[200] labor or intellectuals,[201] electorate,[202] military and business elites,[203] opposition leaders and activists,[204] and the so-called "Tolerated Opposition."[205]

However, even in the case of wealthy authoritarian regimes with ample financial and administrative resources, there are constraints and limitations when it comes to co-opting specific groups that could potentially undermine their stability. As a result, these regimes tend to act strategically and selectively, opting to cooperate with opposition party leaders who are considered more willing or less threatening to their rule. This nuanced strategy enables them to adeptly navigate and exert control over the complexities of opposition dynamics, thereby enhancing their capacity to manage potential threats more effectively.

Illustrated through the case of Kazakhstan, which will be examined in forthcoming sections, most of the respondents as well as extensive literature points out the mechanisms of co-option as one of the central strategies employed by the Kazakh government over the past three decades to sustain a stable network of elites and manage potential challengers.[206]

Over the decades, the Kazakh government has successfully managed to take control over the available political opportunities, economic resources, and social conditions. This control has been instrumental in shaping the consolidation of the regime, primarily through the dispensation of policy concessions, leveraging formal institutions, such as the legislative and executive branches of government, access to ministerial positions, and granting opposition members a stake in the decision-making process, provision of state salaries, bestowal of privileged access to government contracts and others. Particularly in the context of high corruption and extensive resource rents, co-option of political opposition has proved to be a highly effective strategy and provided incentives for political elites to sustain their loyalty to the regime.

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[200] Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, "Pyongyang's Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea," *International Security* 35, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 44–74.
[201] Yumin Sheng, "Authoritarian Co-optation, the Territorial Dimension: Provincial Political Representation in Post-Mao China," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 44, no. 1 (2009): 71–93.
[202] Meredith L. Weiss, "Payoffs, Parties, or Policies. 'Money Politics' and Electoral Authoritarian Resilience," *Critical Asian Studies* 48, no. 1 (2016): 77–99.
[203] Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability."
[204] Bove and Rivera, "Elite Co-optation, Repression, and Coups in Autocracies."
[205] Holger Albrecht, *Raging Against the Machine: Political Opposition under Authoritarianism in Egypt*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014).
[206] Pepinsky, "The Institutional Turn in Comparative Authoritarianism."

Moreover, the regime has strategically leveraged the weaknesses and the absence of a strong ideological foundation among opposition elites to its advantage when co-opting opposition political groups. Nazarbayev's regime has also invested resources in cultivating its own agents of influence, a system political opposition in the form of political parties and non-governmental sector, acting as opposition elite and directly or indirectly maintaining regime stability. Hence, the co-opted opposition in Kazakhstan aimed to fulfill several roles, such as enhancing regime legitimacy, portraying Kazakhstan as a relatively liberal authoritarian regime, which can improve its image both domestically and internationally as well as serving as a tool for monitoring and responding to societal dissent, although unsuccessfully, as will be elaborated in the forthcoming chapters.

Menu of Manipulation

Vast amount of literature on authoritarian regimes also touches upon the "Menu of Manipulation"[207] and opposition management, through formal institutions, such as parliaments, elections, and constitutions to support authoritarian regime reproduction. Over the years, the authoritarian regimes have developed a certain mix of strategies and tactics of opposition manipulation and management. They often employ a selective approach, permitting certain opposition groups to participate in the formal political system while actively excluding others. Authoritarian regime leaders often find elections quite useful for political legitimation and use elections and electoral fraud as one of the key mechanisms in supporting regime reproduction and fragmenting and dividing opposition political forces. According to Levitsky and Way, elections can be used by the regimes as a tool for monitoring opposition, identifying of upcoming threats from different groups, and co-opting and maintaining patronage networks.[208]

Authoritarian governments frequently employ different institutional strategies to limit opportunities for opposition, such as controlling access to media, diverting public funds for partisan purposes, engaging in legal voter persuasion, manipulating the process of counting and tabulating votes, misreporting the results or carousel voter tactic, and maintaining their control over electoral arena, collectively undermine the democratic essence of elections.

Given the extensive history and experience of electoral interference by authoritarian governments, these short-term strategies undoubtedly contribute to noncompetitive outcomes.

[207] Schedler, "Elections Without Democracy."
[208] Schedler, "Elections Without Democracy."

Nevertheless, it's important to note that election fraud represents just one facet of the broader array of strategies employed by these governments to maintain power and marginalise the opposition. These regimes utilise a range of tactics and mechanisms beyond elections to control and consolidate their authority.

Authoritarian governments, as in Kazakhstan, manipulate electoral proceedings to discriminate against opposition political parties, primarily though restrictions on party and candidate registration. Although opposition may legally be permitted to patriciate in elections, these governments employ a variety of both formal and informal measures and regulatory frameworks to curtail their activities and operations. These mechanisms include the refusal of political party and candidate registration, selective criteria for political candidates, complaints about the validity of their signature lists,[209] and collectively limiting the presence and influence of opposition parties and candidates within the electoral system. In the rare exceptions when a candidate or political party successfully secures registration, they often encounter a host of additional challenges and strict regulations throughout their campaign, such as restrictions on rallies and public meetings, with a specific limit on time, location, and recourses, as well as limited access to media and social media.

As will be indicated in the following chapters, the Kazakh government has systematically utilised a multitude of the aforementioned techniques to effectively marginalise opposition political forces. These techniques encompass a spectrum of strategies, including manipulation of elections and election fraud, institutional adaptations, stringent restrictions on political party and candidate registration, deliberate exclusion of the opposition from the political landscape, and their isolation from broader society and the electorate, resulting in non-competitive electoral environment and overall absence of genuine opposition in the country. Over the years, the implemented strategies and measures have created a certain impact on political opposition in Kazakhstan by weakening and marginalising opposition forces so that they no longer pose a credible challenge to the government. Over the course of several years, these implemented strategies and measures have left a permanent impact on the political opposition in Kazakhstan. They have worked to systematically weaken and marginalise opposition forces to the extent that they no longer pose a credible challenge to the government's authority. The opposition's capacity

[209]Donnacha ó Beacháin and Rob Kevlihan. "Menus of Manipulation: Authoritarian Continuities in Central Asian Elections," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 25 (2017): 407–434.

to effectively influence the regime has been significantly diminished, ultimately consolidating the government's grip on power.

Table 1: *Framework of analysis*

The table below provides a summary of key concepts in the broad literature on authoritarian regimes and political opposition. It emphasizes the linkages between these concepts, the main research questions, and how these concepts are operationalised to address the central research questions.

Concepts	**Research Questions**	**Operationalization**	**Empirical Chapters**
Political Opposition	*What are the nature and forms of political opposition in Kazakhstan and how it has evolved overtime?*	• **Examining the diverse manifestations and historical evolution of political opposition in Kazakhstan over the past 30 years** • Interviews with political parties • On-the-record statements and interviews of the public officials • Semi-structured interviews with activists, journalists, NGO sector representatives etc. • Analytical notes by political activists	**Chapter 5:** *Mapping the Landscape of Political Opposition in Kazakhstan 1989–1998* **Chapter 6:** *Mapping the Landscape of Political Opposition in Kazakhstan 1998–2011* **Chapter 6:** *Mapping the Landscape of Political Opposition in Kazakhstan 2012*

			–2022
Authoritarianism	*What are the nature and forms of political opposition in Kazakhstan and how it has evolved overtime?*	• **Analyzing the authoritarian traits of the Kazakh regime, including its strategies for handling opposition and manipulation of political processes** • Semi-structured interviews with activists, journalists, NGO sector representatives etc. • Analytical notes by political activists	**Chapter 4:** *Divergences of Authoritarian Regimes and Nature of Political Opposition in Central Asia and Kazakhstan*
• Opposition—regime relations • Repression • Co-optation • Manipulation • Control of the Social Dissent	*(2) How has the Kazakh regime responded to these different forms of political opposition?* *(3) To what extent might opposition agency shape regime durability in Kazakhstan?*	• **Investigating the dynamics between the regime and opposition, exploring regime strategies and opposition behavior to assess their impact on regime stability in Kazakhstan** • Interviews with political parties • On-the-record statements and	**Chapter 5:** *Mapping the Landscape of Political Opposition in Kazakhstan 1989–1998* **Chapter 6:** *Mapping the Landscape of Political Opposition in Kazakhstan 1998–2011* **Chapter 6:**

		interviews of the public officials • Semi-structured interviews with activists, journalist, NGO sector representatives etc. • Analytical notes by political activists	*Mapping the Landscape of Political Opposition in Kazakhstan 2012 –2022*

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the primary aim of this *Conceptual Framework and Literature Review* chapter has been to establish a theoretical framework designed for the examination of political opposition within authoritarian regimes, with a focus on Kazakhstan. The framework introduced here encompasses various dimensions of political opposition, including its diverse manifestations and characteristics. It also investigates the methods and strategies employed by authoritarian governments in response to dissent to maintain their hold on power. It also explores the complex interactions between the ruling regime and opposition forces.

By providing this theoretical underpinning, the chapter equips researchers, scholars, and policymakers with the necessary tools and insights to delve into the complexities of political opposition within authoritarian contexts. It not only paves the way for an in-depth examination of Kazakhstan but also offers a valuable framework for analyzing political opposition in other similar authoritarian settings. In essence, this chapter serves as the conceptual framework for future analyses and explorations of political opposition, developing a more thorough understanding of the complex dynamics at play within these challenging political settings.

Drawing from the case of Kazakhstan, the study emphasizes the critical need to expand our conceptualisation and definition of political opposition of Kazakh political opposition. Rather than viewing it as an integral component of the political system, this research proposes for political opposition to be understood to be an integral component of the nation's broader political system. This shift in perspective necessitates a closer examination of both formal and informal roles, and functions of political opposition, particularly under Kazakhstan's particular authoritarian context.

To offer insight into the developmental trajectory of opposition, the study proposes a three-fold typology suggested by Andrey Chebotarev, that aims to categorize and delineate its various dimensions. This typology comprises *Institutional Opposition*, *Individual Opposition*, and *Civic Opposition* serving as a lens through which we can explore the multifaceted nature of political opposition in Kazakhstan.

The proposed typology of political opposition in Kazakhstan not only identifies the various types of opposition in the country, but also provides a structured framework for examining their relationships with the ruling regime. This multifaceted strategy offers a more nuanced and comprehensive view of Kazakhstan's nuanced dynamics and transforming patterns of political opposition, with wider relevance to authoritarian settings worldwide.

Furthermore, by identifying aspects that drive the consolidation of autocratic rule, this study's framework contributes to a deeper understanding of authoritarian consolidation. It also establishes the framework for comparative research on other post-Soviet republics, providing significant insights into autocratic leaders' strategies and sub-strategy in reaction to political crises.

As the research proceeds, this framework will be applied to the case study of Kazakhstan, delving into the opposition's historical evolution and examining patterns and unique characteristics of opposition activities. By analyzing the specific types and nature of political opposition during different eras, the research aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of how these opposition groups have been structured, influenced, and managed by the Kazakh regime, shedding light on the evolving dynamics of their relationship over time.

It should be noted, that this research consciously adopts a modest approach to theoretical contributions, emphasizing the empirical richness of the findings rather than any pursuit of theoretical innovation. By integrating perspectives from an array of established conceptual frameworks, the research investigates the fluid development of political opposition in Kazakhstan against the background of an authoritarian regime. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of empirical realities and places these findings within broader theoretical discussions of opposition and regime resilience.

The conceptual framework used here serves as a flexible and adaptive lens, opposed to a rigid theoretical model. The incorporation of different theoretical traditions allows this research to explore the particularities of the political environment in Kazakhstan with the aim of offering a

more refined understanding. These different perspectives contribute jointly to the understanding of the strategies of opposition actors and the countermeasures from the regime in maintaining control.

By positioning the conceptual framework as a pragmatic tool rather than a rigid theoretical construct, this research avoids overemphasis on abstraction in favor of emphasizing lived realities of Kazakhstan's opposition actors. This approach allows for an analysis of how the opposition movements navigate around the constraints placed by the regime and how they seize every opportunity for political expression and mobilization. This provides the flexibility of the framework to adapt to the research, while conforming to the complexities of the Kazakhstan political landscape without adhering to one set theoretical perspective.

This integrative framework allows the research to reach a dual objective: on the one hand, shedding light on the case of Kazakhstan through the contextual realities of political opposition under authoritarian rule; on the other hand, contributing to the theoretical discourse related to authoritarianism and opposition movements. The emphasis on empirical inquiry ensures that, while the research is nailed to the realities of Kazakhstan's political context, it offers insights that can be used in studying authoritarian governance in other non-competitive regimes.

The emphasis on the empirical inquiry ensures that the study is firmly placed within the specific political context of Kazakhstan, and at the same time, reaches out with relevant insights to other countries that have non-competitive regimes. The integrative approach allows this study to reach and contribute both to the understanding of Kazakhstan's political dynamics and also to wider-theoretical discussion of authoritarian regimes and opposition movements. Setting the empirical findings within a flexible conceptual framework, the research underlines the importance of contextualized analysis in offering added value to the field.

Chapter 3

Methodological Issues and Research Framework

This study investigates the multifaceted landscape of political opposition in Kazakhstan, tracing its evolution and transformation over the past three decades. Furthermore, it examines various strategies and tactics employed by the Kazakh regime to silence and suppress these forms of political opposition. Beyond a mere exploration of the regime's suppressive measures, the study broadens its scope to assess how the regime's actions impact the nature and trajectory of political

dissent, while also taking into account the opposition's reciprocal influence, recognizing its potential role in shaping the durability and stability of authoritarian regimes, with Kazakhstan serving as a pertinent case study for such dynamics.

With these overarching objectives in mind, the study centers around three fundamental research questions:

(1) What are the nature and forms of political opposition in Kazakhstan, and how it has evolved overtime?

(2) How has the Kazakh regime responded to these different forms of political opposition?

(3) To what extent might opposition agency shape regime durability in Kazakhstan?

Overall, the chapter is dedicated to addressing these research questions pertaining to the implementation and execution of the dissertation, by outlining the rationale for using the research design, methodology and strategy for the examination of Kazakh political opposition for the past thirty years.

The methodological framework selected for this project involves a combination of qualitative research and inductive methods, offering an in-depth analysis and justification for the deliberate choice of a single case study of Kazakhstan. The framework goes beyond theoretical considerations to delve into the practical aspects, such as examining the logistical challenges of conducting research in this specific geographic context of Kazakhstan, taking into account the unique challenges and opportunities that it presents.

The subsequent sections delve into the empirical methods employed, including the steps and procedures implemented for data collection, which primarily involves the use of semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Furthermore, the chapter demonstrates a strong commitment to addressing and mitigating ethical risks related to the research project, ensuring that the study complies to the ethical research conduct standards, maintaining the integrity and credibility of the study.

Research Design

As previously indicated, this research project relies on a multifaceted approach that employs a qualitative analysis, inductive approach, and a single case study framework. The adoption of this methodological synthesis is instrumental in facilitating a comprehensive exploration of the primary objective of analyzing the evolution and transformation of political opposition in

Kazakhstan. Furthermore, it serves as an effective tool for demonstrating the complex dynamics that have characterised the relationships between opposition forces and the ruling government over the last three decades.

As emphasized by Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, "qualitative research methods are currently enjoying an almost unprecedented popularity and vitality in both the international relations and the comparative politics subfield. In the international relations subfield, qualitative methods are indisputably prominent, if not pre-eminent."[210] This is due to their ability to produce rich data and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon or problem under investigation. As Creswell also defines: "a type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the view of participants, asks broad, general questions, collects data consisting largely of words (or texts) from participants, describes and analyzes these words for themes, and conducts the inquiry in a subjective, biased manner."[211]

Also, Patricia Leavy further underscores the advantages of qualitative research, highlighting its ability to "explore, describe, or explain social phenomenon; unpack the meanings people ascribe to activities, situations, events, or artifacts; build a depth of understanding about some aspect of social life"[212] and increase the ability to capture multiple perspectives, revealing subtle meanings and dynamics, and allowing for exploration of individual experiences. The integration of qualitative research methods in this study is instrumental in providing a rich, contextual understanding of the intricacies and complexities of the political landscape in Kazakhstan. This methodological choice allows for a more profound examination of the fundamental factors that shape the development of Kazakh political opposition and the dynamics at play in their interactions with the government.

Additionally, conducting a longitudinal comparison[213] that spans from the early 1990s to the present day allows for a significantly more profound and comprehensive analysis of the developmental path that political opposition has followed over the past three decades, unwavering on the question of how opposition groups have evolved, adapted, and responded to the ever-changing political landscape in Kazakhstan.

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[210] Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, "Case Study Methods," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Ch. 29.
[211] Creswell, John W., and J. David Creswell. Mixed methods research: Developments, debates, and dilemma. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005.
[212] Patricia Leavy, *The Oxford Handbook of Quantitative Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2.
[213] Bren Neale, *Qualitative Longitudinal Research: Research Methods* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020).

By categorising various forms and types of political opposition within specific timeframes, it becomes possible to identify the existing patterns and changes in the regime's responses over time, shedding light on the evolving tactics employed by the Nazarbayev regime to maintain authority and manage dissent. By utilising semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and conducting a thorough investigation of narratives and viewpoints, the study uncovers the peculiarities of the political opposition in Kazakhstan. Thus, the qualitative methodology ensures that the research comprehensively captures the complexity and scope of the changes and developments within the country's political opposition.

In parallel, the incorporation of the inductive approach serves as a powerful tool to derive insights directly from the data collected during the research process. Grounded in the principle of "allowing research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies,"[214] this method creates openness and flexibility into the research process.

Through the inductive approach, the study can identify patterns, themes, and emergent phenomena that may not have been apparent at the outset. It fosters a more open-ended exploration of the subject matter, allowing for new and unexpected perspectives on Kazakh opposition politics to emerge. By employing an inductive approach, the study maintains openness to unforeseen results and fresh perspectives. It offers the framework for uncovering previously unknown patterns, themes, and new trends that may not have been apparent at the start of the project. This open-ended investigation of the subject creates an environment in which fresh and surprising perspectives on the realm of Kazakh opposition politics might emerge, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of this complex area of study.

The case study used in this dissertation is a single case study of Kazakhstan, examining the evolution of Kazakh political opposition from the early 1990s to the present time, with the primary objective to gain a deeper insight into the patterns and scope of transformation within the political opposition throughout the past three decades. The adoption of a single case study approach focuses the research on a specific context—in this case, Kazakhstan—allowing for an in-depth investigation of the country's political opposition. By concentrating on a single case,

[214] David R. Thomas, "A General Inductive Approach for Qualitative Data Analysis," *American Journal of Evaluation* 27 (2003).

the study can thoroughly examine the historical, political, and social factors that have shaped the evolution of the opposition in Kazakhstan over the years.

Case study research, as defined by Robert Yin, is an *"empirical investigation that explores a contemporary phenomenon deeply and within its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are unclear".*[215] This definition emphasizes that single case studies aspire to furnish a depth of detail and comprehension similar to Clifford Geertz's notion of 'thick description,' allowing researchers to attain a profound understanding of the historical, cultural, and social backdrop in which the study unfolds. Such information is vital for capturing the broader context of the study and preventing misinterpretation.[216]

Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett argue that by looking at a single case study, it is possible to gain insight into larger patterns and trends, which can then be applied to a wider population. Single case studies also allow for a more "detailed analysis of the phenomenon being studied, including the ability to look at multiple factors and relate them together to form a holistic understanding."[217] Single case studies are beneficial when seeking "the detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events – has come in and out of favor over the past five decades as researchers have explored the possibilities of statistical methods and formal models."[218] Bennet and Elman also suggest that, in large part, this is a result of the significant benefits that case study methods, in particular, provide when studying the "complex and relatively unstructured and infrequent phenomena that lie at the heart of the subfield."[219]

Furthermore, the deliberate choice of a single case study methodology with a specific focus on Kazakhstan offers a dual advantage. Firstly, this approach provides the opportunity for an in-depth and concentrated examination of the specific intricacies and dynamics that define the Kazakh political landscape. This depth of analysis is pivotal for unraveling the complexities inherent in political opposition within the unique context of the country. Secondly, adopting the single case study approach allows for the extraction of broader insights and generalizable

[215] Yin, R. K. (2009) Case Study Research: Design and Methods. SAGE Publications Ltd: London.
[216] Geertz, Clifford. "Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture." In The cultural geography reader, pp. 41-51. Routledge, 2008.
[217] Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004).
[218] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*.
[219] Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, "Qualitative Research: Recent Developments in Case Study Methods." Annual Review of Political Science 9 (2006): 455–476, 171.

findings related to the overarching question of how political opposition interacts with authoritarian regimes. By delving deeply into the Kazakh case, the study gains valuable insights into the mechanisms, challenges, and strategies employed by political opposition in such contexts. Kazakhstan serves as an enlightening model for understanding these dynamics.

Methods of Data Collection

According to Berg and Lune *"recognizing the importance of advance planning before beginning the data-collection process in crucial."*[220] Thus, following the construction of the research model, the study employed two primary sources of data collection. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the main method of collecting data since they enabled direct and interactive engagement with the respondents. These interviews were carefully designed to gather detailed information and personal perspectives, allowing for a thorough examination of the issues under investigation.

In addition to primary data collected via interviews, the study relied on an array of secondary data sources to supplement and enrich its findings. This involved document analysis, in which existing records, reports, and publications were examined to offer historical context and additional knowledge. Academic literature and earlier studies relevant to the research were studied ensuring a thorough understanding of the subject.

Semi-structured interviews

According to Bennett and George[221], employing semi-structured interviews in the research offers an array of advantages. One of its primary benefits is the flexibility it offers to respondents. In contrast to highly structured interviews, which limit participants to prepared responses, semi-structured interviews encourage participants to provide deeper and detailed comments. This flexibility allows for a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the research subjects. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews are adaptable to the wide range of stakeholders involved in the research. As Bennett and George rightly point out, this approach is highly flexible to the needs and preferences of different respondents. Semi-structured interviews

[220] Lune, Howard, and Bruce L. Berg. "Qualitative research methods for the social sciences." (2017).
[221] George, A. L. and Bennett, A. (2005) Case studies and theory development in the social sciences (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press), p. 67. Cf Groen L. (2016) The Importance of Fitting Activities to Context: The EU in Multilateral
Climate and Biodiversity Negotiations. PhD Thesis, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, p. 83.

give a well-rounded platform to gather the diverse viewpoints by enabling a wide range of data collection methods, such as open-ended questions and follow-up queries.[222]

My research activities over my five-year PhD journey included intensive fieldwork not just within Kazakhstan but also across its neighboring country, Kyrgyzstan, as part of my extended fieldwork. The fieldwork took place between 2016 and 2018, during which I closely observed and analyzed day-to-day developments within the region. This hands-on experience gave me a unique perspective from which to systematically monitor, evaluate, and comprehend the varied political dynamics not only within Kazakhstan but from the broader regional context. This period of dedicated research allowed me to develop an in-depth understanding of the complex structure of challenges and possibilities of political opposition in Kazakhstan. This first-hand experience, marked by a constant engagement in the region's political discourse, provided me with insights into the peculiarities and intricacies that characterise Kazakh political opposition.

In my pursuit to gather in-depth accounts from a diverse array of key stakeholders, I met with diverse groups, such as members of the political parties, political activists, journalists, and civil society sector representatives, and academics. Establishing a network of relevant stakeholders allowed for better observation of the political environment in Kazakhstan through informal conversations and discussions, as well as a deeper understanding of the historical context of political dynamics in the country over the past 30 years.

As part of the fieldwork, I also conducted a regular review of press coverage. This entailed the collection of news articles from a wide range of online archives (both in English and Russian languages), each offering a unique perspective on the activities and organizational structures of opposition parties. To ensure a balanced and comprehensive view of the media landscape, I included both state- and privately-owned news outlets in the sample. This facilitated a well-rounded and objective assessment of the media's portrayal of political events and developments, contributing to the balanced perspective of the research findings.

During my internship at the organization "Siar" in Bishkek, I took advantage of the opportunity to connect with relevant respondents in Kyrgyzstan and conducted an additional interview with to comprehend the Kyrgyz perspective and their perceptions and viewpoints regarding Kazakh opposition and the political processes in general.

[222] Weiss, R. S.; 1994, "Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies", Free Press

Thus, a total of 50 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out not only within Kazakhstan but also in Kyrgyzstan. These interviews were undertaken to investigate the evolution of the Kazakh political opposition over the years; understand the contemporary public perception of the opposition; examine the interplay between the opposition, the government, and civil society; and delve into various other relevant subjects.

To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of opposition dynamics in Kazakhstan and a wider range of perspectives, it was crucial to gather data from a variety of sources. This entailed engaging with multiple stakeholders, such as opposition political parties, civil society actors, academics, local civil society organizations, and local media outlets. By embracing this multifaceted approach, the study aimed to capture a wide range of viewpoints, experiences, and analyses concerning the Kazakh political opposition. This approach ensured that the study not only delved into the complexities of the opposition's development but also examined its interactions and relationships within the broader societal and political context.

Given the sensitive nature of researching political opposition in an authoritarian country like Kazakhstan, there were limited opportunities for direct interactions with representatives of the ruling party (Nur-Otan) or government representatives. Despite these limitations, every effort was made to maintain neutrality and objectivity in the data collection process.

Engaging with this diverse group of respondents allowed for a broader understanding of the political climate within the country and provided neutral insights on the work of political parties, opposition movements, and specific opposition actors. Using the snowball sampling method, I gained valuable contact information of more political actors in the country, former politicians, opposition leaders and individuals.

Table 2. *Interview Sample categorised by groups of respondents (Both in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan)*

Type of respondents	**Political parties**	**Political movements**	**Gov. Rep.**	**Journalists and local media rep.**	**Local NGO representative**	**Academics and local political scientists**	**Total**
Number:	5	8	6	11	15	15	50

Designing and Conducting Interviews

In preparation for the forthcoming interviews, an interview guide was developed to ensure consistency and relevance throughout the data collection process. The interview guide comprised of a written list of constructed questions and was designed based on the primary research questions of the dissertation, aiming to delve into the crucial aspects of the study.

The interview guide functioned as a well-defined roadmap for the upcoming interviews, ensuring that each interview would cover essential themes and topics and addressed specific groups of respondents. To accommodate the diverse perspectives and roles of the respondents, separate questionnaires were developed for political parties, movements, and activists, and a distinct one for representatives of NGOs, academics, journalists, and other relevant stakeholders. This meticulous approach ensured that the data collected would be directly applicable to the research and would contribute significantly to the overall analysis.

Before initiating the fieldwork, a preliminary list of respondents was identified, mainly consisting of local experts, academics, representatives from international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as local and international media representatives and journalists. This specific set of respondents acted as a central contact point, facilitating the acquisition of insights into the local political landscape, obtaining contact details for local organizations and individuals, and streamlining communication with them through shared contacts. Thus, as the research progressed, respondents suggested additional contact within their circles. I tried to target individuals from various categories, including party officials at the national level and local activists. By doing so, I was able to include a wide array of perspectives and opinions from respondents of different ages, social backgrounds, and levels of responsibility within the party.

Interview Selection Process

The selection criteria for interviewees were carefully established to ensure that the study covered a wide range of experiences and viewpoints and the multifaceted nature of political opposition in Kazakhstan. The dynamically changing political situation in Kazakhstan, manifesting itself in periodic changes of regime tactics, made it important to include participants who had experienced or observed significant developments over time.

The selection process was done using political affiliation as one of the main criterion, whereby all different opposition parties, the leaders and participants of political movements, and informal networks of oppositional character have been included. This has also included both high-ranking past political leaders, elite defectors, and grassroots activists in the study in order to represent all levels of political opposition so that the voice of opposition may be taken up from top decision-making to grassroots-level activism for the past three decades.

The research also tried to capture attitudes from different age groups, genders, and professional backgrounds in order to reflect the diversity within Kazakhstan's political spectrum. Moreover, these included academics, journalists, and members of civil society who have experience regarding the political atmosphere in Kazakhstan to add weight to and give a more comprehensive understanding of the greater context. This diversification of respondents contributed to a more generalized understanding of the political climate within the country and provided neutral insights about the work and activities of political parties and opposition movements, along with concrete opposition actors.

To enhance the scope of the interviewee selection and ensure the inclusion of hard-to-reach individuals, the snowball sampling technique was employed. Initial interviewees were asked to recommend other potential interviewees who met the selection criteria of the study. The result was that the technique proved useful in gaining access to a wider network of political actors, activists, and stakeholders. It was through snowball sampling that such hidden participants-like elite defectors or persons with informal opposition activities-could be identified by the researcher, which might have been unreachable through conventional methods.

Saturation was a determinant factor in the interviewing process. A point when no new themes, insights, or views emerge from subsequent interviews. Saturation has thus been achieved in the study based on the following factors:

Thematic repetition: As interviews progressed, it became clear that many of the same themes and concerns were being taken up by various respondents. These included strategies of co-optation and repression by the regime, on the one hand, and limited resources and lack of support and trust by Kazakh population towards opposition parties. Once these themes began to repeat consistently across interviews, it indicated that the key issues had been sufficiently explored. Convergence across sectors: The study was intentionally conducted across participants from different sectors: political parties, civil society, academia, and the media. When similar patterns

and observations were echoed across these diverse groups, it became a case whereby broad understanding of the topic had occurred. The fact that a convergence of views had come from diverse stakeholders furthered that such saturation had indeed occurred. Lack of new information: As interviews progressed, data gradually provided fewer new insights. Additional respondents confirmed or supported, in the main, points already made by previous participants. This was interpreted as a sign that interviewing could stop because the new information obtained was no longer added; this implied that the data collected had been adequate to address the research questions comprehensively. At the point of saturation, where no new information was coming out from interviews, interviewing was stopped. The final sample was 50 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted both within Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Prior to conducting the interview, an introductory email was sent out, requesting an interview with the respondent, clearly outlining the nature of the interview being requested and the material and topics to be covered. The request was composed in straightforward language, ensuring that the interviewee could fully comprehend the nature and scope of the interview. Most of the interviews were conducted in Russian and a few in English.

Majority of the interviews took place in a face-to face format, on an individual basis with the respondent. Most of the interviews were anonymous, as respondents preferred confidentiality. Thus, the interviews were documented manually during the sessions and later transcribed for analysis. This approach ensured the integrity and confidentiality of the data while allowing for a thorough examination of the collected information.

It was of utmost importance to consider the ethical considerations throughout the entire research process, including the planning, execution, and follow-up phases of the study. Considering the potentially dangerous political climate and sensitivity of the topic, the respondents who kindly contributed to the study were provided with full confidentiality as well as a number of security measures. In order to safeguard the confidentiality and well-being of the participants, interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the interviewees and deemed comfortable by the researcher. These locations included offices, public cafes, party headquarters, and sometimes the interviewees' homes. In each instance, the researcher obtained the consent of the participant to record the conversation to facilitate a more relaxed discussion. Anonymity was provided in the study to protect all participants, ensuring their safety and confidentiality.

Navigating Challenges in the Interview Process

The process of gathering data was not without its share of challenges and limitations, which became particularly apparent during the interview phase, impacting the overall quality and depth of the gathered information, with several key challenges standing out.

Some of the primary issues revolved around the sensitive nature of the topics explored in this research. As a result, certain respondents exhibited hesitancy when responding to questions or were reluctant to provide complete transparency on specific subjects. Moreover, a significant majority of the respondents preferred not to have their interviews recorded. This preference added an additional layer of complexity to the data collection process. The decision of many respondents to decline recording their interviews also added to the challenges faced during data collection; the absence of a recording impacted the accuracy of data transcription as the information relied heavily on notetaking and the researcher's memory.

Despite these shortcomings, I made every effort to establish a comfortable environment during the interviews, build trust and connection with the respondents, and encourage them to share their perspectives to the extent they felt comfortable.[223] To mitigate the impact of the limitations, various strategies were employed, for instance, in certain occasions, with more hesitant respondents, I tried not to push them on sensitive questions, rather gained their trust and allowed them to express themselves more freely without feeling constrained. Throughout my two-year field research, I contacted those respondents again and conducted follow-up interviews during my second trip to the field, encouraging a more comprehensive exploration of the topics.

Personally, I benefited from several factors that worked in my favor to build trust and establish connections during both the observation period and the interview process. As a researcher representing the Former-Soviet republic of Georgia as well as being fluent in Russian was very helpful to establishing trust with the interviewees. Based on my personal observation, the participants did not identify me as a researcher representing the European University—Dublin City University (DCU). As a result, they were more at ease and open with me, perceiving me as a friendly "Georgian" researcher.

Positionality of the Researcher as a Georgian

[223] David Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data: A Guide to the Principles of Qualitative Research* (London: SAGE, 2011).

The research process was significantly shaped by the dynamics of interaction, the openness of participants, and the essence of data collection. My identity as a Georgian researcher from a former Soviet republic mattered at the level of establishing rapport with interviewees and garnering trust in them. Such a post-Soviet heritage opened particular opportunities toward political and cultural landscapes in Kazakhstan, which can be more problematic for researchers with exclusively Western or non-post-Soviet perspectives.

Being a Georgian, I shared with the people of Kazakhstan some historical and cultural experiences, including Soviet rule and transition towards post-Soviet governance. This shared background helped to transcend some of the divisions that were potentially present between the researcher and participants, given that for many of the interviewees, I was regarded as one who knows and understands the broader regional context, including political challenges facing post-Soviet societies. Knowing the political and social history of the region, I therefore gave nuance to such discussions with them, which they surely must have appreciated.

In addition, fluency in Russian was of great help in interviewing the participants; for this reason, it did not pose a problem in communication. Most of the interviews were in Russian-that way, I could directly communicate with the participants without the use of a translator or interpreter to create an atmosphere of easiness and inform the nature of the conversation right away. Fluency in Russian therefore minimized not only the linguistic barriers in interviews but also allowed me to establish connections with participants at a rather personal level. This is particularly important within the sensitive political climate, where openness may well be restricted due to distrust or even fear of repercussions. Speaking the same language relieved some of these fears and brought participants into a more relaxed state because they knew deeply that their feelings were shared.

My positioning as a Georgian researcher was finally an intermediary between an insider and outsider. While I did not belong to Kazakhstani nationality, my background from another post-Soviet state initiated moments of rapport among the participants. This hybrid positionality worked for my good in that I was perceived not as a very remote outsider but rather as someone with shared regional understanding. I was affiliated with the European University, Dublin City University; however, the participants did not perceive me as representative of a Western academic institution. They saw me rather as a "friendly Georgian" researcher, which further helped the openness during the interviews themselves.

The status of the regional researcher being unthreatening was particularly useful in this research, where opposition activity or political dissent is sensitive and usually linked with significant risks in Kazakhstan. A certain caution by interviewees, especially those who were active in political opposition or civil society, about consequences of saying too much or appearing too critical of the regime was expected. However, being perceived to hail from a neighbor ex-Soviet republic which shared common historical experiences and alike political problems, participants were more likely to trust my intentions and engage in open dialogues. They did not consider me as an emissary of a faraway and foreign perspective that might misinterpret or misrepresent the specificity of their political context.

Along with the above positive assessment of the respondents, the fieldwork and interview process were also marked by several unusual incidences. Of these incidents, one occasion drew particular attention when a respondent clicked a photo of the researcher without her permission. That photo was later uploaded on the respondent's social media platform accompanied by a brief description of the interview topic.

Considering the potential security risks of meeting with some political activists and opposition leaders here in Kazakhstan and researching the overall political opposition, I asked her to take the post down immediately, citing security concerns. After understanding the gravity of the implications, the respondent removed the photograph from her social media account without any further delay. Whereas, in retrospect, it was clear that the respondent's move was actually one of self-preservation, while at the same time being forthright with the police and publicizing her own contact with a foreign researcher.

This has also brought to the fore unexpected insights into the complexities of conducting research in authoritarian environments: even on occasions, some of the respondents fear for their safety and wellbeing while meeting a "foreign" researcher, journalist, etc. The incident of the social media posts brought home some of the potential vulnerabilities associated with researching in authoritarian contexts through the gains of shared identity serving as a reminder to always be vigilant.

Table 3: ***List of Interview Questions***

Questions posed to opposition political parties and other opposition members and elite defectors

1. How would you describe the ideology of your political party/movement?
2. What are the main policy issues that your party/movement is focusing on?
3. What is the relationship of your party/movement with the government, are you regarded as a radical opposition or manage to cooperate with the regime?
4. As a member of the political opposition, what kinds of strategies and tactics have been used against the regime to achieve the cause?
5. How do external factors impact the development and strategies of opposition parties/movements?
6. How would you describe the strategies of the regime against the opposition?
7. In your opinion does the Kazakh/Kyrgyz legislation affect the operation and prevent the development of opposition political parties/movements? Such as the law on political parties, law on NGOs, and law on public movement
8. Is public support of opposition widespread in your opinion?
9. Is support for the opposition confined to certain groups in society?
10. Does political opposition in Kazakhstan possess enough authority to influence governmental policies? Does the regime consider its suggestions?
11. What do you understand by the political opposition in Kazakhstan?
12. Apart from oppositional political parties what are other existing forms and nature of political opposition in Kazakhstan today? (Opposition movements, networks, non-governmental organizations, activists, etc.)
13. How would you describe the transformation of nature and composition of political opposition through the years (90s, early 2000s, and recent period)?
14. How would you characterise the differences between the political opposition in Kazakhstan?
15. In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the political opposition in Kazakhstan?
16. What kinds of resources does the opposition possess and what kinds of resources do they lack? (For example, money, public support, mass media, and personal connections.)

17. When you made your decision to join the opposition, what do you recall were the major factors that you took into consideration? (In the case of elite defector respondents)

18. How would you describe your departure from the ruling coalition to the political opposition? (In the case of elite defector respondents)

19. What kind of reaction followed your defection from the government and other members of the elite? (In the case of elite defector respondents)

20. How did you assess your chances for success? (In the case of elite defector respondents)

21. Were you concerned about the effect of your decision on your safety?

22. How would you characterise the relationship between the government and the opposition in Kazakhstan?

23. Can the agency of opposition impact the durability of the regime in Kazakhstan?

Questions posed to Experts, political analysts, academics, journalists, and opposition civil society activists

1) What do you understand by the political opposition in Kazakhstan?

2) Apart from oppositional political parties what are other existing forms and nature of political opposition in Kazakhstan today? (Opposition movements, networks, non-governmental organizations, activists)

3) In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the political opposition in Kazakhstan?

4) What kinds of resources do they possess and what kinds of resources do they lack? (Money, public support, mass media, connections)

5) What role and function opposition should pursue and what are the functions of the opposition in reality?

6) Is public support of political opposition widespread in your opinion?

7) Is support for the opposition confined to certain groups in society?

8) Which political parties are dominating and have the biggest support – those in favor of radical change or trying to maintain stability in the country?

9) As a close observer of politics in your country, what conclusions have you come to regarding the decision of elites to leave the ruling coalition and join the opposition?

10) In your opinion does the Kazakh legislation prevent the development of opposition political parties/movements?

11) Law on political parties, the law on NGOs, the law on Public Movement ... legislation which affects the operation of parties and NGOs

12) How do the external factors impact the development and strategies of opposition parties/movements?

13) How would you characterise the relationship between the government and the opposition in Kazakhstan?

14) Can the agency of opposition impact the durability of the regime in Kazakhstan?

15) Does political opposition in Kazakhstan possess enough authority to influence governmental policies?

16) Does the regime consider its suggestions?

17) What kind of strategies and tactics has the opposition used against the regime to achieve the cause?

18) How would you describe the strategies of the regime against the opposition?

19) How would you describe the transformation of nature and composition of political opposition through the years in Kazakhstan (90's, early 2000's and recent period)?

20) How would you characterise the differences between the political opposition in Kazakhstan?

Document Analysis

In addition to conducting semi-structured interviews, the research project incorporated document analysis as an additional and complementary method of data collection. This multifaceted approach involved a comprehensive examination and in-depth analysis of various

written documents that pertained to the research topic, including official reports, academic papers, policy documents, and historical records, among others. The documents examined included official reports, scholarly papers, policy documents, historical records, and a variety of other pertinent textual sources.

Document analysis is a qualitative research method that involves the interpretation of documents by the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the research subject. Its adoption serves a twofold purpose: firstly, it facilitates data triangulation, and secondly, it contributes to the enhancement of the research's validity and reliability.[224] Document analysis, when employed in combination with semi-structured interviews, effectively expands the scope of the research by enriching the dataset with additional data obtained from the official documents, statements, and publications. This two-pronged method ensures that the study findings are based on a varied set of sources, thus enhancing the credibility and reliability of the results.[225]

Triangulation in research endeavors to establish a convergence of evidence, fostering greater credibility.[226] This process involves an investigation of data gathered through diverse methods, enabling the researcher to validate results by cross-referencing across multiple datasets and thereby diminishing the potential influence of biases that might be inherent in a solitary study. As Patton elucidates, triangulation serves as a protective measure for the researcher against allegations that a study's conclusions are exclusively a product of a single method, a singular information source, or the personal bias of a lone investigator.[227]

Furthermore, document analysis is a powerful method for integrating data obtained from primary sources, enabling researchers to cross-reference the information gathered and develop a more comprehensive and well-rounded understanding of the research topic. This validation method not only strengthens the reliability of the findings, but also improves the general strength of the research, ensuring that the conclusions are based on a variety of different and verified sources.[228] In essence, document analysis is a pivotal tool in the qualitative researcher's toolkit, offering the means to deepen insights, validate findings, and enhance the overall robustness of

[224] Leung, Lawrence. "Validity, reliability, and generalizability in qualitative research." Journal of family medicine and primary care 4, no. 3 (2015): 324.
[225] Bowen, Glenn A. "Document analysis as a qualitative research method." Qualitative research journal 9, no. 2 (2009): 27-40.
[226] Madani Borujeni, Sayed Ahmad, and Ahmad Reza Nasr. "Triangulation: A strategy for innovating in educational researches." Educational Innovations 8, no. 2 (2009): 53-74.
[227] Patton, Michael Quinn. *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. SAGE Publications, inc, 1990.
[228] O'Leary, Z. (2014). The essential guide to doing your research project (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

the research project. Its synergy with other data collection methods ensures a more comprehensive and multifaceted exploration of the subject matter, ultimately enriching the research process and its outcomes.[229]

As the research project centered around identifying various nature and forms of political opposition, including political parties/movements, individual opposition leaders and civic and spontaneous opposition displayed through the civic protests and demonstrations, wide array of documents was analyzed, all within the specific timeframe under investigation.

In order to examine the history of the development of institutional political opposition – political parties and movements from early 1990's, the primary source of information were the party publications, party programs, elections manifestos. These material was mostly attained from the official websites or the political parties, informal information obtained from the respondents as well as numerous online sources published in Russian over the years.

As part of the document analysis, I also conducted a regular review of press coverage. This entailed the collection of news articles from a wide range of online archives, (both in English and Russian languages) each offering a unique perspective on the activities and organizational structures of opposition parties. To ensure a balanced and comprehensive view of the media landscape, I included both state-owned and privately-owned news outlets in the sample. This approach facilitated a well-rounded and objective assessment of the media's portrayal of political events and developments, contributing to the balanced perspective of the research findings.

Due to the almost 30 years gap of the research it appeared problematic to find out the party newspapers published back in 1990' and even in 2000's as the local libraries as well as parties themselves did not keep the record of those publications.

Data Analysis

John W. Creswell outlines a detailed six-step method for analyzing qualitative data. To begin, the process involves synthesizing specific data from interviews or transcriptions in order to build a consistent and comprehensive picture. In contrast to quantitative methodologies, qualitative research methodology stresses simultaneous data collection and processing, enabling dynamic interaction. Qualitative research phases are frequent and recursive, allowing researchers to

[229] Bowen, Glenn A. "Document analysis as a qualitative research method." Qualitative research journal 9, no. 2 (2009): 27-40.

alternate between data collection and interpretation. This repeated method increases the depth of learning and refines emerging concepts.[230]

On every occasion, qualitative researchers undertake in-depth studies, diving into nuances and patterns related to prevalent themes for a more nuanced understanding. The variety of qualitative data analysis allows for flexibility in altering methodologies to specific settings. Finally, since researchers include personal assessments in a descriptive manner, qualitative research is necessarily interpretive. This interpretive perspective, which includes the researcher's point of view, adds a subjective aspect to the qualitative analysis process, enriching and deepening it.[231]

Thus, by adopting the general principles of qualitative data analysis, data collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews and document analysis underwent a systematic organization and categorisation process. The interviews were transcribed and the questions from the semi-structured interviews were grouped based on relevant research topics, to facilitate analysis and comparison of the data. Initially, the interviews were transcribed to ensure accuracy, then, the responses and information obtained from these interviews were grouped and categorised according to the relevant research topics and themes. This careful organization of data was undertaken to streamline the subsequent analysis process and facilitate meaningful comparisons between different sets of data. It allowed for a more structured and comprehensive examination of the collected information, enhancing the research's ability to draw conclusions and identify patterns and trends.

For data analysis, the content analysis method was employed. Content analysis is a systematic, orderly, and intersubjective method of describing the contents of the communication, which relies on the categorisation process and coding for the process of ordering the category to the units of analysis.[232] The basis of content analysis is the categorisation process and coding, which are required for organizing the categories and assigning them to the units of analysis. In the document analysis process, I systematically categorized and coded the content into clear themes and categories.[233] Specifically tailored for this project, I designed and applied my own coding

[230] Creswell, J. W. (2013). Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches. New York, NY: SAGE Publications, Inc.
[231] Ibid
[232] Bettina Westle, "Politisches Wissen und Wahlen: Gefälligkeitsübersetzung: Political knowledge and elections," in *Wahlen und Wähler: Analysen aus Anlass der Bundestagswahl 2002* (Wiesbaden: VS Verl. für Sozialwissenschaften, 2005): 484–512.
[233] Krippendorff, Klaus. "Krippendorff, Klaus, Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1980." (1980)

system to efficiently organize and classify all the collected sources, ensuring a comprehensive and structured examination.

The coding process commenced by creating a preliminary list of categories based on the primary research questions and the themes that emerged from the interviews. As the data collection progressed, this initial list of categories was then refined and expanded, enabling a thorough examination and comparison of responses from different respondents concerning similar themes and the identification of underlying patterns. It is important to note that the analysis of the collected data was carried out manually, without the use of any computer program, allowing for a structured and in-depth examination of the information gathered from the interviews and documents.

After collection, the data was worked through to purify, arrange, and then clean it up. The key aspects of the interviewees' answers to each question were documented, although not transcribed fully. According to Meuser and Nagel,[234] the researcher decides which part should be transcribed, paraphrased, cited, or not considered at all, based on the relevance of data. Consequently, while processing the data, it was necessary to organize it, recollect details, verify completeness, and retrieve any missing information from the interviews. As the semi-structured interview questions were designed to align with the research questions and concepts used, they were naturally grouped into research topics. This arrangement greatly facilitated the analysis process, enabling easy comparison of data, identification of similarities and differences, and in-depth analysis.

In addition, to enhance the credibility and validity of the research, the triangulation technique was employed. Noble and Heale define research triangulation as the process of increasing the credibility and validity of research, validating the findings of a study.[235] This approach enriched the depth and comprehensiveness of the study by incorporating diverse perspectives and insights from myriad angles and enhanced the credibility of the research. The data that I collected were triangulated with information from various sources to verify their accuracy. I compared the data

[234] Michael Meuser and Ulrike Nagel, "The Expert Interview and Changes in Knowledge Production," In *Interviewing Experts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009), 17–42.
[235] Noble, Helen, and Roberta Heale. "Triangulation in research, with examples." Evidence-based nursing 22, no. 3 (2019): 67-68.

from interviews with other sources, including additional interviews, newspaper articles, interpellations, and other secondary sources.[236]

The use of triangulation method has strengthened and given more confidence to the central findings of the research, aiding the reliability and validity of the study. The cross-referencing of data across multiple sources ensured the reliability of conclusions drawn from the data. This was achieved by only referring to a particular phenomenon if it could be cross-references with at least two sources within the complete data analysis process.

Table 4. Research Codebook:

Name	Sources	References
1. What are the nature and forms of political opposition in Kazakhstan and how it has evolved over time?		
General Characteristics of Kazakh Political Opposition over the years		
Marginal	20	23
Emerging from above	15	25
Fragmented and ineffective	20	27
Indirect channels of expression opposition stance	25	29
Lack of structure	19	31
Strength and Weaknesses of Opposition over the years		
Strength		
Financial resources of individual opposition leaders	18	22
The elite composition of the leadership	10	16
The popularity of individual	15	15

[236] Uwe Flick, Vjenka Garms-Homolova, Wolfram J. Herrmann, Joachim Kuck, and Gundula Röhnsch, "'I Can't Prescribe Something Just Because Someone Asks for It...' Using Mixed Methods in the Framework of Triangulation," *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 6, no. 2 (2012): 97–110.

opposition leaders among the population		
Facilities and information services from donor organizations	13	19
Weaknesses		
Lack of action and strategies	20	24
History	6	6
Media manipulation	11	17
Media Propaganda	17	23
Ideological vacuum	10	11
Personalist politics	18	19
Values	12	12
Lack of Financial means	30	34
Lack of administrative resources	23	26
Structural weaknesses	24	28
Fragmentation and internal structural factors	17	19
Lack of democratic political traditions	25	29
Inter party democracy	8	8
Social and political cleavages and informal politics	30	34
Competition over resources	37	39
Constant merging and	20	22

dissolution of opposition part.		
Public mistrust	23	28
Absence of constituency	26	30
Territorial settings	12	19
Political apathy	28	34
Peoples' Mentality	30	32
Objectives of opposition - Getting power - Influence the government - Personal advantages	30	37
2. How has the Kazakh regime responded to these different forms of political opposition?		
Repression	40	49
Co-optation	42	49
Manipulation	47	50
- Elections	54	55
- Political party and candidate registration	32	33
- Restrictions on Rallies and protests	29	32
- Media manipulation	26	30
- Local networks	24	29
Patronage politics	30	32
Clans	25	28
Economic rewards	30	38
Financial and administrative resources	29	35

Authoritarian support	30	32
3. To what extent might opposition agency shape regime durability in Kazakhstan?		
Opposition agency	20	25
Regime durability	24	29
Influence	15	18
Government stability	29	31
Regime's resilience	28	29
Opposition strategies	18	20
Authoritarian rule	38	41

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter delved into a thorough examination of Kazakhstan's varied political landscape over the past three decades. The overall objectives of the study were laid out with a focus on identifying the nature and forms of political opposition, examining the regime's behaviors, and investigating the potential impact of opposition agency on regime durability. The execution of the research was directed by the key research questions, emphasizing the rationale for the chosen research design, methodology, and strategy.

The methodological framework employed a combination of qualitative research and inductive methods, with Kazakhstan as a single case study. This technique allowed for an in-depth examination of the country's political opposition, taking into account the complex dynamics that define the Kazakh political landscape. The limitations and advantages of undertaking research in this specific geographical area were acknowledged, ensuring a detailed understanding of the unique political environment in Kazakhstan.

The fieldwork for this research was conducted over the period spanning from 2016 to 2018, during which I conducted research in Kazakhstan also in Kyrgyzstan as part of my extended fieldwork and internship program. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, a total of 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted. This diverse group of interviewees represented a broad spectrum of individuals, including party officials and activists, members of Parliament, local government officials, representatives from civil society and non-governmental organizations,

dedicated journalists, and other key informants from both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This extensive and inclusive approach was instrumental in capturing a multifaceted view of the political landscape.

The adoption of an inductive approach in this research was pivotal in enabling a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies surrounding the formation, evolution, and transformation of the opposition in Kazakhstan. Going beyond the conventional institutionalised forms of opposition, such as political parties and movements, this approach enabled me to uncover the informal aspects of the Kazakh political opposition, contributing to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the various manifestations of opposition and their complex interplay with the government in Kazakhstan.

In sum, the methods employed in this research project have enabled a broad exploration of the complex world of political opposition in Kazakhstan, offering valuable insights into its evolution and interactions with the government. The combination of qualitative, inductive, and single case study approaches, coupled with the diverse array of perspectives gathered during the fieldwork, ensured the relevance and validity of the research.

Chapter 4

Divergences of Authoritarian Regimes and Nature of Political Opposition in Central Asia and Kazakhstan

In the study of political opposition, Lisa Anderson's words serve as a reminder that *"the nature of political opposition reflects the nature of political authority … therefore, we must not analyse political opposition without analysing the government of a polity."*[237] Thus, an examination of political dissent should begin with a thorough analysis of the general political context and structures within which political opposition operates in authoritarian regimes.

This chapter will embark on a comprehensive exploration of the historical settings of authoritarianism in Central Asia, with a specific focus on Kazakhstan. It will delve into the complex legacy of pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet politics, shedding light on how these historical roots have left its mark on the nature and dynamics of authoritarian regimes and opposition groups in the region and Kazakhstan specifically.

[237] Lisa Anderson, "Lawless Government and Illegal Opposition: Reflections on the Middle East," *Journal of International Affairs* (1987): 219–232.

In the second section, the diversity of political regimes in Central Asia will be analyzed. The chapter will scrutinize the myriad factors that have contributed to the emergence of varied forms of authoritarian political systems. Understanding the origins and dynamics of authoritarianism in Kazakhstan can provide substantial insight into the challenges and opportunities that political opposition and civil society actors have encountered.

The chapter's final section will examine the overall characteristics and numerous aspects of political opposition in Central Asia, while the following chapters will provide empirical data, exploring the specific characteristics and expressions of political opposition in Kazakhstan, as well as the complex mechanisms of regime-opposition relations. This contextualisation is essential for understanding the type of the regime that has taken root in Kazakhstan, as well as its overarching impact on the composition and structure of the opposition in Kazakhstan and the region.

Divergence of Authoritarianism in Central Asia

Following their independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the five Central Asian states found themselves in a new political setting, having just emerged from decades of Soviet rule and lacking any history of or prior exposure to democratic governance. In response to this novel political landscape, Central Asian leaders have opted to establish new regime types, embracing a system of government similar to the Soviet era, by establishing a dominant political rule that relied on repressive and co-optative tactics and the eradication of any expressions of political opposition or dissent.

This sudden transition and adaptation to the new political rule led to the emergence of contemporary forms of authoritarian governance and formation of diverse types of authoritarian regimes within each of these countries. Thus, despite sharing similar institutional and political characteristics, along with comparable historical, cultural, and transitional backgrounds, all the five Central Asian states have taken different paths of political transition and political order, with wide range of regime outcomes and varying degrees of autocratic stability.

The specific political structure of Central Asian states complicates straightforward classification. As on one hand, these countries exhibit numerous characteristics of authoritarianism, with significant power concentrated within the ruling elite. On the other hand, these regimes project an image of electoral democracies, albeit primarily in a formal context. As per the latest Freedom House report for the year 2023, Kyrgyzstan stands out as the most

democratic among the five countries of Central Asia, earning a "Partly Free" classification.[238] In contrast, Uzbekistan[239] and Kazakhstan[240] are both categorised as "Not Free, while Tajikistan[241] and Turkmenistan[242], are classified as "Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes".

Numerous studies have been dedicated to exploring the complex variables that contribute to the failure of democracy and divergence of authoritarian tendencies in the region of Central Asia. These investigations have delved into a multifaceted set of variables that collectively shape the region's political landscape.

One prominent factor often scrutinized in the scholarship is the historical influence of the Soviet past. Scholars have explored how the legacy of Soviet governance, carachterised by centralised control and authoritarian structures, continues to cast a shadow over the political developments in Central Asia. Furthermore, the strategies employed by post-Soviet regimes in response to the challenges of transition have been instrumental in shaping the political trajectories of Central Asian nations, setting the course for governance styles, state-society relations, and the consolidation of political power within the region.[243] The authors such as also Haerpfer and Kseniya Kizilova, analyze political transformations in post-Soviet Central Asia by examining the shifts in attitudes toward democracy, personal freedoms, acceptance of authoritarianism, autocracy, to understand how these changes have influenced the dynamics of the post-Soviet political transition in the region.[244]

Elite structures, clans, and interpersonal networks have also been identified as key determinants of political life in post-Soviet Central Asia. Rico Isaacs, in his book *Party System Formation in Kazakhstan: Between Formal and Informal Politics*, presents a nuanced exploration of the country's political landscape. Isaacs delves into the regional and historical factors that shape the nation's politics, employing the concept of neopatrimonialism, defined as a system in which political leaders employ state resources to establish patron-client relationships. These

[238] Kyrgyzstan: Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report https://freedomhouse.org/country/kyrgyzstan/freedom-world/2023
[239] Uzbekistan: Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report https://freedomhouse.org/country/uzbekistan/freedom-world/2023
[240] Kazakhstan: Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/freedom-world/2023
[241] Tajikistan: Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report https://freedomhouse.org/country/tajikistan/freedom-world/2023
[242] Turkmenistan: Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkmenistan/freedom-world/2023
[243] Glenn, John. The Soviet Legacy in Central Asia. Springer, 1999.
[244] Haerpfer, Christian W., and Kseniya Kizilova. "Values and Transformation in Central Asia." Transformation and Development: Studies in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Member States (2020): 7-28.

relationships play a pivotal role in securing the loyalty of the broader population, known as clients, and in creating influential networks of support centered around a singular leader or a political party.[245]

Kathleen Collins also underscores the significant influence of "*clan-based political systems, where the regimes' stability is ensured by regional clans' pacts."*[246] Collins highlights that clan politics have been "*profoundly impacting both the nature and direction of regime transition and the potential for regime viability during and after the transition."* She emphasizes how these networks of clans play a pivotal role in preserving regime stability through regional clan agreements, exercising control over government institutions, and managing the law enforcement apparatus of the state. This underlines the crucial role of clan-based politics in shaping the political landscape and maintaining the stability of regimes in the region.[247]

The role of cultural and traditional practices, as well as the local population's mindset, has also been examined to understand their impact on political governance. This includes elements such as patriarchy, respect of authority, and the presence of weak democratic institutions, which can influence the path to authoritarianism. As Gregory Gleason notes

> *To outsiders, Central Asian political practices often seem idiosyncratic and subject to mysterious protocols, secretive and mutual understandings, and subtle but powerful local political idioms. Central Asian traditions of patriarchy, popular submissiveness, deference to authority and to elders, and weak democratic institutions would seem to impel Central Asian societies toward an authoritarian future.*[248]

In addition, the various leadership styles and strategies employed by the leaders in the region have been identified as one of the key factors contributing to the divergence in authoritarianism and political regime types observed in Central Asia. These differences are particularly noticeable in the way presidential power has been consolidated, following the nation's independence, signifying the degree to which the presidents exercise complete authority and permit or restrict political contestation from opposition groups. The distinctive methods of

[245] Rico Isaacs, *Party System Formation in Kazakhstan: Between Formal and Informal Politics*, Vol. 26. (London: Routledge, 2011).
[246] Kathleen Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[247] Kathleen Collins, "The Political Role of Clans in Central Asia," *Comparative Politics* (2003): 171–190.
[248] Gregory Gleason and A. J. Motyl, *The Central Asian States* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997).

leadership adopted by these leaders greatly influenced how they responded to opposition challenges and shaped the tactics and strategies employed against their adversaries.[249]

The scholarship has also attributed the prevalence of authoritarian politics in the region to underdevelopment and specific socio-economic conditions that are unique to Central Asia. Economic constraints in the region, including as poverty, corruption, and resource dependency, create an atmosphere in which centralised control and authoritative leadership can be considered as tools for sustaining stability and order. These conditions can create an environment conducive to authoritarian rule, providing insights into the region's political landscape.[250]

This, briefly summarized body of research reflects the diverse array of factors that could potentially lead to the persistence of authoritarian governance in Central Asia, offering valuable insights into the complex dynamics of the region, which will be elaborated upon in subsequent sections. Therefore, the examination of the nature and variation of authoritarianism within the former Soviet republics of Central Asia will start with a thorough exploration of the region's historical and political background. This involves recognizing the pre-soviet and Soviet eras' influence and legacy to understand the origins and contemporary nature of authoritarian tendencies in the region.

The Imprint of the Soviet Legacy

The commonality between the five countries of Central Asia can be traced back to a centuries'-long shared historical background and rich heritage of traditions, with similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds shaping the region's identity and sense of community. Over centuries, Central Asia with its long history of political domination has been home to a variety of conquerors and empires, from nomadic tribes to the great empires of Alexander the Great and Mongol invasions by Genghis Khan,[251] as well as Russian imperial rule in the late 19th century,[252] each seeking to control the region's strategic location and rich natural resources, establishing the groundwork for authoritarianism in the region. Consequently, the colonial

[249] Azamat Sakiev, "Presidential Leadership Styles and Forms of Authoritarianism in Post-Soviet Central Asia," (PhD diss. The University of Syracuse, 2011).
[250] Pomfret, Richard. "The economic future of Central Asia." Brown J. World Aff. 19 (2012): 59.
[251] János Harmatta, Baji Nath Puri, and G. F. Etemadi, eds. *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1994.
[252] James Pickett, "Central Asia between Empires: New Research on the 18th and 19th Centuries." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, ed. David Ludden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

experience left distinct, fundamental imprints and significant transformative effects on the region and overall mentality of the population. [253]

As Gregory Gleason notes, *"none of these republics existed as independent states"*[254] until the Soviet era, and their inclusion in the Union has shaped the political geography, institutions, economic and urban patterns as well as the normative identities of the Central Asian republics.[255] Thus, the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution gave way to the creation of artificial nation-states[256] in the heart of Asia and brought with it a new ideology and a new set of institutions that initially were designed to promote a more equal and egalitarian society. . Under Soviet administration, the territorial setup of Central Asia changed in the 1920s and 1930s, culminating in the foundation of the five independent nations with their current borders in 1936.[257]

Although, over time the centralised and authoritarian model of Soviet-style governance, has wielded a considerable influence in shaping authoritarian practices and the perception of power, leaving profound imprints on the political and social structures of the modern-day Central Asia and Kazakhstan.[258] This Soviet legacy included the centralisation of power in the control of a single leader appointed by Moscow, granting them near-total control over the lives of ordinary citizens. This control was established through collectivisation policies, informal networks and authority structures, all while facing extensive corruption and suppression of all forms of traditional governance, including cultural and linguistic diversity among majority of the Soviet Republics.[259]

The disintegration of the Soviet Union created optimistic prospects for the establishment of democratic practices in the region. The new political changes were predominantly perceived by Western society and the newly independent states as a worldwide transition towards democracy, as countries faced a profound transformation, transitioning from socialist systems to capitalist economies and shifting from autocratic to democratic governance.[260] Although, in contrast to

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[253] Massansalvador, Francesc Serra. "The process of nation building in central Asia and its relationship to Russia's regional influence." Jean Monnet/Robert Schuman Paper Series 10, no. 5 (2010): 1-13.
[254] Gregory W. Gleason and Susan J. Buck, "Decolonization in the former Soviet Borderlands: Politics in Search of Principles," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 26, no. 3 (1993): 522–525.
[255] Rico Isaacs and Abel Polese, "Between 'Imagined' and 'Real' Nation-building: Identities and Nationhood in Post-Soviet Central Asia," *Nationalities Papers* 43, no. 3 (2015): 371–382.
[256] Shaziae Pirzada, "FEDERALISM IN THE USSR: The Central Asian Context," *Strategic Studies* 10, no. 2 (1987): 67–94.
[257] Batsaikhan, Uuriintuya, and Marek Dabrowski. "Central Asia—twenty-five years after the breakup of the USSR." Russian Journal of Economics 3, no. 3 (2017): 296-320.
[258] Robert D. McChesney, *Central Asia: Foundations of Change* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, Inc., 1996), 147.
[259] Gregory Gleason, "Fealty and Loyalty: Informal Authority Structures in Soviet Asia," *Soviet Studies* 43, no. 4 (1991): 613–628.
[260] Huntington, *The Third Wave*.

nationalist movements and political unrest in other former Soviet republics, the Central Asian states (especially Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) went through a relatively peaceful transition from the communist rule. This was primarily driven by the reluctance of some of the Central Asian states to break away from the Union, mostly due to certain political, security and economic stability they felt during the Soviet period.[261]

Gaining independence, granted significant freedom to the leaders of the newly established countries in the region. Given their lack of prior experience with self-government and democratic politics, the shape of the new political landscape in each of these countries was heavily determined by the governing style, patronage networks, local clans and elite structures built around particular leader in each country.[262] During the Soviet times within the Central Asian republics, political discourse was constructed and controlled by elite's dependent on the communist parties. After gaining independence, a similar pattern persisted, with the leading role also passed to politicians directly connected with the Soviet party leadership.[263] As Rico Isaacs also notes in his article "Neopatrimonialism and beyond: reassessing the formal and informal in the study of Central Asian politics" the informal politics and neo-patrimonialism has emerged as "*the central conceptual label applied by scholars to understand the politics of the Central Asian republics and particularly Kazakhstan".* [264]

This sequence of events was predetermined by the historical context in which leaders such as Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan; Islam Karimov, President of Uzbekistan; and Saparmurat Niyazov, President of Turkmenistan, had previously held positions as first secretaries of the Central Committees of local communist parties during the Soviet era.[265] It is notable that both Nazarbayev and Karimov assumed the highest party roles in 1989, Niyazov in 1985, with Niyazov also becoming chairman of the Supreme Council of the Turkmen SSR in 1990,[266] a role he held up until his passing in 2006. Yet the fundamental principles and

[261] Hooman Peimani, *Failed Transition, Bleak Future? War and Instability in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing US, 2002).
[262] Boris Z. Rumer, *Central Asia: A Gathering Storm?* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
[263] Izquierdo-Brichs, Ferran, and Francesc Serra-Massansalvador. Political Regimes and Neopatrimonialism in Central Asia. Springer Singapore, 2021.
[264] Isaacs, Rico. "Neopatrimonialism and beyond: reassessing the formal and informal in the study of Central Asian politics." Contemporary Politics 20, no. 2 (2014): 229-245.
[265] Martha Brill Olcott and Zhanara Nauruzbayeva, "Taking Stock of Central Asia." *Journal of International Affairs* (2003): 3–17.
[266] Slavomír Horák, "Turkmenistan at the Last Stage of Perestroika. Determinants of an Authoritarian Path," *Cahiers d'Asie Centrale* 26 (2016): 29–49.

governing style carried over to his successor, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, remained unchanged.[267]

Kyrgyzstan's case was different. In 1990, Askar Akaev assumed the presidency, a rather unexpected leap from his previous role as the head of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences. While the sudden transition of a scientist to the highest political position was undoubtedly surprising, Akaev's time in office was similarly marked with the emergence of authoritarian tendencies, mirroring the experiences of his counterparts in the region. Hence, the new leaders did not need to acquire office through a political struggle and elections, rather they inherited it, along with the associated administrative apparatus, including authoritative structures, from the Soviet system. Subsequently, their efforts were largely devoted to preserving their hold on power.

As a result, despite the initial commitment by the Central Asian republics to embrace political liberalisation, their efforts have failed and transitions after communism did not take the anticipated route.[268] Consequently, a new political arrangement emerged in these newly independent states and at the outset, the world observed the establishment of "hybrid forms" of regimes:[269] "a combining rhetorical acceptance of liberal democracy, the existence of some formal democratic institutions, and respect for a limited sphere of civil and political liberties with essentially illiberal or even authoritarian traits."[270]

This new political order of "façade democracies" introduced elements of elections, parliament, and the existence of opposition groups.[271] In the early 1990s, all the Central Asian leaders, at least publicly, declared their adherence to the ideals of democracy. The president of Turkmenistan, Separmurat Niyazov, also known as Turkmenbashi in early years of independence, stated: "We are moving towards the creation of a democratic secular state in which all human rights and freedoms will be guaranteed…."[272] Comments by the Uzbek President, Islam Karimov, also affirmed: "We are building a civil society. This means that as our statehood develops, diverse management functions will be transferred to the people themselves, to public self-government bodies. … The formation of a democratic state with

[267] Merdan Amanov, "Turkmenistan Under Serdar: Has Anything Changed?" *The Diplomat*, July 21, 2022.
[268] Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
[269] Matthijs Bogaards, "How to Classify Hybrid Regimes? Defective Democracy and Electoral Authoritarianism," *Democratization* 16, no. 2 (2009): 399–423.
[270] Olcott and Ottaway, "Challenge of Semi-authoritarianism."
[271] Donnacha ó Beacháin, "Faking It: Neo-Soviet Electoral Politics in Central Asia," in *Voting for Hitler and Stalin: Elections under 20th Century Dictatorships*, eds. Ralph Jessen and Hedwig Richter (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2011): 204–227.
[272] 'Turkmenistan: Stability, reforms, neutrality'. Ashkhabad, 1996, p. 49.

strong social guarantees is our goal."[273] The Uzbek president also supported the democratic prospects of his country and the region: "with the acquisition of state independence, the countries of Central Asia have chosen a liberal-democratic model of political culture."[274] Kyrgyzstan also proclaimed itself as the cornerstone of democracy in the region. In the early 1990s, President Akaev even gave a historical speech as part of his lecture at Columbia University, where he stated: "Democracy was not brought to the United States from Europe, it came from the American forest, let me say: 'Our (Kyrgyz) democracy descended from the mountains of Tien – Shan'."[275] As the president stated during the 2015 presidential elections, "democracy is not the starting point of our way, it is the final point of our destination."[276]

Despite their liberal views, the leaders of Central Asia maintained the narrative that democracy should align with the distinct national, religious, and civilisational traits of their societies, emphasizing that democracy is an important but not a top priority of these nations, often linking it to "instability" as the core element of the statehood.[277] As Nancy Lubin also notes on the examples of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan due to the absence of democratic traditions in these nations:

> *while "democracy" has become a catchword used by leaders and the general population alike throughout Central Asia … strong leadership, stability, law and order, and economic improvement are far higher priorities than the construction of any particular government system. Since there is no history of democratic rule in these countries, democracy is perceived there as, at best, an ideal for some distant future, not as the best system to resolve Uzbekistan's or Kazakhstan's problems today.*[278]

Furthermore, majority of the respondents also confirmed that a significant portion of the local population in Central Asia, until today view democratic principles as "something distant, unattainable, and therefore alien."[279] As a result, the prevailing sentiment is that Central Asia is not ready to embrace liberal democratic values or establish a robust civil society. This readiness

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[273] Motherland is sacred for everyone. Tashkent: Uzbekistan, 1995, p. 176.
[274] Karimov I. Stability and reforms. M.: Palea, 1996. S. 308.
https://shorturl.at/tuvS6
[275] Askar Akayev, "Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Democratic Alternative," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 2, no. 1 (1993).
[276] "Nazarbayev otsenil svoju rabotu na postu Presidenta," *Tengri News*. March 20, 2015, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/nazarbaev-otsenil-svoyu-rabotu-na-postu-prezidenta-291129/.
[277] Charles J. Sullivan, "Kazakhstan at a Crossroads," *Asia Policy* 13, no. 2 (2018): 121–136.
[278] Nancy Lubin, *Central Asians Take Stock: Reform, Corruption, and Identity*, Vol. 31 (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 1995).
[279] Paul Stronski and Russel Zanca, "Societal Change Afoot in Central Asia," *World* 17, no. 20 (2019): 18.

gap serves as the primary rationale for advocates of the authoritarian system. Therefore, the lack of readiness in Central Asia to embrace liberal democratic ideals and to foster the development of a civil society stands as the most key argument advanced by advocates of the authoritarian system.[280]

Hence, the existing political and social environment in all of the five states of the region, paved the way for a more authoritarian path, authority being heavily concentrated within personalist presidential autocracies, who employed a combination of formal strategies such as elections[281] as well as informal strategies to maintain their power.[282] Thus, contrary to Huntington's claim that "liberal authoritarianism is not a stable equilibrium … the halfway house doesn't stand,"[283] transitional hybrid regimes have proven wrong, and the authoritarian rule has been sustained and evolved as stable authoritarian form of rule across the region.[284] It is important to note that authoritarian trends became evident in all five Central Asian states from early 1990s based on the extent of changes in each country, thus by the mid-1990s, all five states in Central Asia had taken different paths of political transition and political order, with a wide range of regime outcomes and varying degrees of autocratic stability.

Kyrgyzstan: Ranging from states with higher democratic predispositions to those with greater authoritarian tendencies, Kyrgyzstan stands out as the only country in the region where a certain degree of democracy has emerged and persisted over the years. In the early years of its independence, Kyrgyz Republic embraced a broad course of liberalisation and political transformation. This approach included important aspects of pluralism and prospects for political opposition and the establishment of a set of interests and elite alliances. Consequently, the country managed to avoid the rapid emergence of sultanistic politics, which had been observed in other states of the region.[285]

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[280] A. A. Shamolov, "Political Culture in Central Asia: Tradition and Modernization // Social Specifics of the Development of Political Culture in Central Asia," *Materials of the International Conference in Dushanbe, January 16–17, 2009* (2009), 36.
[281] Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Rob Kevlihan, "Imagined Democracy? Nation-building and Elections in Central Asia," *Nationalities Papers* 43, no. 3 (2015): 495–513.
[282] Mukarji Apratim, "The Democracy Conundrum in Central Asia," *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 8, no. 3 (2004): 31–40.
[283] Huntington, *The Third Wave*.
[284] Anna Matveeva, "Democratization, Legitimacy and Political Change in Central Asia," *International Affairs* 75, no. 1 (1999): 23–44.
[285] Eugene Huskey, "Kyrgyzstan: The Fate of Political Liberalization," *Conflict, Cleavage, and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus* 254 (1997): 68.

The first Kyrgyz president, Askar Akayev, known for his liberal worldviews, demonstrated greater commitment to democratisation, initially with strong financial assistance and political support of the Western governments and financial institutions.[286] Nonetheless, despite this backing, Akayev's efforts to establish a democratic government were short-lived. To a large extent, this was attributed to the character of the country's first president—a Soviet intellectual who upon assuming the power, initially exhibited inclinations towards liberal principles.

Nonetheless, the initial phase of Kyrgyzstan's "mild authoritarianism," gradually became more rigid. Like his counterparts in the region, Askar Akayev took his opponents out of the political game, primarily resorting to diplomatic methods. Akayev's soft authoritarianism culminated in the 2005 revolution, paving way for another 'soft authoritarianism'[287] led by newly appointed president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Bakiyev's authoritarian rule, which grew more severe over the span of five years, failed to gain sufficient power, due to geographical limitations. His reliance on the Southern region of the republic heightened, while opposition to him largely manifested as a north-versus-south conflict.[288] This culminated in the "Second Kyrgyz Revolution" in 2010, ultimately resulting in the downfall of Bakiyev's regime.[289]

Thus, by 2010, Kyrgyzstan, once regarded as an "Island of Democracy" of Central Asia,[290] had experienced political turbulence of two violent regime changes in 2005 and 2010, intensified by increasingly authoritarian tendencies and corrupt governments and elites competing for power in politics.[291] And what emerged was a distinct form of a "hybrid regime," involving a system where official democratic structures are viewed as the principal means of obtaining and retaining political power.[292]

Having undergone substantial improvements in political processes in 2011, when Kyrgyzstan arose as the only parliamentary system, the country's political landscape has been marked by an unequal party system, weak and fragmented political parties, and a relatively low level of

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286 Mariya Y. Omelicheva, "Central Asian Conceptions of 'Democracy': Ideological Resistance to International Democratization," in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr. (Lanham, Mayland: Lexington Press, 2013), 81–104.
287 Edward Schatz, "The Soft Authoritarian Tool Kit: Agenda-setting Power in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan," *Comparative Politics* 41, no. 2 (2009): 203–222.
288 Andrew R. Bond and Natalie R. Koch, "Interethnic Tensions in Kyrgyzstan: A Political Geographic Perspective," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 51, no. 4 (2010): 531–562.
289 Donnacha Ó Beacháin, "Roses and Tulips: Dynamics of Regime Change in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan," In *Rethinking the 'Coloured Revolutions'*," eds. David Lane and Stephen White (London: Routledge, 2013), 87–114.
290 John Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Island of Democracy?* (London: Routledge, 2013).
291 Donnacha Ó Beacháin, "Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution" in *The World Encyclopaedia of Protest and Revolution: 1600 to Present*, ed. Immanuel Ness (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009) 3328–3333.
292 Bogaards, "How to Classify Hybrid Regimes?"

political competition, with the country falling back to the category of "consolidated authoritarian regimes," a category it had left after competitive parliamentary elections in 2011.[293]

Since creating the practice for a peaceful transfer of power in 2017, the political situation in Kyrgyzstan remains precarious and the country witnessing one of its worst political crises in decades. The contested 2020 Parliamentary Elections erupted in another political crisis and violent protests, characterised by clear evidence of fraud and vote-buying. After the Central Election Commission was forced to annul the election results and the resignation of the President Sooronbai Jeenbekov, the political situation in Kyrgyzstan remained uncertain.[294] As a result of these developments, the degree of authoritarianism in Kyrgyzstan has been greatly affected, and the country was demoted from "Partly Free" to "Not Free" status in the 2022 edition of Freedom House's report, as explained by the "deeply flawed parliamentary elections featuring significant political violence and intimidation that culminated in the irregular seizure of power by a nationalist leader and convicted felon who had been freed from prison by supporters."[295] Although the country reclaimed its status of "Partly Free" in 2023.

Furthermore, the political turbulence in 2020, was followed by the change in leadership with the election of President Sadyr Japarov, that brought about significant changes to Kyrgyz governance and authoritarian tendencies, reverting the country's political system back to a presidential one and putting an end to the eleven-year span of parliamentary authority. Hence, in Kyrgyzstan, the state of authoritarianism remains fragile—it emerged twice and collapsed twice. The state of "mid authoritarianism," which involves either reinstitution of democratic structures or transition towards a more rigid authoritarian regime, did not materialize.

Kazakhstan: Meanwhile Kazakhstan, since gaining its independent, has made efforts to establish itself as a liberal Asian democratic power. In response to unexpected transition, the country rapidly adapted and managed to establish what is known as a "Facade Democracy, achieved through the adoption of a Western economic model, incorporating the elements of a democratic system, a market economy, elections, opposition political parties, the rule of law, and civil rights.[296] Since the adoption of a new the Constitution giving full power to the

[293] "Nations in Transit 2017; Kyrgyzstan," Freedom House, https://freedomhouse.org/country/kyrgyzstan/nations-transit/2017. (Access date 23.20.2023)
[294] Congressional Research Service (CRS), "Kyrgyz Parliamentary Elections Annulled Amid Protests and Unrest," October 29, 2020.
[295] Freedom House Report 2021(Access date 22.08.2023)
[296] Robin Nicole Merritt, "Facade Democracy: Democratic Transition in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan," (PhD diss., University of Central Florida, 2004), https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/143.

presidency in 1995, Nazarbaev has built a strong and personalised presidential regime, regarded as a "visionary" leader; "founder of the nation" and "wise father,"[297] who saved the country from political instability and redirected it towards an effective socio-economic transformation.

Nevertheless, through the early 1990s, Nazarbaev gradually destroyed independent thinking, civic participation, democratic activism, and freedom of the media through different coercive and repressive means. Over the years, he managed to effectively secure the loyalty of his in-group supporter and slowly cleanse the political elite, removing his opponents, many of whom were prominent in society at the time.[298] The gradual concentration of power and constant confrontation with opponents formed the main features of soft authoritarianism, which left the opposition some opportunity for ideological and even political self-expression.

Kazakhstan, unlike other states in the region, had a unique structure of patronage politics, governance, financial resources, and ethnic relations, which resulted in a unique type of state authority and authoritarian stability. The president capitalised on the country's independence to further his own interests, utilising the Soviet apparatus to regulate his political influence, as well as the country's vast natural resources through patronage politics to consolidate and manage his political power.[299]

Economic prosperity has become a fundamental pillar of Kazakhstan's stability and control over the population, with Nazaryave slowly having built his own version of democracy, further distancing the country from the Western democratisation path. This gave Nazarbayev considerable resources to promote economic well-being and facilitate social stability for certain groups of the population in exchange for political freedoms, relying upon formal and informal patronage networks.[300]

As will be discussed more in the upcoming chapters, after more than three decades since independence, instead of undergoing a transitional phase, Kazakhstan has undergone a process of adaptation to maintain authoritarian stability and, as a result, remains firmly categorised as a "Not Free Country," as per the "Freedom House 2023 Report."[301]

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[297] Omelicheva, "Central Asian Conceptions of 'Democracy'."
[298] M. B. Olcott, "Central Asia's Catapult to Independence," *Foreign Affairs* 71 (1992).
[299] Donnacha Ó Beacháin & Rob Kevlihan; "State-building, Identity and Nationalism in Kazakhstan: Some Preliminary Thoughts," Working Papers in international Studies, Center for International Studies, Dublin City University 1 (2011).
[300] Sally N. Cummings, "Eurasian Bridge or Murky Waters between East and West? Ideas, Identity and Output in Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 19, no. 3 (2003): 139–155.
[301] ***Nations in Transit - Kazakhstan Country Report***

External Actors present in Kazakhstan: Since its independence, Kazakhstan's foreign policy has been influenced to a great extent by several external actors, including Russia, China, Turkey, the European Union, and the United States, which pursue different goals by using economic, political, and security means. Of these, Russia and China are playing the biggest role in Kazakhstan, with every country trying to make different strategies for exerting influence in these spheres. At the same time, the Republic of Kazakhstan has adhered to a "multi-vector" foreign policy practice, balancing its relations with regional and world powers. The multi-vector approach allows Kazakhstan to protect its sovereignty while creating multiple alliances and maneuvering between these powerful actors holding opposing interests.

Russia: Russia holds the central position in both political and economic spheres in Kazakhstan, deeply shaped by the historical, cultural, and economic relations dating back to Russian Empire and continued into the Soviet era. Over the years, Russia has integrated itself ever deeper into the societal and administrative fabric of Kazakhstan, consolidating its position as a vital external actor.[302]

Integration within Moscow's sphere of influence is demonstrated by its integration into Russia-led projects such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), thus further solidifying Moscow as the main military and economic ally. Russia leverages these platforms to reinforce its influence, promoting integration policies that align with its vision for the region. These mechanisms enable Russia to influence Kazakhstan's domestic policies, especially in areas such as trade regulations, security measures, and foreign policy orientation, often constraining Kazakhstan's ability to fully assert its sovereignty.[303]

Economically, Kazakhstan remains intertwined with Russia, with energy trade as a cornerstone of their bilateral relations. The country's oil export relies mainly on Russian pipeline systems and infrastructure to be regarded as an integral one; however, this has encouraged Kazakhstan look for more diversification in its economic activity concerning energy cooperation, most markedly so with China. despite this, Russia's dominance in the energy sector of Kazakhstan

[302] Massansalvador, Francesc Serra. "The Process of Nation Building in Central Asia and Its Relationship to Russia's Regional Influence." Jean Monnet/Robert Schuman Paper Series 10, no. 5 (2010): 1–13.
[303] Mamenov, S. D., A. N. Dunets, and K. A. Artemieva. "Economic Integration of Kazakhstan with the Neighboring Countries." In International Conference on Sustainable Development of Cross-Border Regions: Economic, Social and Security Challenges (ICSDCBR 2019), 270–274. Atlantis Press, 2019.

forms an integral part of its broader influence, shaping the bilateral relations between the two countries and the possibility of Kazakhstan fully attaining energy independence.[304]

Russia's role as a security guarantor is another critical dimension of its influence. Kazakhstan's membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) facilitates joint military exercises, intelligence-sharing, and integrated security measures. These arrangements position Russia as a key partner in addressing regional threats, such as terrorism and extremism. However, they also reinforce Kazakhstan's reliance on Moscow for defense and internal stability.[305]

The January 2022 protests in Kazakhstan showcased Russia's strategic leverage. At the Kazakh government's request, CSTO troops were deployed to stabilize the unrest, demonstrating Moscow's ability to intervene in domestic affairs under the guise of ensuring regional security. This event underscored the dual-edged nature of Kazakhstan's security ties with Russia: while providing immediate stability, they also highlight Moscow's pervasive influence in shaping Kazakhstan's internal dynamics.

Cultural ties between Russia and Kazakhstan further cement Moscow's influence. The high percentage of Russian speakers and widespread use of Russian media within Kazakhstan create a societal coherence with Russian narratives. Such cultural interdependence allows Moscow to disseminate messages aligning with its geopolitical interests, often complicating Kazakhstan's efforts to foster a distinct national identity and to practice an independent foreign policy.

Despite its close ties with Russia, the foreign policy of President Tokayev has been characterized by cautiousness and balanced approach, especially toward Russia, in the face of the current geopolitical turmoil and in light of the continuity of the Ukrainian conflict, as one of the determining factors. Kazakhstan has sought to diversify its foreign relations by deepening ties with China, the European Union, and other international actors and organizations, offsetting the overbearing dominance of Moscow and reducing dependence on any one partner.

China: At the same time, China has established itself as a major external force in Kazakhstan. Since the early 1990s, when the two countries first established diplomatic relations, China has become Kazakhstan's largest trading partner and one of the biggest investors into the country's

[304] Vardomsky, L. "Russian-Chinese Economic Links in the Context of Growing International Tensions." Journal of the New Economic Association 58, no. 1 (2023): 142–148.
[305] Davydova, Yulia A., and Ekaterina V. Kargapolova. "Cooperation Between Russia and Kazakhstan as a Vector of Eurasian Integration." Eurasian Integration (2022): 52.

infrastructure, energy, and transportation projects within the massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Such an initiative has transformed Kazakhstan as one of the most vital node linking Chinese markets with Central Asia, Europe, and further regions, positioning the country as a major hub for transcontinental trade and development.[306]

In contrast to Russia's historical and cultural ties, China's influence in Kazakhstan has been driven by robust economic investment and development projects. The Chinese government has, therefore, heavily invested in energy projects in Kazakhstan including oil and gas pipelines, to ensure consistent resource flow and create an integrated economic network that allows China to exert influence without challenging Russia's political or cultural dominance.

Chinese economic involvement provides an important counterbalance to Russian influence in Kazakhstan. Chinese investment and trade opportunities offer Kazakhstan various ways to achieve economic development and infrastructure improvement, possibly mitigating its reliance on the Russian-controlled trade networks. Furthermore, China's preference for stable economic relations instead of political alignment has also helped Kazakhstan to maintain its sovereignty in decision-making and at the same time receive huge Chinese investment. This dynamic also brings in its own set of challenges, as Kazakhstan must balance its growing economic reliance on China with the public's perception and concerns over China's expanding presence.[307]

The European Union's involvement in Kazakhstan is grounded in trade and the pursuit of stable energy supplies. Kazakhstan offers a favorable business environment among resource-rich Central Asian countries, which has led to substantial European investments, particularly in energy. The EU promotes economic emphasizing trade liberalization, energy security, and the promotion of democratic governance. and political stability in Central Asia, focusing on combating terrorism, drug trafficking, and promoting good governance as part of its broader security strategy. Additionally, European energy security concerns have spurred interest in diversifying supply sources, making Kazakhstan an attractive partner amidst Europe's efforts to reduce dependence on Russian energy imports. Although its influence in the region is less

[306] Pieper, Moritz. "The Linchpin of Eurasia: Kazakhstan and the Eurasian Economic Union Between Russia's Defensive Regionalism and China's New Silk Roads." International Politics 58, no. 3 (2021): 462–482.
[307] Kondapalli, S. "Kazakh-China Relations: Balancing in Preventing Regional Domination." International Relations and International Law Journal 101, no. 1 (2023). https://doi.org/10.26577/irilj.2023.v101.i1.02.

pronounced than that of Russia and China, the EU's engagement reflects its broader strategy of reducing reliance on Russian energy and fostering stability in Central Asia.[308]

The United States' engagement with Kazakhstan has been driven by security concerns and strategic interests, especially since 9/11. The U.S. established military and logistical bases in Central Asia to support operations in Afghanistan, while also fostering relations with Kazakhstan through bilateral trade and investment agreements. Key areas of U.S. involvement include defense training, political development, and energy investments, reflecting a broader goal of reducing Kazakhstan's reliance on Russian energy infrastructure and supporting its economic independence.

Uzbekistan: In the meantime, following their early independence, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan displayed no indication of substantial reforms, entirely eradicating any oppositional elements, and enforcing strict control over the lives of their populace. The last two of these nations have been ranked as the world's most oppressive cultures and the "Worst of the Worst," according to the Freedom House reports, due to their sultanistic political system.[309] Nationalist movements within Tajik, Uzbek, and Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republics contributed significantly to the Soviet system's deterioration and final collapse. These movements, however, did not lead political shifts from dictatorship to democracy.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan took a very different path, emphasizing traditionalism, strong leadership, and national consolidation, which was marked by a high degree of repression, regular and widespread violations of human rights, and attempts to repress not just opposition forces but almost any independent voice.[310] Islam Karimov became the Communist Party's first secretary in 1989 and was elected president of the Uzbek SSR by a legislative vote in the Supreme Soviet in 1990.[311] As president, Karimov ruled Uzbekistan for 27 years, with his leadership primarily associated with his despotic style of governance,

[308] Siddi, Marco, and Marcin Kaczmarski. "The EU and China in Central Asian Energy Geopolitics." In The EU and China in Global Governance: Partners or Rivals? 161–178. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003022336-11.
[309] "Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan Ranked as Among World's 'Worst' Societies." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 12, 2009. https://www.rferl.org/a/Turkmenistan_Uzbekistan_Ranked_As_Among_Worlds_Worst_Societies/1508647.html.
[310] "Uzbekistan: Persistent Human Rights Violations and Prospects for Improvement," Human Rights Watch, May 1, 1996, https://www.hrw.org/report/1996/05/01/persistent-human-rights-violations-and-prospects-improvement.
[311] "A Profile of President Islam Karimov," Human Right Watch, March 7, 2002, https://www.hrw.org/news/2002/03/07/profile-president-islam-karimov.

forcefully suppressing all forms of political dissent within the country, including religious freedoms, and manipulating his presidential terms to stay in power.[312]

During those years in Uzbekistan, the state of human rights was particularly critical, as the government systematically suppressed political opposition and active civil society members. Those who opposed the authorities were consistently arrested, detained for extended periods, and subjected to torture to coerce fabricated admissions from them.[313] One of the most violent episodes in Uzbekistan's history, which occurred during Karimov's rule, were the events that unfolded in Andijan in May 2005, where the military opened fire on an anti-government demonstration. Official reports indicate that 187 people lost their lives during the clashes, while unofficial sources suggest the death toll could be much higher, reaching several hundred.[314] Over time, the authorities progressively eliminated all forms of political competitors, expelled Western media representatives, and human rights organizations from the country due to their critical stance towards the government's actions.[315]

Following the death of Islam Karimov and the succession of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in December 2016, Uzbekistan has given off a new image as a nation in transition. Following two decades of economic and political isolation under Karimov, Mirziyoyev immediately initiated broad and rapid governance reforms aimed at establishing the foundation for financial liberalisation and attracting foreign investment to help the country's economy. The transformation to a market economy, modernisation of the administration, and liberalisation of society have become the overarching goals of the state development program, based on three critical areas: reorganizing the security apparatus, reforming cadres and governance, and mobilising society.[316]

Despite the substantial steps taken by Mirziyoyev to introduce political liberalisation, Uzbekistan remains under the control of a firmly established authoritarian government. Legitimate opposition political parties do not function, and both the legislative and judicial

[312] Donnacha Ó Beacháin, "When Dictators Die," *BNE Intillinews*, September 1, 2016, https://www.intellinews.com/comment-when-dictators-die-105177/.
[313] "Uzbeks Vote On Constitutional Changes Aimed at Keeping President in Power Until 2040," Radio Free Europe; Radio Liberty, April 30, 2023, https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-referendum-mirziyoev-2040/32385660.html.
[314] "'Bullets Were Falling Like Rain': The Andijan Massacre, May 13, 2005," Human Rights Watch, June 6, 2005, https://www.hrw.org/report/2005/06/06/bullets-were-falling-rain/andijan-massacre-may-13-2005.
[315] "Uzbekistan; Events of 2005," Human Rights Watch, n.d., https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2006/country-chapters/uzbekistan.
[316] Andrea Schmitz, "Uzbekistan's Transformation: Strategies and Perspectives," SWP Research Paper (12/2020), https:// doi.org/10.18449/2020RP12 (2020): 32.

branches effectively act as extensions of the executive branch. Reforms are primarily initiated through executive decrees, and the state maintains tight control over the media.[317] The recent referendum extending Mirziyoyev's reign until 2040[318] proved to be another instrument for the Uzbek rules to stay in power.[319]

Tajikistan: Tajikistan's case was different from its neighbors, as soon after gaining independence, Tajikistan was wracked by a civil war between regional groups. After the country's previous president Rahmon Nabiyev resignation Emomali Rahmonov has been elected to the national assembly, who promised, "I, as President, swear to protect the Constitution and the laws of the Republic, to guarantee the security of the rights, freedoms, honor and dignity of citizens, to protect the territorial integrity, political, economic and cultural independence of Tajikistan, [and] to faithfully serve the people."[320] and 27 years later remains Tajikistan's president.

While the authoritarian regime in Tajikistan didn't emerge immediately, its establishment became increasingly inevitable after the conclusion of the Civil War in 1997. With overwhelming force, the president quelled all forms of dissent, even minor ones, and concentrated power in his own hands, as well as in the hands of family members and trusted associates.

The outbreak of civil war in Tajikistan impeded the establishment of a cohesive and stable state. The end of Tajikistan's civil war inevitable led to a gradual emergence of total authoritarian governance in the country, indicating a significant concentration of power within ruling regime. Following its resolution in 1996, Emomali Rakhmonov, who later adopted the name Rakhmon and rose to power, adopted a similar approach as his counterparts in Central Asia, constructing an authoritarian system. Rakhmon faced complexities due to the need to suppress military uprisings and occasionally make concessions to rebels between 1996 and 1997. He survived two

[317] Uzbekistan: Freedom in the World 2019 Country Report
https://freedomhouse.org/country/uzbekistan/freedom-world/2019
[318] RFE/RL's Uzbek Service, "Uzbek Officials Say Constitutional Changes Extending President's Term Overwhelmingly Approved," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, May 1, 2023, https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-referendum-constitutional-changes-mirziyoev/32386702.html.
[319] Donnacha Ó Beacháin, "Death of a Dictator Part 2 – Life after Karimov," *BNE Intillinews*, September 2, 2016, https://www.intellinews.com/comment-death-of-a-dictator-part-2-life-after-karimov-105327/.
[320] Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan, Accessed 04.11.2023.
https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tajikistan_2016

assassination attempts in 1997 and 2001. The aftermath of the war posed the risk of escalating tensions if former opponents from the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) were pressured.[321]

Furthermore, the extremely challenging economic conditions threatened potential local upheaval, with anticipated incidents around 2007–2008. To address this, Rakhmon employed a strategy of rewards and punishments, offering certain UTO members business opportunities while limiting the political engagement of others. He reduced the number of opposition parliamentarians to a bare minimum, impacting the composition and overall influence of political opposition.

By 2006, Rakhmon had effectively consolidated his political dominance, by winning elections with an impressive 79.3% of the votes and amending the constitution to secure the right to two additional seven-year presidential terms. Additionally, there were factions within the country that, sensing this vulnerability, openly challenged the president. Between 2009 and 2010, Rakhmon undertook military actions to quell discontent to weaken opposition groups, particularly the Islamists.[322]

Tajikistan currently ranks lowest in global freedom rankings, particularly in areas of political competition, civil liberties, media openness, and religious freedom.[323] As one of the anonymous respondents noted, the Tajik regime has been employing a multilayered strategy referred to as "suppress, yield, and exploit," to further solidify its power, which appears to have been effectively employed by the current regime, contributing to its continued consolidation of authority.[324]

Turkmenistan: The dictatorship of Saparmyrat Niyazov, was one of the most unique authoritarian regimes that emerged in post-Soviet Central Asia. The “founder," ruled the former Soviet republic from 1985 until his death in 2006. NIyazov’s passing gave hopes to the West that his successor, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, could bring in significant political, economic, and social reforms. However, these expectations have not been met, and the intended changes have not been materialized.

[321] Shirin Akiner and Catherine Barnes, "The Tajik Civil War: Causes and Dynamics," *Politics of Compromise: The Tajikistan Peace Process* (April 2001): 20.
[322] Qayumarsi Ato, “Tajikistan's Islamic Opposition Under Pressure,” RCA 741 (July 29, 2014).
[323] “Nations in Transit 2023.”
[324] Authors Interview with anonymous respondent

Authoritarianism in Turkmenistan in 1990: the first half of 2000 was "genetically" associated with the Soviet authoritarian regime in the Turkmen SSR.[325] These political upheavals of the state history of Turkmenistan were reflected in the speeches of President S. Niyazov, who emphasized that,

> *Turkmenistan is taking the first, and therefore the most difficult steps towards the revival, and in fact the formation anew of its own sovereign history and statehood. It is ancient and eventful, but today we seem to be continuing it from scratch. And therefore, we are not weighed down by the burden of past grievances, the burden of ideologies and phobias, political clichés and national labels.* [326]

After the passing of the "Founding Father" Saparmurat Niyazov who ruled the country from 1985 until his death in 2006. The hopes of the West that his successor, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, would be able to hold significant political, economic, and social reforms did not materialize. Berdimuhamedov, who replaced Niyazov, inherited a tightly controlled system, to which he made only small modifications discreetly and without much disturbance, eliminating prospective political opponents, remaining one of the world's most dictatorial presidents.[327]

The existing power structure in Turkmenistan demonstrates an exceptional level of continuity. Despite President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov's nine-year reign, the country has remained essentially unreformed. Even if the current president has taken steps to reverse some of his predecessor's detrimental policies and has made significant investments in the country's infrastructure, the fundamental foundations of governance have not changed. The succession process further underscores the system's resilience, showing its ability to persist even after the passing of a long-serving autocrat. This resilience is not merely rooted in cultural or historical factors but is driven by self-serving interests.

Turkmenistan is a highly centralised state that heavily relies on its natural resources. This resource-driven approach is associated with efforts to quell dissent and suppress any democratisation processes. The country has a critical shortage of competent employees, a small

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[325] Polese, Abel, Donnacha Ó Beacháin, and Slavomír Horák. "Strategies of Legitimation in Central Asia: Regime Durability in Turkmenistan," *Contemporary Politics* 23, no. 4 (2017): 427–445.
[326] Maksim Kyrchanov, "Political and Intellectual Mythologists of Modern Turkmen Nationalism," *Central Asia and Caucasus*, Issue 1, 2010
[327] Donnacha Ó Beacháin, "Turkmenistan Presidential Election 2017: A Facade of Pluralism," *Baltic Worlds* 10, no. 1–2 (March 20, 2017), https://balticworlds.com/a-facade-of-pluralism/.

intellectual elite that is subject to repeated purges, a deteriorating educational system, a poorly developed manufacturing base, and a wide web of informal elite networks. All these considerations work against any meaningful progress toward liberalisation.

Opposition groups, both within and beyond the country, are visibly weak and lacking international support. Moreover, the absence of a developed civil society and the limitations on network organization make it challenging for the opposition to unite for collective protest. Citizens' activities are closely monitored, and civil freedoms are restricted. Major national upheavals are unlikely unless there are systemic changes.

The Evolution of Political Opposition in Central Asia

Various factors discussed above had a notable impact on the overall political landscape, and the extent of autocratic stability within each Central Asian country, ultimately shaping the evolution and formation of political opposition across different levels and oppositional behaviour within each country across the region.

As already mentioned, after gaining their independence in the 1990s, all the five nations in Central Asia experienced the emergence of political dissent, notably characterised by the rise of opposition political parties and movements that became an essential component of the political environment, particularly during the first decade after countries' independence.[328]

Initially, there have indeed been some outward signs of democracy in Central Asia. The emergence of political resistance was a direct response to the Soviet regime's decades long authoritarian control and repression of political opposition, where opposition political parties, movements, and civil society organizations (CSOs) have been operating at certain level and in certain cases and times posing a significant threat to the ruling regimes.

The responses of the Central Asian leaders varied, depending on the necessity to suppress different types of opposition activities completely or partially. Over the years, the Central Asian leaders have developed a certain mix of strategies and tactics of opposition manipulation, some opposition groups being allowed to take part in the formal electoral process while others are prohibited. Certain governments, such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have used number of techniques to fully eliminate the opposition political forces, through coercive and repressive measures. While others have utilised more soft mechanisms, the so called "menus of

[328] D. Akhmedov, "Specifics of the Development of a Multi-party System in Central Asia and its Influence on Political Culture (on the Example of the Republic of Tajikistan)," *Bulletin of the Tajik National University* 2 (2009).

manipulation"[329] and other different tactics of opposition management, implemented through different formal and informal mechanisms, such as elections, election fraud, restrictions on political party and candidate registration, excluding opposition from politics, opposition's isolation from the society and the electorate, resulting in non-competitive electoral environment and overall absence of genuine political opposition.[330]

Uzbekistan: In case of Uzbekistan, since the country's independence, it has been practically impossible for a major opposition party to be registered, as first president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov eliminated the secular opposition from the political field. The most prominent and active political groups active on Uzbek political arena, particularly during the early 1990's, were the Birlik movement and the Erk Democratic Party, the first registered Uzbek party in the history of Uzbekistan in 1991. The Birlik, led by Abdurakhim Pulatov, was granted permission to form a political movement in 1991, however, the party was not authorized to put forth a candidate for the 1991 presidential election.[331]

Meanwhile, an Uzbek intellectual, Muhammad Salih, the leader and founder of the Erk Democratic Party, avant-garde poet and dissident, emerged as the sole and prominent contender in the 1991 presidential race, despite heavily rigged elections, with the official results showing Solih receiving only 12.7% of the total votes. Karimov nonetheless easily won the election with 87% of the vote, and Salih was forced to quit the country in 1993. Although, this outcome still marks the closest presidential race in Uzbekistan's history, which is likely why it stands as the sole instance featuring a legitimate opposition candidate. Subsequently, Salih remained in exile for over 25 years. In early 1990s Karimov also faced an extra threat, arising from the Islamist opposition. Initially embodied by the Adolat movement and later by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) as well as Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islamiy (KhTI, the Islamic Liberation Party), this opposition posed a significant challenge.[332]

Another attempt to go against the Karimov's rule was led by a businessman Sanjar Umarov, the leader of Sunshine Uzbekistan party, who planned on competing in the 2005 presidential elections. Following the tragic events in Andijan, on May 13, 2005, the Sunshine Uzbekistan

[329] Schedler, "Elections Without Democracy," 36.
[330] Beacháin and Kevlihan, "Menus of Manipulation."
[331] Josh McLeader: "Uzbekistan: Alternative Political Positions," *Eurasianet*, January 28, 2003, https://russian.eurasianet.org/node/57764
[332] Politicon, "The problem of Islamic extremism in Central Asia" https://politicon.co/en/essays/34/the-problem-of-islamic-extremism-in-central-asia

Party swiftly issued a series of impactful demands, urgently calling for the government's resignation and the prompt scheduling of early presidential elections. Sanjar Umarov urged Uzbekistan's middle class to take a stand and declared the formulation of an economic recovery plan for the country to overcome the crisis. However, was soon arrested and charged on criminal charges and was sentenced to 7 years of prison.[333]

The transition of power from Karimov to Mirziyoyev in 2016, opened new possibilities for a potentially more liberal political environment and greater tolerance towards political opposition in Uzbekistan. President Mirziyoev reiterated on multiple occasions that he was not opposed to Uzbekistan having alternative political groups., in his inaugural speech, on July 14, 2023 President Shavkat Mirziyoyev also stated: "We guarantee the activities of the constructive opposition, I repeat once again, the constructive opposition, freedom of speech and the press, the rights of citizens to receive, use and disseminate information."[334]

The Truth and Progress Party, led by Hidirnazar Allaqulov and Halq Manfaatlar (Interests of the People), led by scientist and professor Mahmud Yuldashev, are the latest in a long line of opposition parties that are willing to operate legally in Uzbekistan. Despite previous promises from Mirziyoev, the authorities are still not allowing opposition parties or individual opposition leaders to operate, suggesting that both organizations may face a similar fate as their predecessors in Uzbekistan.[335]

Tajikistan: Tajikistan, despite having a formally established multi-party system, has functioned as a presidential-dominated state since the early 1990s, with opposition political parties consistently struggling to demonstrate their legitimacy. Indeed, during the early 1990s, following countries independence, Tajikistan experienced a relatively strong opposition.

The 1997 peace accord that ended the Civil War established multiparty democracy, with opposition parties such as Tajikistan's Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT) having participation in government. President Rahmon, on the other hand, immediately secured control of the country and began to remove potential opponents one by one. This process finalised in 2015, when the IRPT was initially excluded from parliament at the March elections and then banned

[333] Gulnoza Saidazimova, "Uzbekistan: Sanjar Umarov – An Oligarch Angling for The Presidency?" Radio Free Europe; Radio Liberal, June 2, 2005, https://www.rferl.org/a/1059094.html.
[334] The inauguration speech, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev: "We guarantee the activity of constructive opposition." https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/07/14/opposition/.
[335] Bruce Panier; "The Second President, the Old Order. Barriers for Opposition Parties in Uzbekistan," *Rus Azattyq*, March 25, 2021, https://rus.azattyq.org/a/new-uzbek-opposition-party-runs-into-the-same-wall-as-its-predecessors/31167788.html.

all together. Many of its members were arrested and imprisoned. Thus, over a span of just two decades, Emomali Rahmon, who assumed leadership of the country through the People's Party's victory in the civil war, consolidated his authority to such an extent that memories of a robust opposition had all but faded away.

In present-day Tajikistan, authorities have become adept at effectively suppressing the opposition. The current situation has unfolded in a manner where nearly all prominent political leaders in the country have been forcefully removed from the political arena. Here are just a few examples: Mahmadruzi Iskandarov, the leader of the Democratic Party, who was arrested in 2004 and sentenced to 23 years;[336] his successor Rakhmatullo Valiev, who withdrew from politics, leading to a split in the party;[337] Safarali Kenjaev, leader of the Socialist Party (killed in 1999),[338] followed by his successor Zaid Saidov, leader of the never-formed New Tajikistan party (arrested in May 2013 and sentenced to 29 years)[339]; and Umarali Kuvvatov, leader of the opposition Group 24, which was established abroad (killed in March 2015 in Turkey).[340]

The opposition made several attempts to unite, but unfortunately, all these efforts ended in failure. One of the most notable instances occurred in 2013, just before the upcoming presidential elections. During this time, the Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan (SDPT) joined forces with the now-banned Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) and various civil activists, with the intention of fielding a single candidate for the elections.[341] Rakhmatillo Zoirov was expected to be the chosen candidate. However, for reasons known only to the IRPT leadership, they decided not to support Zoirov's candidacy. Instead, they nominated a non-partisan human rights activist, Oynikhol Bobonazarova, to run for president.[342] While Bobonazarova was known for her opposition stance within civil society, her campaign encountered challenges, including poorly conceived election strategies and apparent

[336] Radion Ozodi, "High-Profile Conviction Seen as Major Setback for Tajik Opposition," Institute for War & Peace Reporting, November 20, 2005, https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30838526.html (Accessed 02.05.20230

[337] "The Central Election Commission of Tajikistan Refused to Register the Leader of the Democratic Party as a Presidential Candidate," Radio Free Europe; Radio Liberal, 2020 https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30838526.html

[338] "The leader of the Socialist Party of Tajikistan, Safarali Kenzhaev, was killed in Dushanbe," НОВОСТИ, March 30, 1999, https://www.1tv.ru/news/1999-03-30/296789-v_dushanbe_ubit_lider_sotsialisticheskoy_partii_tadzhikistana_safarali_kenzhaev.

[339] "Tajikistan: Long Sentence a Blow to Free Expression," Human Rights Watch, February 7, 2014, https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/02/07/tajikistan-long-sentence-blow-free-expression.

[340] "Tajik Opposition Tycoon Quvatov Killed In Istanbul" Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2015 https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-opposition-quvatov-killing/26885021.html

[341] "The Case of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan," Global Freedom of Expression, 2015

[342] Galim Faskhutdinov, "An Ideal Candidate for the Tajik Opposition," Deutsche Welle, 2013 https://shorturl.at/ABL04

disagreements among the coalition members, ultimately preventing her from participating in the elections. As a result, Bobonazarova could not compete in that election.

In fact, none of these opposition leaders posed an existential threat to the government. Nevertheless, the series of events surrounding their political involvement strongly indicate that the authorities in Tajikistan are highly averse to the emergence of any potential leader who could pose a credible challenge to the current ruler or their potential successors. These incidents demonstrate the government's reluctance to entertain any form of political competition or alternative leadership within the country, as they have consistently taken measures to suppress, sideline, or neutralize such figures. This pattern underscores the regime's determination to maintain a firm grip on power and limit the potential for opposition within the political landscape of Tajikistan.

Turkmenistan: In contrast to other Central Asian countries, Turkmenistan has never encountered any form of organized and structured political opposition. Attempts to establish opposition minded political activities were met with severe repression, leading opponents of the president to either be imprisoned or forced into exile. The key figures who opposed the president, such as Prime Minister Nazar Suyunov and Foreign Minister Avdy Kuliev, only dared to challenge the authority only when they were outside of Turkmenistan.[343] The sole instance of a potential revolutionary scenario by domestic opposition occurred in 2002,[344] when the People's Democratic Movement of Turkmenistan, led by former Foreign Minister Boris Shikhmuradov, and a small group of associates attempted a coup d'état. However, this endeavor ultimately failed, resulting in Shikhmuradov's surrender, imprisonment, and an uncertain fate.[345]

Another notable example of an opposition attempt in Turkmenistan was the so-called "walkout" in 2005, when three diplomats, Nurmukhammed Khanamov, Turkmen ambassador to Ankara; Boris Shikhmuradov, Turkmen ambassador to China and former foreign minister; and Pirmukhammed Kurbanov, ambassador to the United Arab Emirates, resigned from their posts and announced their support for the opposition People's Democratic Movement of Turkmenistan. Khanamov, in a resignation statement, accused Niazov of dictatorial behavior

[343] Alexey Malashenko, "Doomed for Eternity and vegetation Alexey Malashenko," Tema Homera, 2011, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ProetContra_52_78-95.pdf.
[344] Donnacha Ó. Beacháin and Abel Polese, eds. *The Colour Revolutions in the Former Soviet Republics*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).
[345] Annette Bohr, "A Failed Coup after All? November 2002, Asghabat," *Central Asia–Caucasus Analyst* 18 (2003).

that produced "fear, helplessness, and poverty," and said that Niazov's "duplicity" in relations with Turkey, Russia, Azerbaijan.[346]

An unprecedented visit to the United States in 2014 by politicians identifying themselves the delegation of the United Opposition—comprising those who left the country during the first wave of opposition in the early 1990s as well as bureaucrats who joined them in the last two or three years—was a sign of rising opposition confidence. The group was led by former vice-premier Avdy Kuliev and featured former Turkmen oil and gas minister Nazar Suyunov and Afghan Turkmen spiritual leader Makhtum Abdulkerim.[347]

Kyrgyzstan: In the wake of the Soviet Union's demise, the principal opposition in Soviet Kyrgyzstan was mainly represented by intellectuals and the cultural elite dissatisfied with the ruling regime. Initially, most of the opposition movements to Communist rule that were based on economic and social interests were initially prioritized, but the forces soon switched to political matters, such as implementing political and economic reforms, demanding regime change, and achieving independence.

As independence progressed, most of the opposition leaders continued to emerge from the grassroots mostly represented by democratic movements, organizations, and parliamentary and extra parliamentary opposition. The most traditional way to oppose the regimes was through street protests and demonstrations largely supported by the population.

Following Akaev's rise to power in October 1990, opposition activism declined significantly. With no substantial international support for the Communist party, which became the leading opposition group who firmly expressed their stance through street rallies and in parliament, popular support for the president was high. This period also saw the first attempts by all opposition forces, including the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan and Communist blocs, to unite in the face of the "For the Protection of the Constitution, Democracy, and Freedom" movement to resist the consolidation of Akaev's power, such as in 1994 during the first Constitutional referendum, which strengthened Akaev's presidency.

The rest of the Akaev's presidency, until the 2005 revolutionary events, can be characterised by low activity of the opposition political forces mostly related to elections and referendum. The opposition voice was mainly expressed through certain members of parliament, such as

[346] V. Volkov, "Nurmukhammed Khanamov: Niyazov left – The Regime in Turkmenistan Remains," Deutsche Welle, 2007
[347] "New Turkmen Opposition Movement Appears," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2014.

Omurbek Tekebaev, Azimbek Beknazarov, Ismail Isakov, Adakhan Madumarov, Usen Sydykov, as well as representatives of the business elite—Almazbek Atambaev, Bolotbek Sherniyazov, and Daniyar Esenov.

Akaev's effort to usurp legislators' powers in 2005, coupled with increasing corruption, socio-economic issues, and internal split among the elite stimulated widespread mass protests against the regime and highly increasing opportunities for the opposition political forces. Opposition blocs and coalitions, political movements, marches, and large protests soon emerged as parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition activities. Kurmanbek Bakiev led one of the largest political blocs, the "Forum of Political Forces of Kyrgyzstan," which was founded in 2004 and includes the political parties Asaba, Communist Party, Kairan El, Republican Party, ErK, Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan, Novyi Kyrgyzstan, and Erkinndik. The political opposition's immense activism to change the entire political regime produced results, culminating in political turbulence and changes in the country's establishment. The led to the "Tulip Revolution" in October 2005.

However, the popular mobilisation of March 2005 did not produce the desired results. Askar Akaev was replaced by Kurmanbek Bakiyev, the opposition leader, who also promised big political reforms, but with his increasingly authoritarian reign, prospects for a democratic revolution faded quickly. His administration was also followed by the "Second Tulip Revolution" in April 2010, which sparked ethnic unrest in the country's south, mainly between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.

During Bakiev's administration, political opposition participation was mainly linked to actions held by the two major blocs "For Reforms" and the "United Front," which promoted a program primarily addressing the topic of constitutional revisions. In 2006, the opposition movements were actively demonstrating against the constitutional reforms during three major street protests (April 29, 2006), (May 27, 2006), (November 2–6, 2006) also demanding for Bakiev's resignation. Under the pressure from demonstrators, Bakiev declared his readiness to adopt the new Constitution, which strengthened the institute of Presidency by granting even more powers to the role.

Under Almazbek Atambayev's newly elected government in 2010, Kyrgyzstan took a step toward political stabilisation and democratisation by adopting a new constitution designed to prevent a single political network from capturing too much power, transforming the country

from a presidential to a semi-parliamentary system. Despite substantial advancements in the political party system, such as relative independence of political opposition and freedom of speech, significant problems exist in practically all essential areas that affect the country's dynamic performance and development of political parties.

When analyzing the activism of Kyrgyz political opposition from the early 90s until the present day, especially during the revolutionary events in 2005 and 2010, it has to be noted that political opposition indeed used the window of opportunity such as the social atmosphere of trust and the available resources driven by "present dangers," such as the presidential succession crisis and "political monopolisation" by Akaev and Bakiev, the split of governing elite as well as social grievances and general socio-economic and political environment that eventually appeared to be the driving force for the activism and strong public support for the Kyrgyz opposition. However, in recent years, the political space in Kyrgyzstan has been increasingly experiencing the influence of global trends, such as decreasing role of opposition political parties and the importance of other institutions like civil society and non-governmental sector, increasing their activity quite steadily.

Kazakhstan: Given that the primary objective of this dissertation is to identify and characterise the nature and forms of political opposition in Kazakhstan, I intend to present a brief analysis of the key features and characteristics of political opposition in Kazakhstan, which can be generalised to the broader region and shed light on the Central Asian political opposition landscape.

Political opposition in Kazakhstan is no exception to the challenges faced by opposition groups in other Central Asian states. Throughout the years, political opposition in Kazakhstan has been constructed through the lens of new political structures based on post-independence power conflicts, exhibiting a significant imbalance between competing social and political forces in favor of the ruling elite. Since early 1990s, Kazakh political opposition has been systematically marginalised and subject of harsh suppression and manipulation by the regime. Under the leadership of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, the government adeptly manipulated and fragmented the opposition, ensuring that only loyal and compliant opposition survived. Over the years Nazarbayev's regime was actively opposed by influential figures such as Akezhan Kazhegeldin (Prime Minister in 1994–1997; left the country in 1999), Galymzhan Zhakiyanov (Akim of Pavlodar region; convicted in 2002), Mukhtar Ablyazov (former Minister of Energy,

industry and trade; in 2000, he was sentenced to seven years), Zharmakhan Tuyakbai (Speaker of Parliament in 1999–2004) and Sergey Kozlov, political party Alga!, and others.

Throughout Nazarbayev's nearly three-decade rule, the regime did not encounter any significant anti-government and anti-presidential demonstrations. This was partly attributed to a certain degree of political apathy prevailing among most of the population towards the political processes in the country, in part because of the environment the regime managed to create. Political apathy, caused by disillusionment with the limited impact of opposition efforts, contributed to a low level of public engagement in political activities beyond the regime's prescribed framework. This lack of grassroots support made it difficult for the opposition to mount successful challenges against the ruling authorities.

A distinctive feature that emerges when examining the general structural characteristics of political opposition in Central Asia and Kazakhstan specifically, is that much of it originates "from above," typically represented by defected former members of the regime and business elites turned opposition politicians seeking governmental authority and pursuing their business interests first. The general decline in the level of political culture and inability of political opposition in Kazakhstan to become institutionalised force has several other reasons, such as both the ruling and opposition political parties and movements in the region did not arise as a natural continuation of the political activity, but as tools for the political action of individual leaders and inter-clan fights. Thus, they are mostly characterised as fragmented and ineffective, established around individuals, lacking strong ideological platform and policy agenda.

The landscape is further complicated by the presence of mistrust both among the Kazakh constituents of these opposition groups and within the groups themselves. The constituents, who often hail from diverse backgrounds and hold varying perspectives, may find it challenging to unite under a common banner due to concerns about the intentions and motivations of fellow members. This mistrust can result from historical divisions, personal rivalries, or a lack of transparent communication and coordination.

Due to the highly personalised nature of politics in the country, most political parties remain institutionally weak, with a lack of vision, a vague and confused ideological standpoint, and a tendency to respond to the government's unpopular policies and decisions rather than taking action to gain popular support based on their alternative approach. Opposition parties lack public support because they can acquire power despite having no clear ideological stance or policy

platforms, and they are frequently dormant between elections. The general public's suspicion of the opposition, combined with political indifference, makes it difficult to attract a broad audience beyond the opposition's constituency of politicized groups.

The backdrop of popular distrust of the opposition, along with political apathy among the region's general populace, makes it even more difficult for opposition parties to reach out to a broader audience beyond their core constituency of politicized groups. Other major causes of political opposition fragmentation include structural factors such as a fractured organizational structure, insufficient resource mobilisation, unclear goals, poor ideological and organizational consolidation, the absence of alternative policies, and a lack of democratic political traditions. Social and political cleavages, as well as informal politics inside major political parties, continue to be important impediments to the country's party system's development.

Accordingly, the political environment in which Kazakh political opposition currently finds itself and where it has been trapped since the early 1990s has made significant adjustments to the formation of Kazakh opposition and transformed and adapted opposition forces and the culture of expressing dissent and opposing the regime though various means. As a result, the level of freedom and activity among opposition forces varies significantly, heavily influenced by the political climate and the measures employed by the ruling regime to suppress opposition activities.

Currently, opposition in Kazakhstan exists as a vague and shapeless entity, primarily due to the limited institutionalisation of opposition actors as stable political party organizations. Consequently, the opposition lacks a clear and consistent ideological vision, a well-planned comprehensive strategy for action, and a focused approach towards electoral niches. Additionally, it lacks initiative and is unable to address the immediate demands of society effectively. Thus, the failure or reluctance to address certain societal issues and support public demonstrations has led to a rise in public distrust towards the opposition parties and their leaders, resulting in their inability to effectively compete with the Nazarbayev/Tokayev regime due to a lack of credibility.

Thus, the contemporary Kazakh political opposition can hardly be described as robust against an existing regime, promoting strong ideological agenda, that can effectively rally widespread public support, currently with no presence in the parliament or subsequent influence on the ruling regime.

Despite the complete disappearance of formal *Institutional Opposition,* such as political parties and movements, the phenomenon of opposition, referring to dissent against the actions and decisions of governing authorities, has not ceased to exist. It would be more accurate to say that the opposition broke down and transformed in more informal and underground forms of dissent, to be analyzed in greater detail in the coming sections.

Conclusion:

The emergence of varying political settings within Central Asia demonstrates that the origins of authoritarian governance within the region may be diverse, resulting from a complex interaction and combination of numerous factors that shaped the political environment.

Numerous studies have explored the complex factors that contribute to the failure of democracy and the prevalence of authoritarian tendencies in Central Asia. The continuing influence of the Soviet past, post-Soviet regimes' transition plans, elite structures, clans, and interpersonal networks, as well as cultural and traditional traditions influencing governance, are all key aspects determining the political landscape. Scholars such as Haerpfer and Kseniya Kizilova[348], Rico Isaacs[349], and Kathleen Collins[350] have analyzed political transformations, emphasizing shifts in attitudes towards democracy, the impact of neopatrimonialism, and the role of clan-based political systems in ensuring regime stability. Cultural practices, weak democratic institutions, and different leadership styles have also been recognized as contributory factors on a possible authoritarian future in the region. Furthermore, the region's underdevelopment, characterised by economic restrictions such as poverty, corruption, and resource dependency, provides conditions favorable to centralised authority. [351]

Following the initial stages of political competition in the early 1990s, the majority of Central Asian governments witnessed a significant shift in political authority. Over time, authority became increasingly centralised under the leadership of a single leader, exhibiting a remarkable degree of longevity and relative stability, with power concentrated within the hands of these long-standing leaders. Except for Kyrgyzstan, expectations that authoritarian rule in Central Asia would be fragile and vulnerable to governmental a collapse have thus far proven incorrect.

[348] Haerpfer, Christian W., and Kseniya Kizilova. "Values and Transformation in Central Asia." Transformation and Development: Studies in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Member States (2020): 7-28.
[349] Isaacs, Rico. "Neopatrimonialism and beyond: reassessing the formal and informal in the study of Central Asian politics." Contemporary Politics 20, no. 2 (2014): 229-245.
[350] Kathleen Collins, Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[351] Munck, Gerardo L. "Disaggregating political regime: Conceptual issues in the study of democratization." Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies Working Paper 228 (1996).

Many Central Asian rulers employed various techniques to legitimize their power. Countries such as Kyrgyzstan, relied on performance, stressing their ability to govern successfully, resulting in relatively better governance and less need for repression. Others, driven by perceived threats to their power, resorted to extensive repression. In some instances, like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan, these measures escalated to the use of violence, including the shooting of civilians, as a means of asserting government control.

Additionally, non-violent methods such as cyber surveillance and altering the urban environment were employed to maintain social and political dominance. Furthermore, the regimes extended their reach beyond their borders, conducting covert international operations to quell political activities among exiled opposition. Moreover, these authoritarian governments sought to consolidate their influence over vital business sectors. In Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, economic power became concentrated within a small elite closely linked to the presidential family.

Certainly, upon analyzing the current dynamics in all five nations of Central Asia, the nature of the governing regimes and the extent and level of repression have had and continue to have a notable impact on the formation of the concept and nature of political opposition in the region. Thus, over the years, political opposition in Central Asia has emerged in contrasting patterns and forms of expression, with different degree of freedom and activity, based on the political environment, cohesive and legislative measures implemented against them in each of the state. This complex dynamic makes it challenging to understand what exactly constitutes political opposition in present-day Central Asia.

Further exploration into the political opposition in Kazakhstan will uncover that, in addition to traditional forms of political opposition like political parties, the Kazakh political opposition has also evolved into alternative, more informal methods of challenging the regime. Subsequent chapters will delve into these diverse forms of opposition, offering a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of opposition and shedding light on the intricacies of the relationship between the regime and opposition.

Chapter 5

Mapping the Landscape of Political Opposition in Kazakhstan

1989–1998

"Institutional Political Opposition"

As previously indicated, Chapter 5 will provide an in-depth analysis of the emergence of early political opposition within Kazakhstan, spanning from the late 1980s, through the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent political developments up to 1998. This time frame is crucial, marking a significant juncture when Nazarbayev's presidency was firmly solidified, and the government took on a more authoritarian character. Over the course of this period, the prevailing form of opposition was the institutional form, manifested through the establishment and active presence of opposition political parties and movements that played a monumental role in shaping the political discourse and challenging the government during this important phase in the country's post-independence history.

In a coherent structure, this chapter is organized as follows: it begins by investigating the early manifestations of Kazakh grassroots opposition to the Soviet rule and explores the socio-political context of Kazakhstan. This includes an in-depth analysis of the socio-political landscape in Kazakhstan during the late 1980s and the period of the Sovie' Union's disintegration. This sub-chapter intends to present an in-depth understanding of the factors that gave rise to these groups and parties, as well as the strategies they used in their struggle against the established Soviet power.

The subsequent section investigates the formation of an independent Kazakhstan and the emergence of *Institutional Opposition*, manifested through political parties and movements. This stage explores the political landscape following independence, focusing on the emergence of political parties, their ideologies, organizational structures, and activities. The chapter analyzes the role of *Institutional Opposition* in shaping the early post-independence period, including their engagement within the parliamentary sphere and their impact and contribution to the policy debates and decision-making processes.

Lastly, the chapter examines the principal strategies and tactics employed by the Nazarbayev regime to suppress the existing opposition and consolidate presidential power in the late 1990s. It investigates the measures taken by the regime to curtail the influence of opposition parties

and movements, restrict political freedoms, manipulate political processes, and maintain a firm grip on power.

Given that the institutionalised opposition was primarily concentrated within the parliament and posed the most significant challenge to the president's authority, the chapter's analysis predominantly centers on the interplay between these two branches of government—the presidency and the *Institutional Opposition* within the political system.

The Emergence of Political Opposition in Kazakhstan

Early Grassroots Opposition to the Communist Rule

The societal developments that took place during the republic's tenure within the USSR from 1985 to 1991 laid the groundwork for the formation of contemporary political thinking in Kazakhstan, contributing to the gradual democratisation of social dynamics within the country. Thus, the first cycle of high opposition activism in Kazakhstan started in the late 1980s, prompted by the weakening of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, the fragmentation of the Soviet elite, and a decrease in public support for the Soviet rule. During the period of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* and the rapid social change, the formation of the politics of sovereign Kazakhstan was taking place under the influence of a predominantly nationalistic and liberal-democratic trend.[352]

Initially, the Kazakh government declared its official political orientation centered on transforming the entire system to establish new democratic institutions and improve the state's governance and administrative systems. The republic's leadership tried to convince most Kazakhs to show courage and patience and mobilize them in support of the course of the reform agenda.

Despite the complexity and ambiguity of the policies of *Perestroika and Glasnost* and the actions of the leadership, this period served as a catalyst for the emergence of autonomous socio-political activities and the growth of political ideologies among much of the population. In the wake of the gradual liberalisation of the political system, fundamental intellectual, theoretical, and societal political foundations began to slowly take shape, laying the groundwork for contemporary political ideologies. The socio-political activity and civic consciousness of the Kazakh population have also increased significantly, leading to the formation and establishment

[352] Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Rob Kevlihan, "Threading a Needle: Kazakhstan between Civic and Ethno-nationalist State-building," *Nations and Nationalism* 19, no. 2 (2013): 337–356.

of independent political and social movements in Kazakhstan, characterised by an increasing ideological divergence from the Communist legacy.

The new changes created new opportunities for amateur groups, clubs, and public self-governance committees (particularly linked to higher education institutions), including "Alma-Ata Popular Front" (1988); the historical educational club "Akitat" ("the truth") (1988); Memorial Society (1988); Adilet (1989); "Alma-Ata Peoples Front" (1986); the civil movement "Sodruzhestvo," an Independent Trade Union of Businessmen, Tenants, and Cooperatives Birlesu ("Unity") (1988), and others.[353] Also, particularly active were the social-ecological associations, such as "Initiative" ("Инициатива") (1987), "Green Front" ("Зеленый фронт") (1988), and one of the most active ecological organizations,—International Anti-Nuclear Movement "Nevada – Semipalatinsk" ("Невада – Семипалатинск") (1989), established by the Kazakh nationalist poet Olzhas Suleimenov, actively protesting against the nuclear testing at the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site.[354]

For some time, these organizations stayed aligned with the political agenda of the government by limiting themselves to ecological, cultural, and historical issues. However, gradually, their actions went beyond the scope of environmental concerns and took a distinct political and nationalistic dimension,[355] through establishment of the political organizations such as the "Forum Society," "Zheltoksan Committee," "The Kazakhstan Public Human Rights Committee," as well as "Nevada-Semipalatinsk," which ceased to exist after the closure of the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site, but later transformed into a political party, "National Congress of Kazakhstan," in 1991.[356]

This led to the formation and institutionalisation of new political parties and social movements, which played an active role in advocating for democratic values and received significant support, particularly from the younger generation.[357] Driven by the goal of political change and the implementation of political and economic reforms, the dissolution of the Soviet parliament and the achievement of Kazakhstan's independence became major ideas behind the emergence and existence of those organizations and movements. As the principal opposition was not

[353] Достан Жуманбаев, Буркитбай Аяган, and Абдуахап Кара. "Some Aspects of the Formation History of the Legal Foundations of the Multiparty System in Kazakhstan (1989–1996) (According to archival materials)," Отан тарихы-Отечественная история 26 (3) (2023): 618–631.
[354] Жуманбаев, Аяган, and Кара, "Some Aspects of the Formation History."
[355] Ó Beacháin and Kevlihan, "State-building, Identity and Nationalism in Kazakhstan."
[356] S. T. Seidumanov, *The Phenomenon of a Multi-party System in Kazakhstan* (Almaty: Kazakhstan, 1997), 28.
[357] Martha Brill Olcott, "Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010.

represented in the parliament, the most traditional way of opposing the regimes was through street protests and demonstrations largely supported by the local population. As of 1990, there were 100 registered and unregistered public organizations in the country.[358]

In the early years of independence, the party-state leadership in Soviet Kazakhstan encouraged the manifestation of certain public initiatives that aligned with their policies. However, they simultaneously aimed to maintain control over the process and guide it toward their goals. Any actions of citizens and public associations that went beyond the state's control were perceived as oppositional. One of the significant demonstrations during that era was the *Zheltoksan* protests that took place in Almaty on December 17–18, 1986 and marked a major turning point in the political consciousness of the Kazakh civil society. Despite the tragic events, the protests were viewed as the first attempt in the republic to exercise the right of free speech and civic participation, heavily proclaimed during the perestroika era. The December events represented the outburst of long-held liberal views and sentiments and sparked a surge in political participation among the students and working youth, who rejected the traditional dictates of the center.

In response to these emerging challenges, Kazakhstan observed the creation of large number of public organizations. At that time, legitimate mechanisms that would help formalize all these processes in an appropriate and constructive manner were still in their formative stage. During this period, the initial proto-party organizations started to form into the first political parties. One of the first public associations to openly challenged the Soviet regime was the "Alma-Ata Popular Front," founded in 1988 by journalist Sergei Duvanov, who was under active pressure by the government at that time. The repressive campaign lasted from November 1988 to April 1989, concluding due to the arrival of Nursultan Nazarbayev as the first secretary of the Communist Party, who relatively eased the pressure on opposition-minded groups, compared to his processors.[359] These transformative developments invigorated political activists, leading to the emergence of "political Thursdays" organized by activist, Sergei Duvanov. These gatherings brought together politically engaged citizens who came together to discuss current political affairs. The outcome of these meetings culminated in the formation of the Association of

[358] Rustem Zhumanbai, "Historiography of the Issue of Formation and Development of Public and Political Associations of Independent Kazakhstan," Отан тарихы-Отечественная история 26, no. 1 (2023): 93–107.
[359] Zhumanbai, "Historiography of the Issue."

Independent Public Organizations of Kazakhstan (ANNOK), marking a notable attempt to bring together various independent public movements within the republic.[360]

Overall, the events that unfolded in 1986 (the Zheltoksan protests) played a pivotal role in establishing the groundwork for a more vocal and engaged civil society in Kazakhstan, leaving a profound impact on the trajectory of political opposition and laying the groundwork for future resistance against the existing governance.

Evolution of Institutional Opposition in Kazakhstan

The policy of perestroika introduced a pressing question about the potential for the Kazakh state to attain sovereignty. The Supreme Council's approval of the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Kazakh SSR on October 25, 1990, was a watershed moment in the state-building process.[361] The declaration was an important turning point since it affirmed the republic's status as a sovereign nation.

Another significant move in this direction occurred in April 1990 with the creation of the position of the President of the republic and the election of Nursultan Nazarbayev to this office. Nazarbayev ran in a nationwide, uncontested presidential election and achieved a resounding victory on December 1, 1991. According to the CEC, the turnout in the elections was 88.23%, and 98.78% of voters voted for Nazarbayev.[362]

It is noteworthy that the elections had no alternatives. The legislative body provided support in this process by giving its endorsement to the concept of a presidential election.[363] They justified their support by emphasizing the necessity for strong leadership during the challenging times faced by their newly independent country. During the lead-up to the election, Nazarbayev encountered minimal or no opposition from Parliament, even though it consisted of influential political figures, many of whom were his rivals.[364] Deputies proposed Olzhas Suleimenov as Nazarbayev's contender, but he recused himself. Also, Khasen Kozha-Ahmet, the leader of Zheltoksan, intended to represent the opposition, but he failed to collect the required number of signatures. Thus, Nazarbayev emerged as the sole candidate in the election.

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360 Sergey Duvanov (Independent Journalist, KIBHR), in an interview with the author, June 2019.
361 "Declaration KSSR on the state sovereignty of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic of October 25, 1990," CIS Legislation, https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=6402
362 Colin Knox, "Kazakhstan: Modernizing Government in the Context of Political Inertia," *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 74, no. 3 (2008): 477–496.
363 Knox, "Kazakhstan."
364 Martha Car, "Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Paper, 2010.

Although, Kazakhstan attained full independence following the disintegration of the USSR, which commenced with the signing of the Agreement on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States by the presidents of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine in Minsk on December 8, 1991. This agreement legally marked the end of the USSR. Subsequently, on December 10, the Supreme Council passed the Law for renaming the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, officially designating it as the Republic of Kazakhstan. Finally, on December 16, the Constitutional Law concerning the State Independence of the Republic of Kazakhstan was enacted. In practical terms, this law solidified the core principles of the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Kazakh SSR. The primary distinction between the Constitutional Law and the Declaration lay in declaring Kazakhstan as an entirely independent state, not affiliated with any other state entities and free from limitations on its sovereignty through recognition of their decisions and legal acts.

Following the presidential elections, a similar electoral process for the 12th convocation of the Supreme Council of the Kazakh SSR (1990–1993) was scheduled for the following year. Despite the absence of well-established political parties and social movements, these elections initiated irreversible changes in the transformation of the Soviet totalitarian system. Thus, the 12th Supreme Council, elected in March of 1990, served as the main legislature until 1993.[365] Subsequently, the country adopted its first Constitution of Kazakhstan in 1993, establishing the foundation for a semi-presidential system of governance, with unicameral legislature, modeled on the 1958 Constitution of the French Republic."[366] In June of 1992, the Supreme Council released its proposed version for public consideration: the government promoted the implementation of a presidential system of governance, the incorporation of private ownership, and the recognition of both the Kazakh and Russian languages as having equal status.

In response to these developments, opposition parties strongly urged Supreme Council to refrain from approving the draft in its current form. They emphasized that the constitution failed to consider evaluations by international experts, disregarded input from citizens, lacked assurances for upholding liberties and human rights, and essentially marginalised public involvement in

[365] W. Fierman, "Shireen T. Hunter, Central Asia Since Independence," *Slavic Review* 57 (1998): 651–651.
[366] The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan in 1993 https://e-history.kz/en/history-of-kazakhstan/show/9735/ (Accessed 01.07.2023)

governing the state. However, despite these concerns, on January 28, 1993, many deputies from the Supreme Council—309 out of 312—voted in favor of adopting the Constitution.[367]

During the period under review, there was a significant shift from informal associations to formalised political opposition, with the emergence of political parties and social movements that had distinct and diverse ideological and political orientations. These included socialist, liberal-democratic, and national-democratic beliefs, each reflecting different visions of what the new Kazakhstan should look like and how it should be governed.[368]

The key (registered and unregistered) political organizations active at that time included: the "Civil Movement of Kazakhstan Azat" (Azat Party of National Freedom), chaired by the former Foreign Minister of Kazakh S.S.R, Mikhail Isinaliev; "Alash Civil Movement of Kazakhstan" (The Party of National Freedom Alash) (1990) established by Aron Atabek, a Kazakh writer, poet and dissident; "Zheltoksan National-Democratic Party of Kazakhstan" (1990) was to varying degrees nationalistic and religiously oriented political movement headed by writers and grassroots activists, such as Khasen Kozha-Ahmet;[369] Social Democratic Party of Kazakhstan (SDPK) established in 1990 and led by Sergei Duvanov and Dos Kushimov; "The Republican Party of Kazakhstan," established in 1991–92; "The Socialist Party of Kazakhstan" (1991) succeeding the Communist Party of Kazakhstan; "People's Congress of Kazakhstan" (1991)—the first democratic party registered in the republic, although in 1994 it became the constructive opposition to the president—"Communist Party of Kazakhstan" still existed and had its own electorate (1991); the "Party of Democratic Progress of Kazakhstan (PDPK)" (1991); the National-Cooperative Party of Kazakhstan (NCPK, December 1994); the Party of Revival of Kazakhstan (PRK, January 1995); People's Cooperative Party of Kazakhstan (NPKK), and others.[370]

As well as numerous socio-political movements were present in the political arena: the Republican Public Slavic Movement "Lad Workers' Movement of Kazakhstan;" "United Inter-National Movement;" the Edinstvo (Unity) Interethnic Movement (Edinstvo IM, August 1990); the Pokolenie (Generation); the Movement of Social Legal Protection of Pensioners (Pokolenie

[367] Foundation of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Elbasy;" Formation and Development of Present Statehood of Kazakhstan"; 2019, p. 59
[368] Olcott, "Kazakhstan."
[369] Vladimir Babak, Demian Vaisman, and Aryeh Wasserman, eds. *Political Organization in Central Asia and Azerbaijan: Sources and Documents* (New York, London: Routledge, 2004).
[370] Erlan Karin and Andrey Chebotarev, "The Policy of Kazakhization in State and Government Institutions in Kazakhstan," *The Nationalities Question in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan* 80 (2002).

MSLPP, November 1992); the Union of National Unity of Kazakhstan Republican Movement (UNUK, February 1993); the Solidarnost (Solidarity); Workers' Movement of Kazakhstan (September 1994), and others.[371]

The ideological positions and opposition stance of the newly formed political parties and movements were defined by several ideological parameters, that shaped the political discourse and strategies of the opposition parties and movements—opposing the totalitarian communist rule; fighting for the state independence and sovereignty; and in case of the Communist party, being against the dissolution of the Soviet Union. They advocated for Kazakhstan's independence from Moscow, the creation of a rule-of-law multi-party state, the recognition of the Kazakh state language and the improvement of the living conditions of the indigenous population.[372] Certain individuals from the national political elite and the Kazakh intelligentsia, who felt oppressed during the Soviet era, sought to secure prominent roles in the politics and economy of the republic by aligning themselves with these political parties.[373]

Indeed, the newly established parties and movements were in the early stages of their development, due to the lack of a systematic and legislative basis in their activities, a clear social base, and the permanent electorate of the general population or any significant impact on the political processes within the country. By the end of 1993, there were 396 public associations officially registered in the justice bodies in the republic.[374]

Following Kazakhstan's attainment of state independence, the initial challenge was to identify the most suitable development models for the republic at that juncture. In response to these circumstances, the Kazakh leadership officially articulated its political direction as the reform of the entire social system with a focus on establishing democracy, the rule of law, and a market economy. These transformative changes served as a significant catalyst for increased civic engagement among the populace and the emergence of new socio-political organizations in the political arena. Under these circumstances, the development of political thought in sovereign Kazakhstan was predominantly shaped by a liberal-democratic orientation and the novel geopolitical settings.[375]

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371 Karin and Chbotarev, "The Policy of Kazahitzation."
372 Andrey Chebotarev (Kazakh Political Scientist), in interview with the author, February, 2018
373 Vladimir Babak, Demian Vaisman, and Aryeh Wasserman, eds. *Political Organization in Central Asia and Azerbaijan: Sources and Documents* (New York, London: Routledge, 2004).
374 Seidumanov, *The Phenomenon of a Multi-party System in Kazakhstan*.
375 Serra-Massansalvador, Francesc. "Russia's Role in the Consolidation of the Central Asian Elites." Political Regimes and Neopatrimonialism in Central Asia: A Sociology of Power Perspective (2021): 41-70.

Thus, in the initial phase of Kazakhstan's development, both the country's leadership and opposition groups equally declared their commitment to advancing democratic principles and values, with frequent cases of political dialogue, mostly on the need for stronger leadership and the democratic path of the country. Nazarbayev, in his book *Strategy of Independence* (1997), even gave a highly positive assessment of the significance of the development of the opposition in the republic: *"... we must cultivate tolerance in society for the views of political opponents. On the whole, the opposition is a normal and even useful phenomenon. But the main thing is that the parties, movements should act in a constructive spirit, would be engaged in criticism in the true sense of the word, and not criticism."*[376]

It should also be noted that, in the early years of independence (1992–1993), the process of party building and the formation of new political parties and public organizations were the result of certain policies implemented by the president and the government of Kazakhstan. One key milestone was the adoption of the Declaration on the State Sovereignty of the Republic on May 25, 1990 by the Supreme Soviet of the Kazakh S.S.R. This declaration ensured equal legal opportunities for all public and political organizations, as well as mass movements, to actively engage in state and public affairs.[377] Furthermore, the provisions of Article 6 of the Constitution of the USSR, which affirmed the supremacy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), were abolished during the Second Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR on March 14, 1990. This event marked the proclamation of the permissive policy of the state in relation to political pluralism, the creation of new political parties, and, thus, the formation of a multiparty system.[378]

Another notable development was the passing of the law "On public associations in the Kazakh SSR," on June 27, 1991, which stipulated the right of parties and other public and political organizations to take part in public activities, further fostering a conducive environment for political diversity.[379] Additionally, on January 28, 1993, political parties in Kazakhstan were granted constitutional and legal status, which stipulated the role of political parties, as organizations that "promote the formation and expression of the political will of citizens." Thus,

[376] Nursultan Nazarbayev, *Strategy of Independence* (1997).
[377] Asylkhan Mamashuly, "Why did Kazakhstan adopt the Declaration of Sovereignty later than the other 13 republics?" Radio Azattyk, October 26, 2020 (Accessed 22.07.2023)
https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-declaration-of-state-sovereignty-30-year/30913230.html
[378] Andrey Chebotarev (Kazakh Political Scientist), interview with author. (February 2018)
[379] Chebotarev, interview.

legal conditions were created for the transition of these associations from the status of informal organizations to officially recognized public structures.[380]

Overall, these legal measures and policy initiatives laid the groundwork for the advancement of political diversity and pluralism in Kazakhstan, enabling the formation of new political parties, establishing a multi-party system within the state, and creating serious political and legal preconditions for the further development of political parties and the party system of Kazakhstan.[381] These developments created significant political and legal preconditions for the subsequent growth and evolution of political parties and the party system in Kazakhstan.

Nazarbayev's Path to Power Consolidation

The next stage of opposition activism, spanning from 1994 to 1998 started with a cardinal shift in the character of the interdependence between the government and political opposition, through an increase in the constitutional and legal status of political parties and their inclusion in the decision-making process. In March of 1994, un[de]r the 13th convocation of the Supreme Council,[382] Kazakh political parties for the first time were granted the opportunity to participate in elections for governmental bodies at every level, including the Supreme Council and local Maslikhats, providing a platform for the opposition to voice their opinions and express their objections.[383]

The adoption of the majoritarian electoral system in the early years of independence, was the start of 'he regime's efforts to tighten its control over the process of political recruitment in the face of emergent opposition forces. Under the framework of the majoritarian electoral system, the composition of the parliament was structured around the allocation of 177 delegates. This system was designed to emphasize direct representation from specific constituencies. However, in a demonstration of the government's influence, the president still retained the authority to nominate an additional 40 delegates to the legislative body. This provision was particularly relevant in cases where a cohesive political party failed to materialize, allowing the president to exercise control over the composition of the parliament.[384]

According to the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Kazakhstan, a detailed breakdown of the composition [o]f the 13th Convocation of the Parliament of the Republic of

[380] Chebotarev, interview.
[381] Knox, "Kazakhstan."
[382] Olcott, "Kazakhstan,"
[383] Zhumanbai, "Historiography of the Issue."
[384] Isaacs, *Party System Formation in Kazakhstan*.

Kazakhstan (1994–1995) reveals that a total of 177 seats were available. Among these, a significant portion of 75 seats were secured through elections conducted by diverse political parties and public-political organizations. As a result of the 1994 parliamentary elections, the seats were distributed as follows: the parliamentary factions of the pro-presidential party, the Party of People's Unity (32); Trades Union Federation (11); 'he People's Congress party of Kazakhstan (22); Socialist Party (12)' Peasants' Union (4); Lad (Harmony) Movement (4); Other parties and groups (7); a significant portion of 59 seats was held by independent deputies.[385]

The parliament commenced its work in April 1994. It should be noted that the 13th Convocation of Parliament had more opposition compared to the previous member's parliament and within just a month, opposition had already taken shape. Among these, the most significant and influential was the "Progress Group." This group served as the central force of the parliamentary opposition and consisted of representatives from the "Federation of Trade Unions of Kazakhstan," "People's Congress of Kazakhstan," "Socialist Party of Kazakhstan" and the "Union of Peoples Unity of Kazakhstan," the Lad Movement", as well as small number of independent deputies.[386]

Also, recognizing the need for greater unity and collective strength, nearly all opposition groups within Kazakhstan decided to unite their efforts and establish a political coalition known as the Coordinating Council of Public Associations ("Respublika"). "The primary aim of this coalition was to create a genuine and constructive opposition that could effectively counter the policies of the government and the president. To achieve this, they developed and aimed to implement a comprehensive program called the "Survival Program of Kazakhstan."[387] Serikbolsyn Abdildin, who had previously served as the head of the 12th Supreme Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan, was chosen as the Council's chairman.

As already mentioned the parliament played a crucial role in facilitating Nazarbayev's rise to power in the early years of his presidency, thereby bolstering the legitimacy and credibility of the legislative body. Consequently, the parliament began to perceive itself as having equal authority and significance as the executive branch. Thus, the parliamentary opposition often

[385] Kazakhstan Mazhilis (House of Representatives), Historical Archive of Parliamentary Election Results. http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2165_arc.htm
[386] Karin and Chebotarev, "The Policy of Kazakhization."
[387] Zhumanbai, "Historiography of the Issue."

demonstrated a clear willingness to assert its independence and challenge the policies and decisions of the executive branch. This included actions such as refusing to elect the president's preferred candidate for the position of parliamentary speaker, passing a vote of no-confidence in the government of Prime Minister Sergey Tereshchenko, who had been in office since 1991, overriding the president's veto on two legislative bills.[388] Serikbolsyn Abdildin also often criticized the government's handling of the economic reforms. Opposing demanded that the IMF's proposals be rejected, showing skepticism of the government's socioeconomic policies.[389]

As Martha Olcott points out, the parliament has developed a significant growth towards parliamentary responsibility:

> *The legislature was beginning to develop some of the fundamental characteristics of an institution cable of providing the checks and balances essential to the functioning of a pluralistic society. Even staunch supporters of Nazarbayev were beginning to understand that they had responsibilities as legislators of the parliament were functions as a legislative body*.[390]

Thus, the parliamentary opposition, which held considerable power, focused on preparing for the 1996 presidential election, with a few of its members being considered potential candidates. Notably, figures such as Serikbolsyn Abdil'din, who had previously served as the parliament speaker and led the Communist Party, and Gaziz Aldamzharov, a parliamentarian acknowledged as an unofficial leader of the opposition during the 1994–1995 parliamentary term, were regarded as viable candidates.

The growing increase of influence and public support of the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition led Nazarbayev to utilize indirect tactics to apply pressure and marginalize the opposition. Eventually he succeeded to dissolve the parliament through Kazakhstan's Constitutional Court, citing constitutional violations that occurred during the 1994 elections, as well as the parliament's inefficiency, having only passed seven laws throughout its one-year tenure.[391] More specifically, Tatiana Kvitkovskaya, an unregistered candidate for the position of deputy, initiated a legal action concerning the breach of electoral laws within the Abylai Khan electoral district. Her plea entailed seeking the declaration of the vote-tabulation

[388] "More than a prime minister," *Forbes*, October 2019, https://forbes.kz/process/bolshe_chem_premer/.
[389] S. Akkuly, "Kak Prezident Kazahskoi SSR Nezametno Stal Prezidentom Respubliki Kazahstan. Radio Azattyq," April 5, 2011, accessed October 20, 2019, http://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan_election_nazarbayev_/3546446.html.
[390] Olcott, "Kazakhstan."
[391] Martha Brill Olcott, *Central Asia's Second Chance* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2010).

technique as unconstitutional. March 6, 1995, marked the day when the Constitutional Court granted Kviatkowska's request, affirming the illegitimacy of the parliamentary elections held the previous year. This verdict resulted in yet another instance of the government stepping down.[392]

The dissolution of the Parliament and the appointment of the next elections in 8 months provided the president with a significant opportunity to initiate a comprehensive constitutional reform. In the period of direct rule, Nazarbayev initiated two major referenda. The first on August 30, 1995, extended Nazarbayev's presidential term for an additional five years until 2000, without the need for re-election. Following that, in June, Nazarbayev put forth a proposal for a new constitution for Kazakhstan through another referenda, aimed to enhance the president's authority while concurrently reducing parliament's influence.[393] The new constitution, adopted on August 30, 1995, radically changed the balance of power in favor of the president and transformed the entire structure of the country's political power system. It also introduced new entities such as the two-chamber parliament, the Constitutional Council, and the Supreme Judicial Council. The Cabinet of Ministers was also renamed to the government, the heads of the administrations to akims, and the vice-presidential institute was abolished.

Former politician Petr Svoik suggests that these series of actions were instigated by Nazarbayev's concerns regarding the potential actions of the parliament. He explains:

> *This phase could be described as the point of no return. The 1995 Constitution marked a shift from a dual power structure to a clear dominance of the president within the system. There was no longer a single political institution that operated independently of the president's influence. In the early half of the 1990s, the opposition had little chance of changing the power dynamics.*[394]

Consequently, the later stage of opposition activism was marked by a significant reversal, leading to a shift towards strengthening the state and its authority in all spheres of society. This was most evident in the strengthening of state control over public and political processes and the centralisation of the political-power system based on the redistribution of power resources

[392] Robert Elgie and Sophia Moestrup, eds. *Semi-presidentialism in the Caucasus and Central Asia* (London, New York: Springer, 2016).
[393] K. N. Burkhanov, B. K. Sultanov, and B. G. Ayagan, *Modern Political History of Kazakhstan (1985–2006)* (Almaty: Publishing Center of the Institute of History and Ethnology. Ch.Ch. Valikhanov, 2006), 83.
[394] Pert Svoik (Kazakh Politician), in interview with author, 2018.

from all levels. By manipulating the country's main legal document, Nazarbayev ensured the supremacy of his authority and substantially weakened the legislature's institutional standing.[395] In October of 1998, the parliament enacted constitutional amendments that increased the scope of presidential power, two years before the initial term was set to expire following a prior extension.

At this point, Kazakhstan was officially established as a state with a presidential system of governance, characterised by a singular individual's leadership, whereby Nazarbayev managed to gain overwhelming authority and establish conditions favorable almost to uncontrolled, unbalanced, and unchecked presidential rule.[396] In parallel to obtaining the new constitution that heavily favored and granted more power to the presidency, Nazarbayev expanded pro-governmental political parties to support relevant measures and gain public and political support. In this regard, the following loyal new political parties appeared in the political arena of the country: The Party of National Unity of Kazakhstan (PECN); the Democratic Party of Kazakhstan (KDP) (established in July 1995); the Republican Political Labor Party (RPPT) (established in September 1995 based on the Union of Engineers of Kazakhstan); National Cooperative Party of Kazakhstan (1994); Revival Party of Kazakhstan (1995).[397]

In December 1995, the first parliamentary elections according to the new constitution were held, one that exhibited greater loyalty to the president. These elections were also conducted through the majoritarian electoral system, which created a two-chamber parliament consisting of the upper house, the Senate (with members serving six-year terms, half of whom were elected every three years), and the lower house, or Majilis (with members elected for five-year terms).[398] As a result, in the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan's 1st convocation (1995–1999), the parliamentary factions of the Kazakh People's Unity Party and the Democratic Party of Kazakhstan, consisting of 30 (19 deputies of the Majilis and 11 senators) and 22 (11 deputies of the Majilis and the Senate) members, respectively, were elected. Another 2 deputies represented the Communist Party of Kazakhstan in the Majilis.[399]

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[395] Martha Brill Olcott, "Kazakhstan: Nursultan Nazarbaev as Strong President," in *Postcommunist Presidents*, ed. Ray Taras (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 106–29.
[396] Olcott, "Kazakhstan."
[397] Olcott, "Kazakhstan: Nursultan Nazarbaev."
[398] Anthony Clive Bowyer, *Parliament and Political Parties in Kazakhstan* (Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2008).
[399] "Report on Parliamentary Elections in Kazakhstan," Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 1995.

The new opposition, as predicted, did not pose the same level of threat to the president as its predecessor. As a result, Kazakhstan's parliament has become a tool for promoting presidential policies. Nazarbaev made sure that the most independent deputies who had blocked the president's agendas in the past were left out of parliament. Thus, political opposition in Kazakhstan became associated with former members of parliament who found themselves out of office.

The later period between 1996–1997 witnessed an increase in the socioeconomic crisis and civil unrest within Kazakhstan, sparking a heated confrontation between the ruling elite and the opposition. The most proactive faction within the opposition at that time was the "Azamat movement," formed in April 1996. This movement gained significant attention by orchestrating multiple demonstrations, directing public attention to the existing political vacuum, and eliciting a response from the government.[400]

The adoption of the new Constitution and a shift towards a presidential republic influenced the trajectory of political opposition and the overall shaping of the political landscape within the country. From a legal perspective, following the Law on "Public Associations" adopted on May 31, 1996, the enactment of the first law "On Political Parties" on July 2, 1996, had the most significant impact on the decay and marginalization of opposition parties and civic organizations.[401]

Art. 5 banned all political parties that were *"created on a religious basis, as well as those that "aimed at, or worked toward the use of force to change the constitutional order, violate the integrity of the Republic of Kazakhstan, undermine its security, or fan social, racial, ethnic, religious, and clan strife."*[402] In accordance with the document, "*political parties have no right to receive money or other property from religious associations. Political parties should not be financed by foreign legal entities or physical persons, other states, international organizations, or legal entities with foreign participation"*[403] In addition, parties were banned from intervening in public affairs. As a positive note,

> *parties gained the right to nominate their candidates for the position of the President of*

[400] Barbara Junisbai, "A Tale of Two Kazakhstans: Sources of Political Cleavage and Conflict in the Post-Soviet Period." *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, no. 2 (2010): 235–269.
[401] "Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Public Associations," https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=1005615. (Accessed on 23.10.2023)
[402] "Article 5 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan," https://constitutionrk.kz/razdel-1/statya-5. (Accessed on 17.08.2023)
[403] "Article 5."

the country, as well as for positions in Parliament and Maslikhats, or local representative agencies. According to the law, parties could unite into electoral blocs and various associations could band together to engage in business activity within the legislation on public associations.[404]

The newly imposed legislative measures played a pivotal and strategic role in suppressing dissent and consolidating Nazarbayev's presidency. By establishing a comprehensive legal framework, the government gained the ability to meticulously manage and direct the operations of political parties. This intricate structure allowed them to exercise control over various aspects of party functioning, including their organization, activities, financing, and even their affiliations. As a result, President Nazarbayev's influence extended well beyond the confines of his office, permeating into the very fabric of the political parties themselves.

Conclusion

This period under review was marked by the turbulent and ambiguous processes that took place in the first decade of Kazakhstan's independence (1989–1998) which ultimately shaped the contours of the country's development, leading to the emergence of limited political pluralism and determining the future of the political opposition in Kazakhstan as well as the overall political order in the country.

The process of party building and opposition activism, with the establishment of a multi-party system in Kazakhstan, marked by the presence of nearly twenty independent political parties[405] representing diverse viewpoints, became a defining characteristic of Kazakhstan's political environment. What initially started as informal and small dissident-type associations gradually evolved into large political parties and social movements, carrying the potential for political change in the country.

During the formative years of political independence, a significant portion of the opposition to the president was voiced through the *Institutional Opposition*, which was primarily represented within 'he nation's legislative body. The foundation of this group was established by opposition members of the parliament who opposed the political trajectory of the president. By actively participating in the electoral processes and at certain stages, in the activities of elected

[404] Daniyar Sayabayev, "Sociopolitical Associations in Independent Kazakhstan: Evolution of the Phenomenon," *Pacific Science Review B: Humanities and Social Sciences* 2, no. 3 (2016): 94–99.
[405] Olcott, "Kazakhstan."

bodies of state power (strong parliamentary factions in the Supreme Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan of the 12th and 13th convocations), the Kazakh opposition has transformed into a full-fledged political institution.

Parliament provided the platform for political opposition to voice their views and express their objections and slowly became a potent force in opposition to the president. Both the creators and the critics of the official political course became more active, formulating and promoting their views, proposals, and plans concerning critical issues related to Kazakhstan's societal and governmental progress. Political parties inside and outside of the parliament became increasingly vocal, exerting some form of influence on political processes in the country and, on some occasions, openly criticizing the government. However, the organizational structure of political parties was still weak and unstable, with only few effective legal tools available to political parties to exert a serious influence on the leadership, majority of the parties still lacking significant popular support among their constituents.

Gradually, the government abandoned its liberal policy towards political opposition, slowly marginalising and narrowing down the rights and freedoms of opposition political parties, the media, and civil society. The relationship between the regime and the opposition had been marked by a clear increase in the power of the state, with expanded capabilities and mechanisms for controlling society and its institutions. This was particularly evident in the centralisation of the political system based on the redistribution of power resources from all branches of government to the President of Kazakhstan, and the strengthening of state control over socio-political processes in the countries.

As a result, Nazarbayev was able to establish a system of governance that granted him extensive control over nearly every facet of the republic's political and economic spheres. However, former opposition member Yevgeny Zhovtis believes that during the first half of the 90s, the authorities in Kazakhstan still operated with a degree of tolerance towards opposition forces, without resorting to severe repression. As Zhovtis asserts, "It's important to understand that this was an authoritarian regime inclined towards complete political control over civil society. But in the initial stage of its independence, there were no significant pressures against the key opposition forces."[406]

[406] Yevgeni Zhovtis (Director of Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law (KIBHR)), in interview with the author, June 2019.

The chapter's central argument revolves around the early manifestations of political opposition, specifically political parties and movements, and their dynamics with the ruling regime. While these opposition groups were vocally critical of certain government policies, still served as a source of legitimacy in the Parliament and supported some of the government's policies, particularly during the initial years of countries' independence.

As a result, President Nazarbayev did not perceive the existing parliamentary opposition as a substantial threat that required a full-scale violent crackdown. Instead, he opted for subtler methods to neutralize the opposition. Nazarbayev employed indirect and quasi-legal tactics, such as referenda, constitutional amendments, and re-elections, strategically weakening and eventually eliminating parliamentary political opposition. This approach differed from the overt violent crackdowns witnessed in some neighboring newly independent states. The cumulative effect of these actions created a cycle, leading to weakened and ineffectual opposition political parties and movements that could no longer pose a credible challenge to the government.

These actions have created a reinforcing cycle of effects, resulting in weakened and ineffective opposition political parties and movements that would no longer pose a credible challenge to the government. The government's constant efforts to undermine the opposition, combined with electoral and political failures, have contributed to the decline and loss of influence of the parliamentary opposition in Kazakhstan.

By slowly marginalising the opposition, the government has created an image of uncontested authority. As one analyst summarized, "The current regime's policy is to present themselves as the only alternative. In other words, to make the opposition seem like they are not a credible alternative."[407] So, by the end of the 2000s, parliamentary opposition parties had experienced a significant decline in popularity. According to a Kazakh activist, the "Parliamentary opposition had essentially vanished, became ineffective, powerless, and divided, with minimal influence. The repeated electoral and political failures over the years had detrimental reputational effects on the opposition."[408]

The ability of Nazarbayev to demote the parliamentary opposition to a largely nominal status without minimum violence has resulted in a more thorough consolidation of presidential powers and a harsher political regime. As a result, with the presence of limited *Institutional Opposition*

[407] Janar Jandosova (Activist), in interview with the author, 2019.
[408] Jandosova, interview.

within the parliament, the political opposition in Kazakhstan has diversified into alternative forms, such as defected former members of the political circles as well business elite. These individuals form what is known as *Individual Opposition*, which will be the primary focus of the forthcoming chapter.

Chapter 6

Mapping the Landscape of Political Opposition in Kazakhstan

1998–2011

"Individual Political Opposition"

The proceeding chapter delved into the early stage of political opposition's development in Kazakhstan and its interaction with the Nazarbayev regime, emphasizing the power dynamics among the key political entities in the country. This particular period of opposition activism has been characterised by the gradual consolidation of control over the legislature, the reinforcement of presidential powers by Nazarbayev, the tightened limitations on political participation, and the elimination of *Institutional Opposition* represented in parliament.

The second phase of Kazakhstan's political trajectory has been characterised by the emergence of new influential groups within the ruling elite, dissatisfied with the government's policies and gradually engaging in a competition to expand their spheres of interest and influence, with the main aim of exerting control over the president and gaining access to economic resources. As this competition intensified, it began to extend into the political sphere of the republic, resulting in significant disruptions to the intra-elite balance, further increasing the tensions between the government and the opposition groups.

The new form of political opposition had taken a distinct shape and was composed of the defectors and former members of the ruling elite and dissatisfied business executives—the so called *Oligarchic Opposition*,[409] represented through the individual political leaders and certain politically active figures, taking on leading roles and representing potential competition to the Nazarbayev's presidency. Political actors such as Akezhan Kazhegeldin, former prime minister of Kazakhstan; Altynbek Sarsenbayuly, former member of the government and the opposition

[409] Isaacs, *Political Opposition in Authoritarianism,* 12.

leader of the political party Narghyz AK Zhol; Mukhtar Ablyazov, founder of political party DVK; and Galymzhan Zhakiyanov, also leader of the DVK and others.

Despite many of these "New Kazakhs" holding governmental positions at that time, they began to display a growing interest in creating a stable political environment to support and safeguard their positions in the country and joined the opposition, providing crucial financial support to their initiatives, once again emphasizing the acute divide among the ruling elite.

Apart from the *Oligarchic Opposition*, the notable individual political activists who openly portrayed their opposition included Sergey Duvanov and Yevgeniy Zhovtis founders of "Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law" (KIBHR); Zhasaral Kuanyshalin, civil activist and writer; Zauresh Batalova, president of the Development Fund for Parliamentarianism in Kazakhstan; and Vladimir Kozlov, Kazakhstani opposition politician, leader of the political party Alga!

One noteworthy distinction of the new form of Kazakh political opposition was its radical nature—they openly and radically exhibited their protest against the regime through various forms of political activism, including rallies and public protests. This type of opposition rejected the political path of Kazakh rulers, advocated for a radical transformation of the political system, and implied denial of cooperation with the authorities, demanding the resignation of all those in power and, as a rule, promising their criminal prosecution.[410] It is important to highlight, that one of the most noticeable advantages of the Kazakh opposition at that time was the relatively high rating of fame and popularity of individual opposition leaders, as well as the availability of solid organizational, financial, personnel, and information resources.

It's worth noting that the sense of optimism for an escalating crisis and the potential downfall of the ruling regime was further fueled by the unfolding revolutionary events in neighboring countries like Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan.[411] These events not only inspired the political opposition but also mobilised the regime to take actions aimed at eliminating groups that played pivotal roles in the revolutionary movements in those neighboring states. This included crackdowns on the civil society sector, restrictions on critical media, and efforts to suppress the

[410] Zhovtis, interview.
[411] Abel Polese and Donnacha Ó. Beacháin, "The Color Revolution Virus and Authoritarian Antidotes: Political Protest and Regime Counterattacks in Post-Communist Spaces," *Demokratizatsiya* 19, no. 2 (2011): 111.

political opposition itself, all designed to safeguard the regime's grip on power and prevent similar uprisings.

To capture the fundamental nature of opposition in Kazakhstan in 1998–2011 as well as understand how the regime handled the opposition, during the second important stage of its transformation, I employ the typology of *Individual Opposition* suggested by Andrey Chebotarev, as a conceptual framework for conducting a comprehensive analysis of opposition at that time.

The chapter starts with an exploration of the significance of individual political opposition in Kazakhstan and discusses several cases of certain opposition leaders who were perceived as a threat to the ruling regime, consequently making them prime targets for ’he regime's oppressive tactics. Notable figures discussed include Akejan Kajegeldin, former prime minister of Kazakhstan (1994–1997), leader of the political party, the unregistered Republican People's Party of Kazakhstan (RNPK); Mukhtar Ablyazov, a Kazakh businessman and political activist, former minister of energy and trade of Kazakhstan (1998–1999), a co-founder and a leader of the also unregistered political party Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK) and Galymzhan Zhakiyanov, former Akim of Semipalatinsk Region and Pavlodar Region and leader of the DVK.

Thus, this chapter aims to answer the question of how the Kazakh authoritarian regime dealt with the so-called *Individual Opposition*, which emerged because of the previous strategies employed by the regime to eliminate the institutional form of opposition, notably parliamentary opposition, and how this has effected the evolution of the next stage of the *Civic Opposition*.

Akezhan Kazhegeldin – The Republican People's Party of Kazakhstan (RNPK)

One of the first individual opposition leaders to raise their voice against the Nazarbayev regime and emerge as one of the most notable and promising candidates for the presidential race was the former Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Akezhan Kazhegeldin, who served from 1994 to 1997 and resigned, ostensibly due to health-related reasons.[412]

[412] Liz Fuller, Central Asia/Russia, “Kazakhstan's Kazhegeldin conspicuous by his absence”, (1999) https://web.archive.org/web/20000925133338/http://www.atimes.com/c-asia/AI18Ag02.html

While Kazhegeldin did not publicly proclaim himself as an opponent of the government until September 1998, his actions indicated that he was making steady progress in that direction. In addition, his extensive background in key government positions, notable international recognition, and sufficient financial resources for the election campaign served in his favor. Following his departure from the office, Kazhegeldin was elected as the President of "the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs of Kazakhstan."[413] The former Prime Minister also established the Rodina Public Foundation,[414] focusing on humanitarian and philanthropic initiatives and notably bolstering the former Prime Minister's popularity rating among the population. Kazhegeldin also owned number of small TV stations and a political newspaper, *DAT*, led by journalist Yermurat Bapi.[415]

The newly retired prime minister was also actively supported by other former members of the government. Yevgeny Zhovtis, human rights activist and director of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law notes that

> *the transition of the elite to the opposition was also due to the personal interests of former civil servants. By the end of the 90s, a clan-based oligarchic economy had formed in Kazakhstan, when officials took over almost all big business. However, only Nazarbayev could guarantee the safety of their assets – all power was concentrated around him. Therefore, when ministers and deputies lost their posts, they opposed the president in an attempt to save what they had accumulated*.[416]

Kazhegeldin's political stance became particularly evident through his frequent media statements, openly criticizing the government and advocating for radical reforms in the political system of the republic. His address pushing for the enactment of democratic principles in the country immediately won him widespread public support. One of these steps was the publication of his book *Kazakhstan: The Right to Choose*, criticizing the political system in Kazakhstan, in which Kazhegeldin stated that *"there are no direct parliamentary social controls on executive power. The government's clumsy meddling in the economy causes corruption to flourish, and the legal system is extremely weak."*[417] The former prime minister also drew attention to the

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[413] Didar Kassymova, Zhanat B. Kundakbaeva, and Ustina Markus, *Historical Dictionary of Kazakhstan* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2012), 154

[414] Kassymova, Kundakbaeva, and Markus, *Historical Dictionary of Kazakhstan*, 154.

[415] "Khazakstan; Freedom of the Medial and Political Freedoms in the Prelude to the 1999 Elections," Human Rights Watch, October 1999, https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/1999/kazakhstan/.

[416] Zhovtis, interview.

[417] A. Kazhegeldin, *Kazakhstan: pravo vybora* (Karzhy Karzhat, 1998).

correlation between democratic governance and the fundamental principles of a free market economy. According to him, these two systems shared the common aspect of the right to choose. He claimed that,

> *The meaning of democracy is not only that politicians get power by instilling fear. How a market economy is impossible without Free competition of goods and services is a true democracy? This is impossible without the free competition of politicians. The availability of such competition protects citizens from the arbitrariness of the authorities, forces politicians who are fighting for votes to focus on their.*[418]

Later, 50,000 Russian-language copies of his book were taken and burned, and the Kazakh-language publication was discontinued entirely.[419]

Despite numerous criticisms of the government, it is noteworthy that Kazhegeldin was not yet labeled as an opposition figure, as he and his team belonged to a counter-elite group that still maintained a certain level of loyalty to the authorities. However, the subsequent actions taken by the authorities, including exerting pressure on Kazhegeldin and his associates while, also marginalising him from the political and power structure, had a substantial influence on his decision to adopt a firm stance against the official course of the country.

Kazhegeldin's initial move towards assuming an opposition role came through his resignation from the presidency of the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs of Kazakhstan. The ex-prime minister explained this step by the *"acute and inadequate reaction of the authorities"* in relation to his political and journalistic activities, as well as his unwillingness to harm the Union in any way with his political actions.[420] In parallel, Kazhegeldin took established the Republican People's Party of Kazakhstan (RNPK) in 1998 as an opposition party, with the main goal to build a "democratic state with a socially oriented market economy."[421] Thus, officially moving from being loyal to the regime to the first real contender to Nazarbayev. Confronted with escalating pressures, numerous former opposition members united under Kazhegeldin's newly founded party, which now possessed enough financial and media resources for political struggle. Petr Svoik, a former opposition activist recalls: "Kazhegeldin's party represented a direct

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[418] Kazhegeldin, *Kazakhstan.*
[419] *World Report 2002* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002), 325 and "Khazakstan; Freedom of the Medial and Political Freedoms."
[420] Speech by Akezhan Kazhegeldin, Neweurasia, October 14, 1998. (Accessed 22.05.2023) http://neweurasia.info/archive/archives/october/Eksp0082.htm.
[421] Nursultan Nazarbayev, *Era of Independence* (Astana, 2017), 130. https://nazarbayev.kz/sites/default/files/pagefiles/2019-06/423d7253d66cad2c6f68758bcaf33782.pdf

challenge to Nazarbayev and also involved the resurgence of the other opposition minded parties at that time. Such as Communist Party of Kazakhstan (CPK) under the leadership of Serikzhan Abdildin's and Azamat party, investing all their available resources into replace Nazarbayev and his system."[422]

Another vivid evidence of the preparation of opposition forces for the upcoming presidential elections in 1999 was the creation of unregistered public movement "For Fair Elections" on September 5, 1998.[423] The primary objective of this movement was to propose amendments to the existing election legislation, educate voters and members of public associations on lawful campaign methods, offer necessary consultations to candidates, conduct public opinion polls, and exercise public oversight over the voting process. While the organization claimed to be non-partisan, given certain objective circumstances, the group's oppositional stance was obvious. In addition, the leadership of the movement was represented by such well-known figures of the opposition as Dos Kushim, Jasaral Quanyşälin, Mels Eleusizov, Irina Satovstina, and others. Some of the experts believed that "For Fair Elections" directly or indirectly maintained close linkage with Kazhegeldin and his team.[424]

Eventually, on October 14, 1998, Kazhegeldin announced his candidacy for participation in the presidential elections of the Republic of Kazakhstan. As follows from his appeal to potential supporters:

> *I am going to the polls because I cannot put up with the impoverishment of the people, growing unemployment and the danger of an impending catastrophe. Citizens of Kazakhstan should not wait for a prosperous and happy life for thirty years, they can earn it tomorrow. I am going to the elections so that from now on and always the fate of the country is decided not by one person, but by the whole multinational Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan, where representatives of all peoples will have equal rights and opportunities. Kazakhstan, from which no one else will want to leave forever. I am going to these elections because I see a threat to the national unity of Kazakhstan and a threat to the unity of the Kazakhs themselves. ... After my victory, these shameful phenomena will become a thing of the past.*[425]

[422] Petr Svoik (former politician), in interview with author, 2018
[423] Andrey Chebotarev, Political thought of Sovereign Kazakhstan, Origins, Evolution, Modernity, 184
[424] Andrey Chebotarev (Kazakh Political Scientist), in interview with the author, February, 2018.
[425] Murat Auezov vs Nursultan Nazarbayev? Murat Auezov's political statement "On the need to elect a new President of Kazakhstan and declare himself a contender for this post" // Greenwich Mean Time. – 1997. – November 7.

During the press conference, he also shared the details surrounding the assassination attempt he faced on October 13, 1998.[426] He highlighted that certain elements within the government institutions are opposed to his participation in the forthcoming elections and are employing intimidation tactics against him.

As the upcoming presidential elections drew near, President Nazarbayev became increasingly fearful about the potential challenges to his authority. In response, he took proactive measures to undermine and suppress all existing rivals among the domestic political opposition. The intensity of the pre-election competition was heightened by the imposition of administrative penalties on certain participants of the gathering of the Council of the "For Fair Elections" movement on October 3, 1998.[427] These penalties were imposed based on their involvement in the activities of an unregistered organization, as defined by the official authorities. Among them was Kazhegeldin. This granted the Central Election Commission the authority to disqualify him as a candidate from participating in the presidential elections, in accordance with the provisions outlined in the existing election legislation.[428] Kazhegeldin's efforts to challenge the decision made by the Medeu District Court of Almaty in higher courts were ultimately unsuccessful.[429] In light of the persecution, Kazhegeldin was prevented from running in the 1999 presidential elections due to a politically motivated misdemeanor offense and was eventually forced into exile.[430]

On September 6, 2001, he was found guilty in absentia and sentenced to ten years in prison. Other RNPK founding members, including Sergei Duvanov, Amirzhan Qosanov, and Nurbulat Masanov, have faced political convictions on similar grounds.[431]

Consequently, during the snap presidential elections of January 10, 1999, out of the three opposition candidates—Serikbolsyn Abdildin, Akezhan Kazhegeldin, and Karishal Asanov—only Abdildin managed to register and came forward as a single candidate from the opposition parties. According to the election results, 12% of voters voted for Abdildin and 80% for

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426 "Assassination attempt on Akezhan Kazhegeldin: Political terror in the Kazakh version," Kommnersant.ru, October 15, 1998, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/206963.
427 Viacheslav Schekunskikh, "U nas dva poliusa: rezhim Nazarbaeva i oppozitsionnie sily" ("We have two poles: The Nazarbaev regime and opposition forces"), *Kazakhstanskie novosti* (*Kazakhstan News*), February 4, 2002, http://kazhegeldin.addr.com/2002/About_04_02_02.htm.
428 "Khazakstan; Freedom of the Medial and Political Freedoms."
429 "Khazakstan; Freedom of the Medial and Political Freedoms."
430 Human Rights Watch, Political Freedoms in Kazakhatn 1999 Report
ttps://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/kazakhstan0404/3.htm
431 Human Rights Watch Report, Political Freedoms in Kazakhstan (2004)
https://www.hrw.org/report/2004/04/05/political-freedoms-kazakhstan

Nazarbayev. As a result, Nursultan Nazarbayev, received an overwhelming majority of votes (79.78%) in the presidential race.[432] It is noteworthy that the OSCE refused to send its observers after Kazhegeldin was not allowed to participate. According to the organization, the voting once again did not meet international standards.[433]

On October 10, 1999, parliamentary elections were also held, though the mixed electoral system, with a 7% threshold. For the first time in Kazakhstan and Central Asia, holding elections by party lists significantly increased the status of political parties in terms of both electoral rights and the general political scene in the country.[434] In total ten parties took part in the elections: The National Congress of Kazakhstan Party, Kazakhstan Revival Party, Republican Political Labour Party, Otan Republican Party, Communist Party, Azamat Democratic Party, Civil Party of Kazakhstan, Republican People's Party of Kazakhstan, Agrarian Party of Kazakhstan, and the Alash National Party. As a result, only four parties managed to overcome the 7% threshold; the newly established pro-governmental party Nur-Otan managed to secure 30,89% (4 seats), the Communist Party of Kazakhstan 17,75% (2 seats), the Agrarian Party 12,63% (2 seats), and the Civil Party 11,23% (2 seats).[435]

For the first time, the electoral process was monitored by a large number of local and international observers, and public discussions, a television marathon, and televised debates of candidates took place throughout the political campaign.[436] As a result of the voting, the OSCE published a report in which it announced five violations of international standards during the voting:

However, the improved legislative and regulatory framework was severely undermined by: (1) illegal interference by executive authorities; (2) unfair campaign practices by parties most closely associated with existing power structures; (3) threats of bureaucratic, administrative, and judicial measures jeopardizing media operations; (4) bias by lower level election commissions for candidates and parties favored by regional and local officials; and (5) intimidation and

[432] "Kazakhstan, Presidential Election, 10 January 1999: Final Report," OSCE, February 5, 1999, https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/14771.
[433] Kazakhstan, Presidential Election, 10 January 1999: Final Report https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/14771
[434] Bowyer, *Parliament and Political Parties in Kazakhstan*.
[435] Rico Isaacs and Sarah Whitmore, "The Limited Agency and Life-cycles of Personalized Dominant Parties in the Post-Soviet Space: The Cases of United Russia and Nur Otan," *Democratization* 21, no. 4 (2014): 699–721.
[436] "OSCE Election Observation Mission to Kazakhtan," OSCE/ODHIR, October 10, 1999, https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/election-observation/election-observation-statements/kazakhstan/statements-13/1424-1999-parliamentary-1/file.

obstruction of the electoral campaign of opposition parties and candidates.[437]

The opposition, also demanded that the election results be declared invalid and that CEC employees be held accountable for the violations committed.

In addition to the strengthening of presidential power, the independent press was practically destroyed in the late 1990s. Yevgenti Zovtis recalls,

> *The authorities have effectively monopolized the Radio and TV channels by revoking frequencies and licenses from independent media outlets. This pattern of closure extended to newspapers as well. A particularly notable instance is the pressure exerted on the DAT newspaper, which was owned by Kazhegeldin and led by Yermurat Bapi. The newspaper's editorial team faced repeated court cases to such an extent that they lost count over time. In November 1998, the newspaper was slapped with a hefty fine of 500 million tenge, ultimately leading to its shutdown.*[438]

The Uprising of the Business Elite: Muhtar Ablyazov and Galymzhan Zhakianov

The origins of Kazakhstan's business elite can be traced back to the early 1990s, when influential individuals within this group capitalised on the opportunities created by the privatisation of state properties. This emerging business elite established close relations with the government from the start, due to the size and power of the enterprises they owned and controlled. Notably, some of the most prominent business elites themselves held influential positions within the government. Among those so-called “New Kazakhs” were Mukhtar Ablyazov, energy minister (1998–1999) and head of the Astana-Holding investment group; Zeinulla Khakimzhanov, the minister of state revenues, who was also well connected to the Kazkommertsbank financial group; and Nurlan Kapparov, the former president of the Kazakhoil state oil monopoly and a leader of the Accept financial group. In addition to the competition between the business elite, they often came into conflict with the government elite. Nazarbayev often used this opportunity to play one group off another and thereby balance rival claims to protect his own political authority.

Meanwhile, Galymzhan Zhakianov wielded considerable political power. He rose to prominence in 1994, when President Nazarbaev appointed him governor of the northern Semipalatinsk region, and again in 1997, when he was appointed governor of the Pavlodar

[437] “OSCE Election Observation Mission to Kazakhtan.”
[438] Zhovtis, interview.

province. Zhakianov began lobbying for political reforms, including direct elections for province governors, in the fall of 2001. Zhakianov's independent political debut occurred on September 21, 2001, when he published an article titled "Time to Make a Choice" in the republican newspaper *Panorama*.[439] At that time, he still held the position of Akim of the Pavlodar region. The article emphasized the achievements of Kazakhstan as a sovereign state and the need for democratic political reforms, which was believed to have triggered a significant shift in the central government's perception of him.

While, Mukhtar Ablyazov, a successful businessman, was initially considered as President Nazarbayev's protege. In July 1997, Ablyazov was appointed by President Nazarbayev as the chairman of the Supervisory Board of the public company Kazakhstan Electricity Grid Operating Company (KEGOC), which held a monopoly in the electricity supply sector. In 1998 and 1999, Ablyazov served as the Minister of Energy, Industry, and Trade of the Republic of Kazakhstan. He developed a reform program that advocated for the implementation of market-based approaches in the economy. Additionally, he held the position of Chairman of the Board of Directors of BTA Bank from 2005 to 2009.[440]

While Nazarbayev's government slowly tightened its grip on the nation's economic affairs, particularly the substantial oil and gas revenues, Kazakhstan's emerging business class became threatened by their diminishing capacity to protect their own interests. The government's strategy to merge key industries into extensive corporations managed by the state was a move that would ultimately bolster the power and influence of Nazarbayev's family and inner circle, while marginalising other influential business interests.[441]

During that period, the influence and control of Nazarbayev's family and close associates over critical economic sectors and government services grew steadily. For instance, Rahat Aliev, Nazarbayev's son-in-law, held key positions such as the First Deputy Chairman of the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan and headed special services, tax police, and customs. Additionally, the president's daughter, Dariga, in partnership with her husband, exerted control over various print and broadcast media outlets. Another son-in-law, Timur Kulibayev,

[439] "Political Freedoms in Kazakhstan," Human Rights Watch, April 5, 2004, https://www.hrw.org/report/2004/04/05/political-freedoms-kazakhstan.
[440] "Political Freedoms in Kazakhstan, Political Prisoners," Human Rights Watch, 2004, https://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/kazakhstan0404/6.htm.
[441] Duvanov, interview.

held significant influence in the oil, gas, and banking industries.[442]

Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK)

The emergence of the socio-political movement Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK) in November 2001 marked a new stage in the growth of opposition groups in Kazakhstan and was one of the most significant political challenges to the government of Nazarbayev. It was arguably the result of a conflict between conflicting elite interests and growing dissatisfaction with the government's tardy reform efforts, exposing visible conflicts and deep divisions among the political and business elites. More specifically, Abliyazov claimed that Timur Kulibayev, President Nazarbayev's son-in-law, made efforts to impede Mukhtar Ablyazov from acquiring BTA Bank, which Ablyazov established in 1998. Furthermore, Rakhat Aliyev, another son-in-law of Nazarbayev, allegedly demanded the transfer of a portion of Bank TuranAlem's shares to members of Nazarbayev's family.[443] The catalyst for the formation of an opposition alliance among these rival business clans occurred in the autumn of 2001 when Rahat Aliev attempted to seize some of Ablyazov's assets.

During the initial phase, the DVK emerged as the central hub for opposition factions within the republic, garnering significant attention and support. Notably, government officials occupying influential positions within the power and governance systems openly declared their affiliation with this movement, in particular, Mukhtar Ablyazov, who at that time served as the Chairman of the Board at JSC "Bank TuranAlem;" businessman Galymkhan Zhakianov, the governor of the northern Pavlodar region; Erlan Tatishev, Chairman of the Board at JSC "Kazkommertsbank;" Nurzhan Subkhanberdin, Bulat Abilov, and Tolen Tokhtasynov, who were Members of the Mazhilis (lower house) of the Parliament; Deputy Prime Minister Oraz Zhandosov; Minister of Labor and Social Protection of the Population, Alikhan Baymenov; Akim of Pavlodar region, Galymzhan Zhakiyanov; Zauresh Battalova, a Senator; Asanali Ashimov, an artist; and Igor Melzer, the Chief Editor of the newspaper *Vremya*.

The DVK announced its commitment to the rule of law and democratisation, calling for political decentralisation, a robust legislature, and an independent judiciary to balance presidential power. The DVK's motivation for establishing a competitive political system reflected its goal of ensuring that fair, transparent, and impartial laws applied to everyone, including the

[442] Aldar Kusainov, "Kazakhstan's Critical Choice," *Eurasianet*, January 13, 2003.
[443] Irina Mednikova (Kazakh Journalist), in interview with the author, 2018

president's family and associates—regardless of status in the patrimonial hierarchy.[444]

In their statements, the movement emphasized that despite Kazakhstan's claim to be a democratic nation, the country continued to exhibit a centralised power structure. The lack of progress in democratic processes could pose a significant threat to the development of statehood and the economic progress of the republic. The recently established movement also called for the decentralisation of state authority, emphasizing the need to empower the parliament, introduce direct elections for regional political leaders, establish elected akims ("mayors"), ensure the presence of an impartial and fair judiciary, and foster greater freedom of the media. To achieve this, it was necessary to ensure the presence of a strong parliament capable of enacting laws in the interest of the entire society, an independent judiciary accountable to the society and the law, and a transparent electoral system.

By advocating for these reforms, the DVK movement inherently positioned itself as an opposition force to the country's leadership, directly challenging the existing power structure. Thus, the conflict was no longer about occupying key positions within the government apparatus, business sphere, or mass media, but rather about establishing new rules of the game in the political arena of the country. By 2003, it is estimated that the organization had approximately 32,000 individuals affiliated with it.[445]

The counteractions of the regime against disloyalty of business elite, were relatively similar to the strategies and tactics employed against Kazhegeldin, such as personal and organizational sanctions, along with institutional adaptation tactics The government's reaction to the DVK's formation was to promptly remove all high-ranking officials who were involved in the party's formation from their positions and to prosecute others. Accordingly, Zhakianov was dismissed from his post as governor of Pavlodar. Similarly, other key members and leaders of the DVK, who held senior government positions such as Deputy prime minister Oraz Zhandosov, deputy minister of Defense, Minister of Labor and Social Protection of the Population Alikhan Baymenov, and deputy finance minister, were also dismissed from their respective roles. Bulat Abilov, also lost his deputy mandate, Deputy Defense Minister Zhannat Yertlesova.

The government also sought to limit the local critical media outlets. Television stations that had reported DVK events, including Almaty's "Tan"43 and Pavlodar's "Irbis," as well as Abliyazov's

[444] Nurseyit Niyazbekov (Political Scientist, KIMEP), in an interview with the author, 2018.
[445] Andrey Chebotarev, Political thought of Sovereign Kazakhstan, Origins, Evolution, Modernity, 184

TV Channel K-Plus TV, were immediately shut down. The government put pressure on publishing businesses, and as a result, they refused to print DVK products.[446]

Subsequently, Mukhtar Ablyazov and Galymzhan Zhakiyanov faced legal repercussions. This ultimately led to their conviction, with Ablyazov being sentenced to six years in prison. He was found guilty under articles 307 and 310 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which provide for punishment for illegal entrepreneurship and abuse of an official position. Although later pardoned.[447] Zhakiyanov received a seven-year prison term. Charged with abuse of office and causing damage to the state during the privatisation of two enterprises, JSC "Peschansky Remzavod" and JSC "Tort-Kuduk," as well as the exchange of state warehouses of mobilisation reserves for private warehouses of the company "Romat."[448]

Another important element in the regime's attempt to eliminate the opposition was the introduction of a restrictive new law on political parties in July 2002. The law became a powerful tool to impede the attempts of oligarchic elites and small-scale parties to re-register and re-establish institutional opposition in Kazakhstan.[449] The law significantly increased the minimum number of member signatures required for party registration, raising it from 3,000 to 50,000. Proponents of the law in the parliament argued that the higher threshold was necessary to ensure that *"any party that claims it represents the interest and speaks on behalf of the people of Kazakhstan should have a legitimate basis for that."*[450] In addition, according to the adopted amendments of this law, "all then-operating political parties had to pass a re-registration, the law also established an article regulating the dissolution of parties by court decision if parties do not register their participation in elections twice."[451]

Since none of these groups had such broad organizations in place, the DVK and other, smaller opposition parties and movements faced the difficult choice of uniting or moving underground. As a result, these developments led to the stagnation of political opposition, failure to generate public engagement as well as work under a unified banner and ultimately a significant decrease in the number of opposition political parties. Consequently, the following political parties

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[446] Kakakhstan: Human Rights Update; Human Rights Watch Submission to the EBRD
August 26, 2004
https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/eca/kazakhstan/2004/kazakhstan_hrupdate.pdf
[447] Ibid:
[448] Petr Svoik, "Why is Galymzhan imprisoned?" За что сидит Галымжан? March 30, 2005, www.zona.kz.
[449] "Republic of Kazakhstan, Law on Political Parties," OSCE, 2002.
[450] "President signs law 'On political parties'," *Kazakhstan News Bulletin Released weekly by the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan* 3, no. 24 (July 17, 2002), http://www.kazakhembus.com/071702.html.
[451] S. Cummings, *Kazakhstan: Power and Elite* (London: IB Tauris, 2005).

ceased their activities: Party of Patriots of Kazakhstan; People's Congress of Kazakhstan; Socialist Party of Kazakhstan; Republican People's Party of Kazakhstan (RNPK); Azamat Democratic Party; and "Kazak Eli" boycotted re-registration in protest of the restrictions in the new law and were liquidated in connection with this court decision; the Party of the Renaissance of Kazakhstan, NPK Alash, the Russian Party of Kazakhstan, and the Democratic Party of Women of Kazakhstan, were refused state re-registration; Justice Party of RK, People's Cooperative Party of Kazakhstan; and Republican Political Labor Party), merged with Political Party "Otan".[452] As a result, 7 out of 19 parties ceased to exist.[453]

Meanwhile, the pro-government parties expanded significantly: the party "Rukhaniyat" (created in April 2003 on the basis of the former Party of Renaissance/Revival of Kazakhstan, led by Altynshash Zhaganova); Republican Party "Asar" (established in October 2003) by the president's daughter Dariga Nazarbayeva; the Democratic Party of Kazakhstan (KDP) (established in April 2004); the Communist People's Party of Kazakhstan (KNPC) (established in April 2004 as a result of the split in the Communist Party of Kazakhstan); Party of Patriots, established in 2000; and others.[454]

The opposition's position was further weakened by the impending parliamentary elections in 2004. The elections were held in a mixed format, with 67 representatives chosen in single-mandate constituencies and ten seats awarded proportionally among parties. Nur Otan gained 67.5% of the available seats in this election, while the Agrarian and Industrial Union of Workers Bloc received 18.2%, the Asar Party received 5.2%, the AK Zhol Party received 2.6%, the Democratic Party received 1.3%, and self-nominated candidates received 5.2%. Notably, Alikhan Baimenov, the single AK Zhol opposition candidate elected to parliament, refused to take his seat in protest at the election procedure. As a result of this decision, the Majilis has no formal opposition representation.[455]

For the upcoming presidential elections in 2005, the leading opposition forces, "AK Zhol – Bright Path," the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, and assets from the former RNPK and DVK formed the opposition Bloc of Democratic Forces—"For a Just Kazakhstan"—to present a unified political platform and nominate a viable single candidate for the presidential race. "For

[452] Chebotarev, Political thought of Sovereign Kazakhstan.
[453] Chebotarev, Political thought of Sovereign Kazakhstan.
[454] Chebotarev, Political thought of Sovereign Kazakhstan.
[455] Donnacha Ó. Beacháin, "Parliamentary Elections in Kazakhstan, September and October 2004," *Electoral Studies* 4, no. 24 (2005): 762–769.

a Just Kazakhstan" pushed for the democratisation of the political system, the election of regional governors, the investigation of corruption allegations involving President Nazarbayev's family, and the equitable division of national resources.[456]

The group nominated Zharmakhan Tuyakbai, a former chairman of the Majilis of the second convocation of Parliament, as their presidential candidate. Tuyakbai, who resigned from the Nur Otan party in 2004, publicly criticized local election officials for cheating the election results and stated that he could no longer represent a party that had won because of fraud. He did, however, suffer a major setback as Nazarbayev won with 91% of the vote. It would later merge to form the All-National Social Democratic Party (NSDP) and run for office in the 2007 elections.

The next stage of opposition development is primarily linked to the constitutional reform held in May 2007, which introduced substantial modifications to the nation's electoral and party political framework.[457] Among them, the transition to the formation of the Majilis of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan is especially prominent, especially through a proportional representation system and an expansion of the deputy body in this chamber from 77 to 107 individuals.[458] The constitutional changes increased the chances for the most leading parties to be elected to parliament, by reducing the threshold from 7% to 5%.[459]

On June 19, 2007, the Election Law was amended mainly to reflect major modifications to the Constitution and to design a new election system. The President dissolved the lower house of Parliament on June 20 and ordered early Majilis elections on August 18, which surprised certain parties as they had little time to prepare. Since the deadline for submitting candidate lists fell less than one month after the election was called, parties were given a short time to make decisions on merging party structures and adapting campaign strategies to the new electoral system, including the fact that parties were not allowed to form pre-election coalitions while maintaining their organizational and legal independence, as they had in previous elections.

This circumstance forced some of the parties to unite. Thus, the temporary consolidation of political parties "Nargiz-AK Zhol" with the OSDP and the "Adilet" with the "AK Zhol" was

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456 Bruce Pannier, "Kazakhstan: Can Opposition Compete in Presidential Elections?" RFE/RL Daily Report, August 22, 2005.
457 Bowyer, *Parliament and Political Parties in Kazakhstan*.
458 Rico Isaacs, "Informal Politics and the Uncertain Context of Transition: Revisiting Early-stage Non-democratic Development in Kazakhstan," *Democratization* 17, no. 1 (2010): 1–25.
459 Rico Isaacs, "The Parliamentary Election in Kazakhstan, August 2007," *Electoral Studies* 2, no. 27 (2008): 381–385.

carried out.[460] Thus, in the Majilis of the 4th convocation of the Parliament (2007–2011), all Nur Otan NDP took all 98 seats designated for the election of deputies on party lists. OSDP-AK-Zhol gained only 4.5% with no seats in the legislature, while Communist Party of Kazakhstan fully boycotted the elections.[461]

Exerting Control over the Disloyal Opposition via Co-optation

As a supplementary method to fully eradicate individual political opponents as well as their associated political parties, Nazarbayev skillfully employed a combination of coercive and co-optative strategies as one of the key methods, to maintain a relatively stable circle of elites and potential opponents.[462] In the face of particularly harsh and repressive measures, such as imposition of personal and organizational sanctions imposed on individual opposition leaders, particularly Kazhegeldin, Abloyazov, Zhalkiyanov, Tuyakbai, and others, and their respective political parties and movements, the remaining opposition-minded parties and individual politicians altered their strategies. This adaptation often took the form of showing willingness to engage with the regime in a more cooperative and constructive manner, to evade personal sanctions and the potential consequences of rest of political opposition.

The government also effectively utilised the act of granting pardons strategically to opposition leaders, including Abliyazov and Zhakianov, as means to co-opt political prisoners into completely abandoning their involvement in politics. Following Abliyazov's release through a presidential pardon, he issued an official statement publicly declaring his departure from politics and subsequently resigned from Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK). Similarly, after their release from prison in 2006, Zhakianov and Duvanov faced significant pressure to withdraw from politics in exchange for a pardon.[463]

The creation of the political party Ak-Jol (Bright Path) in 2002, founded by Bolat Abilov, Oraz Zhandosov and Alikhan Baimenov, serves as another compelling illustration of a co-opted opposition that emerged out of fear of potential political sanctions. Following the harsh repressions against the DVK leaders, the DVK party was divided into three main groups: (1) uncompromising opposition, supporters of the transition and change of the ruling regime, such as Mukhtar Ablyazov, Galymzhan Zhakiyanov, Tolen Tokhtasynov, Zauresh Battalova,

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460 Isaacs, *Political Opposition in Authoritarianism*.
461 Bowyer, *Parliament and Political Parties in Kazakhstan*, 47.
462 Gandhi and Przeworski, "Cooperation, Cooptation, and Rebellion under Dictatorships."
463 Kakakhstan: Human Rights Update; Human Rights Watch Submission to the EBRD (Updated Refernce) August 26, 2004 https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/eca/kazakhstan/2004/kazakhstan_hrupdate.pdf

and others; (2) those who maintained a more moderate stance and formed the AK Zhol party, such as Bulat Abilov, Alikhan Baimenov, Uraz Jandosov, Zhannat Yertlesova, Berik Immashev, motivated by a desire to gain favor with the authorities and potentially return to public service; (3) and finally those who gradually withdrew from social and political activities, channeling their efforts solely into their personal businesses.

Thus, AK Zhol had gone from opposition party to being fully co-opted by the regime. The party's leadership publicly declared that AK Zhol would now function as a constructive political force, open to negotiations with the authorities but no longer aligned with the radical opposition. This change was accompanied by the entry of representatives from the realms of business, finance, and individuals occupying various high-ranking positions. One of these influential figures was Altynbek Sarsenbayuly, Minister of Information and Public Accord (1997–1999), Minister of Culture, Information and Public Accord (1999–2001), and in 2001 he was appointed as the secretary of the Security Council of Kazakhstan. In 2003, he officially resigned as Kazakhstan's ambassador to Russia and joined the AK Zhol party as co-chairman but was later appointed at the Minister of Information in 2004. Thus, for the first time in the history of Kazakhstan, a representative of an opposition party entered the government. The appointment of an AK Zhol party member to the government was interpreted as a sign of the authorities' interest to partner with the party. This shift in perspective was vital as it pointed to a changing dynamic in the regime's relationship with AK Zhol, which evolved from being an integral part of the opposition to a force recognized by the government as having influence and relevance.

AK-Zhol has continued to maintain its status as one loyal opposition parties within the Kazakh political landscape. In 2011, the party underwent a notable transition, with Azat Peruashev assuming party leadership, previously being among the ranks of the ruling Nur Otan. This shift was indicative of AK Zhol's evolution into a pro-government party. Under the leadership of Peruashev, the party achieved a consistent presence in the Majilis, securing parliamentary seats in 2012 (8 seats), 2016 (7 seats), and 2021 (12 seats).

An additional illustration of the loyal and co-opted opposition is the All-Nationwide Social Democratic Party (OSDP) founded in 2007. This new opposition party secured registration, even after the implementation of stricter laws governing political parties in 2002. The OSDP was helmed by Zharmakhan Tuyakbay, a figure whose association with the presidential administration raised skepticism among some quarters within the country.

OSDP has a long history as a political opposition force active on political arena originally created as an irreconcilable opponent of Akorda. In 2005, its party leader even ran as a presidential candidate from the united opposition. But, today it is a party of an openly systemic level of opposition, headed by Ashat Raqymjanov, periodically criticizing authoritarianism in Kazakhstan, but avoiding mentioning the name of the person who personifies it. Official party statements contain rather sharp criticism of what is happening in the country, while the target of this criticism is always blurred. In fact, OSDP does not proclaim against current government in the person of Nazarbayev or Tokayev and, accordingly, does not raise the question of their resignation. The oppositionists express their critical attitude to the policy pursued by Akorda, but they agree to be content with the role that "Akorda" assigns them in the current political games.

A number of respondents noted though that in recent years, the OSDP party has been disappearing and gradually losing its supporters. Many of the party's prominent leaders have left the organization over the years. The last presidential elections in 2011, 2015, and 2019 as well as the parliamentary and local elections to the Majilis and Maslikhats became a test for NSDP. For the first time, by refusing to participate in both elections and even refusing to boycott election results, NSDP openly showed its support and loyalty to the ruling regime: *"The activity of the given party is practically zero, to discuss everything about their strategies or programs, in my opinion, it is quite not serious"* This party can be called "*oppositional purely conditionally. Ideologically, it is quite vague, while in political terms, these are outspoken partners, or rather, puppets of the ruling Nur-Otan party"* as one of the anonymous respondents stated. [464]

Conclusion

In the complex and enduring environment of repression and manipulation by the Kazakh regime over the last three decades, the Kazakh government has been dictating the rules of opposition existence, determining which opposition forces can exist and which cannot. Consequently, the Kazakh opposition has found itself at a junction, trapped between two separate but equally challenging perspectives: either become a part of the ruling regime to survive and grow into a loyal opposition force. By choosing this path, they would ensure their immediate survival and the potential for expansion. The other route would be to maintain their commitment to being

[464] Anonymous respondent, in interview with the author.

genuine contenders for power and challenge the dominant regime. In case of Kazakhstan, this latter choice ultimately would lead to opposition's gradual dissolution or ultimate demise.

The type of opposition that emerged in the second decade of the country's independence, was a result of the Nazarbayev regime's efforts to completely eradicate *Institutional Opposition,* strengthen presidential authority, expand control over economic and natural resources, that eventually triggered the rise of individual opposition leaders dissatisfied with the government.

The so-called *Individual Opposition* appeared as a serious threat to the regime, which employed the menu of manipulations and strategies, a combination of highly repressive measures,[465] such as "personal and organizational sanctions" against the leading opposition leaders—Akezhan Kazhegeldin, Muhtra Abliyazov, and Galimzhan Zhakianov—and their respective political parties, as well as other opposition figures, such as Igor Kozlov, Gennadii Bondorenko, Evgeniy Kravets, Adilzhan Kinzhageleev—all from DVK—as well as Amirzhan Kazanov, Jumabai Dospanov, Adlikhan Ramazoanov, and others from RNPK.

In addition to the imposed repressive measures, the regime focused on 'institutional adaptation' as part of its strategy. This entailed introducing changes to key laws, such as the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Political Parties" and "On Elections" and changes in the constitution, designed to marginalize and weaken the influence of individual and radical opposition elements within the political landscape.

The Nazarbayev regime has meticulously executed a series of strategies to isolate key opposition parties and individual opposition leaders from society. This has been achieved by systematically breaking linkages between opposition parties and their constituents through a range of measures. One of the primary tactics has been the implementation of increasingly strict laws that, in practice, virtually prevent opposition parties from organizing rallies, protests, and public meetings. These restrictions have effectively curtailed opposition parties' ability to engage with citizens, hindering their capacity to understand and address the policy preferences of the population and mobilize public support for their cause. The absence of opportunities to interact with constituents has presented substantial challenges for opposition parties, including difficulties in aggregating voters' interests, formulating representative policy proposals, and

[465] Beacháin and Kevlihan, "Menus of Manipulation."

recruiting new members. This calculated strategy has limited the opposition's ability to function effectively in the political landscape, ultimately consolidating the regime's control and authority.

As a final move to consolidate its position, Nazarbayev created a divided political environment among the opposition. By insulating the fear of repression and intimidation by the regime, the rest of the political parties and the individual leaders (previously perceived as radical) were silenced and transformed into moderate or loyal opposition, serving to maintain short-term regime stability. The combination of instilling fear of being prosecuted or even assassinated (Altynbek Sarsenbayev, founder of Nargiz Ak-Zjol was killed in 2006; Zamanbek Nurkadilov, former mayor of Almaty, was killed in 2005) coupled with the attractive prospect of being co-opted and achieve some level of understanding with the government proved to be highly effective for the Nazarbayev regime and provided incentives for political elites to sustain their loyalty and become more constructive toward the ruling regime. A number of opposition leaders, faced with various forms of personal sanctions, made the decision to stay loyal to the regime or leave politics. The desire of Nazarbayev to invest in the creation of its agents of influence—a system of political opposition in the form of political parties, performing a regime-sustaining function served as a calculated strategy to maintain a semblance of democratic legitimacy while tightly controlling the political landscape and preserving the regime's power.

Thus, the analysis of the development and transformation of Kazakh political opposition over the first two decades of independence reveals the significant shift in the political landscape. The genuine institutional opposition, represented in the parliament, and the more radical forms of opposition and their individual leaders have gradually faded away. In contrast, those elements of the opposition that opted for loyalty or moderation have managed to persist, although in a performative capacity, often taking the form of moderate political parties. With political competition declining and alternative options diminishing, the population has experienced a growing sense of political apathy disengagement. This, in turn, has led to a prevailing sentiment of "political apathy" among the Kazakh population, where individuals have become discouraged by the lack of viable political alternatives and the lack of political engagement.

Over the years the implemented strategies and measures have created a certain impact on political opposition in Kazakhstan, by weakening and marginalising opposition forces, so weakened that they no longer pose a credible challenge to the government. Although some of them still exist on paper they do no longer pose a significant challenge or a threat to the regime

and in most cases even support the stability of the regime. One expert noted, *"The opposition in Kazakhstan todays is ineffective, powerless and destroyed and has basically disappeared."* The strategic measures against them, as well as may years of electoral and political failure, have eventually disengaged them form the society and the electorate.

The system that Nazarbayev created, characterised by centralisation and political space cleansing, independent media, along with mild authoritarianism and a balance among elites, ultimately failed to demonstrate its success. While it succeeded in diminishing both institutional opposition and disloyal political and business elites, this approach safeguarded short-term stability at the cost of triggering the emergence of different patterns of opposition. This novel kind of opposition, characterised as grassroots, spontaneous, and based on activism, represented through the civil society groups and protest movements, posing challenges to the regime in terms of predictability and control, setting the stage for a detailed examination in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter 7

Mapping the Landscape of Political Opposition in Kazakhstan

2011–2022

"Civic Political Opposition"

The proceeding chapters delved into the historical context of the development of political opposition in Kazakhstan and highlighted the evolution and decline of the so-called *Institutional Opposition*, primarily consisting of parliamentary opposition political parties and movements, mostly represented in the 1990s. The pervious chapters chronicled the emergence of the dynamic *Individual Opposition* and its leaders who strongly resisted the Nazarbayev Regime, particularly during the early 2000s.

In contrast, this chapter seeks to uncover the contemporary manifestation of political opposition in Kazakhstan, referred to as *Civic Opposition*, primarily represented by grassroots movements and active civil society members, who articulate their grievances through large-scale mass protests and demonstrations. The label *Civic Opposition* (Народная Оппрзицыя)[466] was also introduced by the Kazakh political scientist Andrey Chebotarev, to depict the existing type of

[466] The term "*Civic Opposition*" in Russian.

opposition activism and will be employed for examining the present-day political opposition in Kazakhstan.

Prior to investigating contemporary form of Kazakh *Civic Opposition*, which Holger Albrecht has drawn parallels to "spontaneous political opposition" observed in Arab countries,[467] this chapter starts with an analysis of the remnants of the previously discussed types of *Institutional* and *Individual* opposition. This analysis is crucial for understanding how the coercive, co-optative and manipulative strategies (institutional adaptation) employed by the Nazarbayev regime have influenced these types of opposition, ultimately shaping their present state and characteristics.

The following sub-chapter provides an overview of the key events and cases of political uprisings that occurred between 2011 and 2022. Starting from 2011, a series of events and the increasing tendency towards expressing discontent through mass demonstrations have emerged as the primary mode of dissent to the government's policies. Those protest were mostly motivated by the prevailing socio-political landscape and clan-based politics within the country, further intensified by a growing feeling of social injustice and economic grievances felt by different segments of the Kazakh population.

Thus, this chapter will specifically focus on key political uprisings in recent decade in Kazakhstan. This include notable evens such as the Zhanaozen incidents in 2011, marked by the government's brutal crackdown on labor protests, followed by 2016 land protests, mass demonstrations that unfolded in response to the 2019 presidential election results and last but not least, the unprecedented and tragic events in January 2022, commonly referred to as "Bloody January".[468] Collectively, these incidents provide a valuable perspective on the current political landscape in Kazakhstan and the complex dynamics that define the relationship between the ruling regime and the emerging form of political opposition, represented by the Kazakh civic society.

Shadows of Political Dissent: Tracing the Survivors of the Marginalised Opposition

As mentioned in the previous chapters, the political reality in which Kazakh political opposition has operated for the past three decades has determined the survival strategies for the few

[467] Albrecht, "How Can Opposition Support Authoritarianism?"
[468] P. Baunov, "Making sense of Kazakhstan's 'Bloody January',". bne Intellinews, February 6, 2022, https://www.intellinews.com/central-asia-blog-making-sense-of-kazakhstan-s-bloody-january-part-1-233840/?source=blogs.

remaining opposition parties and individuals. They were left with two choices: either integrate into the ruling regime and grow into a loyal opposition force, or become genuine contenders for power, knowing that this path may eventually lead to complete marginalisation and eventual elimination of the opposition forces.

Upon conducting a thorough analysis of traditional forms of political opposition that have been previously discussed, considering their historical development and contemporary context, it becomes apparent that from the so-called *Institutional Opposition,* only the regime-loyal opposition political parties managed to survive within the Kazakh political landscape.

In addition, after handling the full eradication of the so-called *Individual Opposition,* the Kazakh regime has gone beyond mere repression of dissent and has further invested in the creation of institutionalised opposition, in the form of loyal political parties and movements. This move was dictated by the regime's attempt to better observe and control societal dissent and thus prevent social unrest, while also bolstering the legitimacy of the authoritarian polity. However, as it will be discussed in this chapter, considering the unfolding events over the past decade, it becomes evident that the system created by the leadership of Nazarbayev, which aimed to eliminate political opposition while preserving a balance among the political elites, has ultimately proven to be ineffective and unsustainable.

The contemporary regime-loyal opposition that Nazarbayev created can be identified by its exclusively strictly intra-systemic character, predominantly comprised of parliamentary and non-parliamentary political parties, serving as agents of influence, comfortably integrated into clientelist authoritarian structures. Despite assuming the role of opposition, they refrain from competing for power and implicitly accept the legal framework established by the regime, contributing to the regime's pursuit of political legitimacy. In this scenario, the regime-loyal opposition puts forward proposals for individual reforms or even complete modernisation of the entire political structure of the state. However, these proposals do not imply a transfer of power, but rather aim to reform only the political structure, while staying loyal to the authorities themselves. This type of opposition does not exclude cooperation, compromises, and negotiations with "Ak orda," providing support to the governing elite during critical junctures and indirectly contributing to the regime stability.[469]

[469] Chebotarev, interview.

According to the human rights defender, Sergei Duvanov*:*

> *These political parties believe that it is possible to improve the current political regime and make it more democratic and oriented towards people, without actual change of the government. Consequently, all their efforts are primarily focused on critiquing the established political system, government, and parliament, but never demanding change. The voices of opposition members in the parliament and in the media regularly demanding social justice and accountability create a certain political climate that suits the regime as well as the opposition.*[470]

Traditionally, the systemic parties represented in the parliament, have distinct roles, by supporting or opposing certain topics of relevance. Party members assume leadership positions in respective committees and raise the issues of their relevance. As former opposition activist, Pert Svoik notes

> *The political activity of the given parties and movements is practically zero. It is not serious to engage in discussions on their strategies and programs. These parties can be called oppositional purely conditionally. Ideologically, they are quite vague, while in political terms, these are outspoken partners, or rather, puppets of the ruling party.*[471]

The transition of power and the new era of Tokayev's presidency in 2019 prompted a reevaluation of the role of opposition political parties in Kazakhstan. Ahead of the parliamentary elections in 2021, significant amendments were made to the "Law on Elections" in May 2020. These changes included loosening of the electoral legislation,[472] by "lowering the vote threshold from 7% to 5%, introducing an 'against all' option to election ballots, and implementing direct elections for local akims (mayors) at the district level". In addition, the number of members required to register a party with the Ministry of Justice was reduced from 40,000 to 20,000.[473]

As an additional step towards strengthening, at least in formal sense, the role of political opposition in Kazakhstan, in 2019 the Parliament adopted a law "On Parliament and the Status of its Deputies," formalising and introducing the concepts of "parliamentary majority" and

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[470] Duvanov, interview.
[471] Svoik, interview.
[472] Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated May 25, 2020, No. 335-VI ZRK, https://www.akorda.kz/ru/glavoy-gosudarstva-podpisan-konstitucionnyy-zakon-respubliki-kazahstan-o-vnesenii-izmeneniy-i-dopolneniy-v-konstitucionnyy-zakon-respubliki-kazahstan-o-vyborah-v-respublike-kazahstan-2442710.
[473] Freedom House Report 2021, Kazakhstan.

"parliamentary opposition."[474] According to the law, the parliamentary opposition is referred to political parties that are not part of the legislative majority and are represented in the Mazhilis, the lower chamber of the parliament. Furthermore, the new legislation grants several privileges to the opposition within the Mazhilis. They are now empowered to request at least one parliamentary hearing annually and to establish the government meeting agenda at least twice a year. The reforms also guarantee that opposition faction leaders can address sessions in both houses of parliament or exclusively at the Majilis, as well as participate in standing committees and working groups, allowing for the unrestricted expression of their viewpoints. As the Chairman of the Mazhilis Nurlan Nigmatulin emphasized, the legislative consolidation of the very concept of parliamentary opposition would *"open a fundamentally new page in the history of Kazakhstani parliamentarism."*[475]

The current composition of the 2023 Kazakh Parliament because of the March 2023 snap elections is dominated by the Amanat party ("Commitment"), with a significant majority of 53.9%. This party is essentially a renamed version of Nur-Otan ("Radiant Fatherland"), which underwent rebranding due to the negative connotations associated with its original name, which rhymed with the Nazarbayev's first name, Nursultan. This change was prompted by the January, 2022 protests held under the slogan "Shal, ket" ("Old man, get out").[476] As for the rest of the seats, the division among the loyal opposition parties was as follows: Ak Jol received only 8.4% of the vote (a decrease from 10.95% in 2021) and the People's Party of Kazakhstan (Former Communist Party) secured 6.8% of the vote (a decrease from 9.1% in 2021). Auyl finished in eleventh place with 10.9% of the vote. In contrast, the recently established Respublica, which was originally a political opposition organization, gained 6 seats in total. The National Social Democratic Party (NSDP) came in fifth place, receiving 5.1% of the vote and earning them four seats in the legislature.[477]

Meanwhile, the political platform "Zhana Kazakhstan" (formed in 2018) serves as an example of the regime's loyal, non-parliamentary opposition movement, with its official statements about

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[474] On making additions to the Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "On the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the status of its deputies," Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated June 2, 2020, No. 339-VI ZRK; https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/Z2000000339.

[475] Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan. About amendments and additions to the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "On committees and commissions of the Parliament Republic of Kazakhstan" on issues of parliamentary opposition, https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=32558953

[476] Bruce Pannier, "After Kazakhstan's 'Bloody January,' Can Toqaev Ever Gain the People's Support?" Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 25, 2022.

[477] "Republic of Kazakhtan; Early Parliamentary Elections 19 March 2023," Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, July 14, 2023, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/9/548599.pdf.

their readiness to cooperate with the authorities. The political background of some of the members of the Zhana Kazakhstan, who currently "are commonly considered to be closer to Kazakhstan's government than they try to portray themselves."[478] This group consisted of opposition leaders such as Akedzhan Kazhgeldin, former opposition leader, despite his public stance against the Nazarbayev regime and his time in exile and being perceived as co-opted by the regime; the head of the Foreign Bureau of the Kazakh opposition Serik Medetbekov; civil activists Nurul Rahimbek and Serikzhan Mambetalin; politician Amirzhan Kosanov; political scientists Aidos Sarym and Rasul Zhumaly; public figures Dos Kushim and Bashir Zhanaltay; head of the Liberty Fund Galym Ageleuov; journalists Ermurat Bapi and Miras Nurmukhanbetov; and leader of the youth movement "Bolashak," Dauren Babamurat. [479]

Another group loyal to the Kazakh regime is the non-governmental sector. In contrast to neighboring Kyrgyzstan, non-governmental organizations in Kazakhstan do not assume a prominent role as an alternative opposition force, instead they function as loyal opposition entities**.** These organizations, often referred to as GONGOs (Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations), are associated with the government, as well as funded by the government. Kazakh authorities perceive the civil society sector more as a tool for promoting public policy rather than as an independent player. Under Nazarbayev's leadership, Kazakhstan underwent a significant shift from an active civil society development model, characterised by grassroots initiatives and a bottom-up approach to a model in which NGOs operate under government control. The law on funding of non-governmental organizations adopted in 2015[480] introduced a centralised state operator, controlling the funding and type of activity of the organization, including the international organizations funded from abroad. As a result, most NGOs have shifted their focus primarily toward social and economic projects, deliberately avoiding any involvement in political themes within their activities.

Independent non-governmental organizations, especially those that implement democracy assistance programs, are considered suspicious and radical opposition and are subject to constant oppression and harassment by the regime, from conducting unreasonable financial audits to

[478] Paolo Sorbello, "Kazakhstan's Elderly Opposition Tries Something New," *The Diplomat* 18 (2018).
[479] Ibid
[480] Law Republic of Kazakhstan, The Legislation Concerning Amendments and Additions to Certain Laws of the Republic of Kazakhstan Related to the Operations of Non-Governmental Organizations, https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=38381898&pos=1;17#pos=1;17

imprisoning the leaders of those organizations.[481] For example, in July 2019, activists and journalists were subjected to an attack at a prominent non-governmental organization, the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KIBHR) by suspending their activities for several months.[482]

As for the "principal opposition,"[483] as mentioned in the previous chapters, for over the last three decades, the genuine opposition political parties have been either closed or split due to various internal and structural factors, party leaders being jailed or in exile or pressured by the regime. Since 2015 the room for genuine opposition parties and movements disappeared. As Daniyar Oshonbayev, a political scientist stated back in 2020: "The radical opposition has died in Kazakhstan" As a Kazakhstani political scientist noted, "No new projects have been announced, no real projects, except for some self-advertising actions. Therefore, it seems quite difficult to say that there will be another new opposition, in my opinion."[484]

Among the relatively recent and active political parties and movements that engaged in opposition activism in the last decade are the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK) led by Muhtar Abliyazov; the newly formed political movements "Oyan, Qazaqstan," an Astana-based political movement; and also the Astana-based movement "Respublika," which later in 2023 transformed into a political party; these were quite active during the 2019 and 2022 public protests as well as the smaller opposition movements such as unregistered political parties and movements "Our Right" (Наше право), founded in 2019; "Halika Adal Kizmet" (Халыққа адал қызмет) (2019); "Democratic Party of Kazakhstan" (Демократическая партия Казахстана) (2019); "Keshe Partiayasi" (Көше партиясы) (2020); "Halik Biligi" (Халық билігі) (2020); and the party "Progress" (2020), which also do not play a significant role in the political process within the country.[485]

[481] "Kazakhstan: Human Rights Groups Under Pressure," Human Rights Watch, December 3, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/03/kazakhstan-human-rights-groups-under-pressure.
[482] "Motion for Resolution on human rights situation in Kazakhstan," European Parliament, February 9, 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2021-0147_EN.html.
[483] Albrecht, "How Can Opposition Support Authoritarianism?"
[484] "The Radical Opposition has Died in Kazakhstan – Political Scientists about the Upcoming Elections to the Majilis," *Times KZ*, October 21, 2020, https://timeskz.kz/75850-radikalnaya-oppoziciya-umerla-v-kazahstane-politologi-o-predstoyaschih-vyborah-v-mazhilis.html.
[485] "The Republic of Kazakhtan Parliamentary Elections on January 10, 2021," Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE); ODIHR, 18. https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/7/484514.pdf. (Accessed 02.05.2023)

Evolution of Civic Political Opposition in Kazakhstan

Active citizen participation in politics, in the form of mass demonstrations and collective protest has long been viewed as a key element of any democratisation process. Classical authors of democratisation literature like Diamond[486] and Dahl[487] emphasize the importance of active citizen participation as a vital instrument for democratisation process and "a potent tool of public influence' over government policies."[488] Sidnye Tarrow also conceptualizes public protests as an activity in which "ordinary people, often in league with more influential citizens join forces in confrontations with elites, authorities, and opponents" via "coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests" and make a collective claim."[489]

In the realm of authoritarian regimes, despite their apparent dominance and authority, they continually face the risk of large-scale protests and civil uprisings, especially when opposition and civil society if heavily suppressed. The classical literature on non-competitive regimes has not extensively addressed the dynamics of collective political protests, particularly in the case of Central Asian Republics. Their analysis often portrayed civil society as too weak, repressed, and disorganized to affect any real change to the ruling regime across the region. Most of the discussions regarding this matter revolved around political parties, individual politicians, and the dynamics of parliamentary and presidential elections.[490]

As previously stated, this chapter will specifically focus on the recent outcomes arising from the evolution of political opposition. The focus will be directed toward the emergence and impact of *Civic Opposition*, which is predominantly embodied through grassroots movements and active citizens of Kazakhstan. This form of opposition has gained significant momentum, particularly since 2011, drawing attention to the voices of the general population who seek to take an active role in shaping the country's future.

It is important to note that in Central Asia, regimes challenging collective protests have not been common occurrence. Throughout the post-independence era, these countries have witnessed relatively low levels of political activism and political mobilisation. However, mass protests

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[486] Diamond, "Developing Democracy."
[487] Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).
[488] Russell Dalton, Alix Van Sickle, and Steven Weldon, "The Individual–Institutional Nexus of Protest Behaviour," *British Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 1 (2010): 51–73.
[489] Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and "Transnational Politics: Contention and Institutions in International Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 4 (1998): 1–20.
[490] Graeme B. Robertson, "Managing Society: Protest, Civil Society, and Regime in Putin's Russia," *Slavic Review* 68, no. 3 (2009): 528–547.

have become more frequent in the region over the years, especially in Kyrgyzstan, but also in Kazakhstan since 2019.

Some of the most prominent mass mobilisations in the region include the revolutionary events of 2005 and 2010 as well as the significant public protests of 2020 in Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, the Andijan uprising in Uzbekistan in 2005 took many by surprise. While Kazakhstan experienced relatively smaller-scale protests over the years, some notable instances include early demonstrations in the 1990s, such as the Margyshlak protests in 1989 and Ust Kamenogorsk protests in 1990. The large scale demonstrations in Kazakhstan include those in Bakai (2006), Shanirak (2006), Zhanaozen protests in 2011, land protests in 2016, election protests in 2019, and, most notably, the recent political uprising in January 2022.[491]

As already indicated, Kazakhstan, unlike Kyrgyzstan has always been known for its absence of strong anti-government demonstrations. Throughout almost the entire period of Nazarbayev's rule, the regime did not encounter any significant anti-government and anti-presidential demonstrations, largely due to a certain sense of political apathy among most of the population towards political affairs in the country.

The cohesive measures implemented against freedom of political contestation by the Nazarbayev regime, had its strong influence on the outcome, motivation, and frequency of mass demonstrations in Kazakhstan. Over the years, Kazakh authorities adopted a zero-tolerance policy towards peaceful public protest and have significantly employed repressive measures restricting freedom of speech and assembly. This has been achieved by enacting preventive legislation and employing vague criminal charges often linking any form of public opposition or involvement in civic activism with the accusation of "extremism." These measures have been used to intimidate and legally pursue government critics, resulting in public protests remaining uncommon and limited in scope.

Because of the extensive repressive actions taken by the Kazakh regime, a notable shift in the development of political opposition in Kazakhstan has become evident. The new tendency demonstrates the shift in opposition political forces from the classical institutionalised form of opposing, such as opposition political parties and movements towards the emergence of the co-

[491] Roudabeh Kishi; Edward Lemon; Asena Karacalti; Bradley Jardine; *"Understanding Disorder in central Asia";* A joint Report by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) and the OXUS Society for Central Asian Affairs; 2021
https://oxussociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/understanding-disorder-in-central-asia-2.pdf

called *Civic Opposition*, driven by grassroots mobilisations and public protests that originate within society, independently of the state. The opposition's and civil societies' resistance against the regime policies has been predominantly manifested through various means, such as mass demonstrations, strikes, hunger strikes, sit-ins, blockades, and marches as well as mass mobilisation against the regime through social media platforms.

As for the composition of these grassroots opposition they encompass a wide array of individuals and organizations, each with diverse interests and demands. While some of these groups demonstrate strong organizational capacity, others emerge spontaneously due to deeply engrained feelings of discontent with the Kazakhstan's governance performance. This form of opposition can be characterised as a self-organized opposition force, often lacking institutional or organizational design and expressed through spontaneously conducted actions. It is represented by protest movements, political and human rights activists as well as ordinary citizens, who emerged from within society and independently from the state.

The age of the internet and online social media had an additional impact on mobilising successful collective protest behavior and elite-challenging mobilisations in Kazakhstan. Despite the censorship of the internet outlets, such as amendments to the country's media legislation in 2012,[492] the criminal code in 2014, and the introduction of the "National Security Certificate" allowing greater surveillance online or blocking various websites, internet usage in Kazakhstan has grown significantly over the last ten years.[493]

Despite the above-mentioned repressive measures imposed by the Nazarbayev regime in an attempt to stifle the voice of society, Kazakhstan has witnessed the significant rise in the frequency of protests in Kazakhstan over the past several years. The 2022 risk assessment by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) on the risk of social unrest in various countries, included Kazakhstan in the list of countries with a high risk of social unrest. [494]

According to the database provided by Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), between January 1, 2019 and January 7, 2022, a total of 2,904 protests of diverse nature occurred in Kazakhstan. Notably, in 2021, the number of protests saw an increase in double compared to 2019, and the trend continued into the first week of January 2022, with 92

[492] "Kazakhstan Must not Muzzle Media Outlets," Amnesty International, November 22, 2012.
[493] Freedom on the NET 2016; Kazakhtan, Freedom House, 2016, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTN%202016%20Kazakhstan.pdf
[494] "Kazakhstan: Risk Assessment," The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Report 2022, *The Economist*, https://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1382792521.

recorded incidents during that period.[495] Peaceful rallies constituted most of these protest events. Between 2019 and 2022, 2,591 protests took place in the country, of which 2,249 were peaceful rallies, representing 77.5% of all entries in the database. Protests that include rallies with the intervention of the authorities, suppressed without serious/lethal injuries or the use of lethal weapons against protesters count 306 cases or 10.5% of the total number of protests.[496] Violence against civilians has also increased significantly. Sergei Duvanov, the director of the information-monitoring center at the Kazakhstan Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KBHR), notes that "on average, 88% of all demonstrations in Kazakhstan took place without official authorisation, and the previous year witnessed 100% of such unauthorized protests."[497]

Consequently, despite the seemingly spontaneous nature of *Civic Opposition* the heightened social tension within society is a direct consequence of a growing feeling of social injustice and disappointment among the various layers of the Kazakh population translating into organized protests and demonstrations. One anonymous respondent aptly noted: "In the absence of an organized force—opposition political parties, Kazakhs, take to the streets only in extreme cases, such as delayed wages and eviction of housing, making protests the only viable avenue for the public to express its grievances."[498] Thus, it can be argued that the emergence of *Civic Oppositin.* In most cases having local-regional prevalence, economic downturn, wide economic inequality, low level of social provision and lack of public support of the government has the potential to escalate and take a political stance.[499]

Political Uprisings in Kazakhstan

Zhanaozen Protests 2011

One of the most notable and early indicators of dissent against the regime in the last decade was the protest carried out by the oil workers in the Mangistau region in 2011, serving as a powerful symbol of discontent against the Nazarbayev regime. The labor dispute in the region traces its origin back to 2008, with protests and labor strikes gaining bigger momentum in 2010 at Karazhanbasmunai (a joint venture with CITIC Group and KazMunayGas), located near the

[495] Josh Satre and Ryskeldi Satke, "Demonstrations in Kazakhstan: From Energy Price Hike to Political Crisis," ACLED, January 13, 2022, https://acleddata.com/2022/01/13/demonstrations-in-kazakhstan-from-energy-price-hike-to-political-crisis/.
[496] Bradley Jardine, Sher Khashimov, Edward Lemon, and A. Uran Kyzy. "Mapping Patterns of Dissent in Eurasia: Introducing the Central Asia Protest Tracker," *The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs* (2020).
[497] Duvanov, interview.
[498] Anonymous respondent, interview.
[499]"Rebels without a cause, What the upsurge in protest movements means for global politics" 2013 Report from The Economist Intelligence Unit';

port city of Aktau, where a considerable number of workers voiced their demands for improved working conditions and higher wages.[500]

One of the key factors contributing to the demand for higher wages was driven by adverse climatic conditions, insufficient infrastructure development in the region, along with significant income disparities among the population, based on their employment sectors. Employees in the oil and gas industry received considerably increased salaries, especially foreigners (primarily Chinese workers), thus leading to a subsequent rise in general commodity prices. Instances of anti-Chinese sentiments were also observed among the local population, including reports of preferences towards Chinese professionals in terms of compensation, as well as the prevalence of Chinese ownership in local businesses.[501]

The first wave of the strikes commenced at the Karazhanbasmunai on May 17, 2011, with protesting against low salaries, poor working conditions, and seeking recognition of independent trade unions. Then on May 26, workers from the "Ozenmunaigaz," and "Ersai Caspian Contractor" (a joint Kazakh-Italian venture) in the Zhanaozen region joined the protest movement. Initially, the strike in Zhanaozen involved around 1,500 oil workers,[502] although during the peak period in early June, 12,000–18,000 striking workers were reported by different sources.[503] After the start of the strikes, approximately 2,000 protesting workers were fired from the oil and gas industry. This led to the establishment of the tent city, followed by permanent protests and hunger strikes, demanding reinstatement to the workplace and salary reviews.[504] For a span of seven months, the government of Kazakhstan did not react in any way to the demands of the striking oil workers. However, as the prolonged protests were significantly damaging the reputation of Kazakhstan's stability and the well-being of most of its population, the authorities resorted to repressive and coercive tactics to suppress the unwanted protest

[500] Dossym Satpayev, and Tolganay Umbetaliyeva, "The Protests in Zhanaozen and the Kazakh Oil Sector: Conflicting Interests in a Rentier State," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 6, no. 2 (2015): 122–129.
[501] "The Strike is Larger than Life" (Стачка больше, чем жизнь), Expert.ru, May 5, 2022. https://expert.ru/kazakhstan/2011/28/stachka-bolshechem-zhizn/.
[502] Satpayev and Umbetaliyeva, "The Protests in Zhanaozen and the Kazakh Oil Sector."
[503] "Striking Oil, Striking Workers," [Кто-то преуспевает. Рабочие бастуют], Human Rights Watch, September 10, 2012, https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/09/10/striking-oil-striking-workers/violations-labor-rights-kazakhstans-oil-sector.
[504] Peter Salmon, "Repression Intensifies against Kazakh Oil Workers' Uprising," *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary* Central *and Eastern Europe* 19, no. 1–2 (2011): 507–510.

movements. This involved dispersing strikes and detaining both protest participants and their supporters.[505]

The examples include the legal prosecution and arrest of the lawyer of the trade union of the oil-producing company "Karazhanbasmunai," Natalia Sokolova,[506] who received a six-year sentence; Akzhanat Aminov, an activist in the "Ozenmunaigas" oil workers' strike, was arrested for two months under the article "Inciting social discord;"[507] human rights activist and leader of the labor rights movement Natalya Azhigalieva was arrested in Zhanaozen,[508] In July 2011, Amnesty International recognized Natalya Sokolova and Akzhanat Aminov as "prisoners of conscience."[509]

Initially motivated by economic grievances, the protest took on a political dimension, as the key activists were marginalised and subjected to legal prosecutions, accused of charges such as "inciting hatred on social, national, tribal, racial, or religious grounds" and "engaging in acts of defiance" against the police, among others. The situation intensified after a protester, who worked for Ozenenergoneft, tragically took his own life on October 3rd, as a form of protest.[510] This event added to the escalation, and the protesters further demanded the release of political prisoners.

On December 16, 2011, on Kazakhstan's Independence Day, clashes erupted between the protesting workers and officials, who planned on to clean up the square in preparation for Independence Day celebration. The clashes, resulted in one of the bloodiest events in Kazakhstan's history that led to the death of more than 16 protesters,[511] as per official reports.

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505 "Kazakhstan: Authorities Urged to Protect Rights of Protesting Oil Workers in the South-west of the Country," Amnesty International, July 22, 2011.

506 Azamat Maitanov, "Oil Workers' Strike at the Karazhanbas Oil Field" (На нефтепромысле Каражанбас бастуют нефтяники), May17, 2011 https://rus.azattyq.org/a/natalya_sokolova_oil_workers_lawyer_verdict/24290171.html.

507 "Kazakhstan. The Leader of the Striking Ozenmunaigas Oil Workers was Left Under Arrest," Autonomous Trade Union, http://avtonomia.net/2011/07/06/kazahstan-lidera-bastuyushhih-neftyanik/.

508 "Kazakhstan: Illegal Arrest and Administrative Sanctions against Labor Rights Movement Leader Natalia Azhigaliyeva"
(Казахстан: Незаконный арест и административные санкции в отношении лидера движения за соблюдение трудовых прав Натальи Ажигалиевой), Frontline Defenders, September 13, 2011, https://web.archive.org/web/20111204212710/http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/node/15926.

509 "Trade unionists Natalia Sokolova and Akzhanat Aminov recognized by Amnesty International as prisoners of conscience," (Профсоюзные деятели Наталья Соколова и Акжанат Аминов признаны "Международной амнистией" узниками совести) July 26, 2011, https://web.archive.org/web/20120201183320/http://static.213-239-216-177.clients.your-server.de/material/politic/6848219.html.

510 United Nations,"UN human rights official calls for independent investigation into Kazakh clashes", 12.07. 2012, https://news.un.org/en/story/2012/07/415362 (Accessed 05.04.2023)

511 Daisy Sindelar and Saniya Toiken, "A Year After Deadly Riots, Zhanaozen Is Quiet But Angry", 16.12.2012 (Accessed 01.03.2023)
https://www.rferl.org/a/zhanaozen-a-year-after-the-riots/24798726.html

Although other reports suggest that the deaths toll was much higher, possibly reaching 50 people.[512] In addition, over 60 people were injured and dozens were arrested.[513] During these clashes, no police officer or member of the security forces was harmed.[514]

In the aftermath of the Zhanaozen violence, the government responded by declaring a 20-day state of emergency in the cities of Zhanaozen and Shepte. Special police and intelligence forces maintained their presence in the area in the following months. In addition, social media sites such as Twitter and YouTube as well as access to media were blocked for several days.[515] In total more than 100 websites were blocked or restricted, being accused of extremist nature. Eight newspapers and 23 Internet resources were categorized as extremist organizations, including the "Republika" and "Vzglyad" newspapers and their websites.[516]

Following the violence in Zhanaozen, the government responded by declaring a 20-day state of emergency in the cities of Zhanaozen and Shepte. During this period, special police and intelligence forces maintained a strong presence in the affected areas. Additionally, the government temporarily blocked access to social media platforms like Twitter and YouTube, as well as restricting access to mainstream media outlets for several days.

The government took over some of the responsibility for the deaths, admitting that it handled the strike and riot control poorly. In 2013, Amnesty International sited the lack of responsibility, noting that "The security forces in Kazakhstan continue to go unpunished for violations of human rights."[517] As a consequence, Nazarbayev dismissed the Akims of the Mangistau region, Krymbek Kusherbaev, Bolat Akchulakov, and Timur Kulibayev his son-in-law, head of the state sovereign wealth fund Samruk-Kazyna and responsible for the oil sector.[518]

However, the government's response persisted in employing heavy-handed methods against the rioters, activists, and politicians involved in the protest movements. In June 2012, 34 oil workers were found guilty and convicted on charges related to their involvement in the mass unrest. Throughout the year, dozens of activists, workers, and politicians were accused of "inciting

[512] Satpayev and Umbetaliyeva, "The Protests in Zhanaozen and the Kazakh Oil Sector."
[513] Salmon, "Repression Intensifies."
[514] David Lewis, "Blogging Zhanaozen: Hegemonic Discourse and Authoritarian Resilience in Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Survey* 35, no. 3 (2016): 421–438.
[515] World Report 2012: Kazakhstan Events of 2011
https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2012/country-chapters/kazakhstan
[516] Reporters Without Borders, 2011
[517] Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan: Violence in Zhanaozen Threatens Nazarbayev Legacy," EurasiaNet, 2011, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64745.
[518] Chebotarev, interview.

social discord." Among those arrested were those who tried to protect the rights of workers and opposition activists, who participated in the protests. Among them were opposition leaders Mukhtar Ablyazov, accused of funding the opposition party Alga!; Vladimir Kozlov, leader of the opposition party Alga!, and Serik Sapargali, an activist of the opposition movement Khalyk Maidany, were arrested on charges of "incitement of social hatred."[519] The authorities accused Abliyazov and Kozlov of financing the protest movements to overthrow Nazarbayev's regime. This conviction was used to ban the political party Alga! as well as the political movement Khalyk Maidany based on its "extremist" nature.[520] The leader of the Alga! Party Vladimir Kozloz was found guilty of "inciting social discord" and "creating and leading an organized group with the aim of committing one or more crimes" and sentenced to seven and a half years in prison.[521]

The government also strengthened institutional response on independent trade unions, who as expected sided with the oil workers during the months of the strike as "those who participated in the Zhanaozen protests were either already members of trade unions or created trade unions."[522]

Fearing the political activity of the independent trade unions, authorities intensified pressure, issuing the restrictive law in 2014 limiting the rights of workers and trade unions.[523] (Trade unions that were independent had to re-register and receive a new status.) In 2017, authorities also shut down the independent trade union – the Confederation of the Independent Trade unions of Kazakhstan.[524] Yevgeniy Zhovtis, the Chair of the Board of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule notes, that "independent trade unions, representing the interest of workers was and is considered a threat by the Nazarbayev Regime, as the strong trade unions represent alternative political force and might become a stronger and a bigger power than all opposition political parties in Kazakhstan."[525]

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519 Satpayev and Umbetaliyeva, "The Protests in Zhanaozen and the Kazakh Oil Sector."
520 Salmon, "Repression Intensifies."
521 "Kazakhstan: Opposition Leader Jailed," Human Rights Watch, October 9, 2012.
522 Zhovtis, interview; "Kazakhstan's Zhanaozen Syndrome," The Diplomat, December 9, 2016.
523 Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Trade Unions (Закон Республики Казахстан О профессиональных союзах), Zakon.kz, 2017, https://online.zakon.kz/ document/? doc_id=31571953.
524 Pyotr Trotsenko, "Inconvenient Trade Union Organization," rus.azattyq, January 23, 2017, https://rus.azattyq.org/a/neudobnaya-profsouznaya-organyzacia/28251081.html
525 "The Political Factor Hinders the Development of Trade Unions," ("Развитию профсоюзов мешает политический фактор"). Radio Free Europe Kazakhstan, April 11, 2012.

Following the violent events, primarily utilising media and newspapers, the government had been depicting the protesters as the provocateurs of the deadly incidents, actively promoting the public narrative on "social danger," and portraying the protest participants as dangerous elements to society at large.[526]

The so called "Zhanaozen Syndrome[527] and tightening by the government the law on public gatherings, such as the Article 400 and Article 403, which stipulated penalties for "taking a leading role, participating in the activities of an unregistered or prohibited public or religious group, and providing financial support to such groups,"[528] led to a notable reduction in various forms of organized demonstrations. The statistical data provided by Kazakhstan's International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law following the Zhanaozen events indicated a significant reduction of approximately 33% in the number of public gatherings held throughout the country. Moreover, there has been a notable shift in the thematic focus of these gatherings when compared to previous years. During the period of 2011–2012, politically motivated protests were the dominant form of public gatherings, accounting for 41% of the total. However, since 2012, there has been a significant change, with most of the mass protests (amounting to 64%)[529] centering around social and economic matters. These issues encompassed a wide range of concerns, including the strikes at the Kamkor Locomotive plant in Mangistau Province, Western Kazakhstan in 2013, and protests triggered by currency devaluation in 2014.

The violent escalation of Zhanaozen events presented a compelling case, revealing deficiencies in the government's crisis management strategy and challenging the narrative surrounding Nazarbayev's success. This narrative strongly asserted that the foundation to achieving political stability rested on two key pillars: an authoritarian style of governance and sustained economic prosperity, traditionally viewed as the central drivers of Kazakhstan's progress and stability.

Land Protests 2016

The mass repressions following the Zhanaozen events and the government's plan to seize public protests was relatively short-lived. In 2016, a series of unauthorized protests known as the "Land Protests" took place as a response to the government's plan to introduce amendments to the Land

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526 Matthew Stein, "Unraveling the Violence in Kazakhstan," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 24, no. 3 (2013): 394–412.
527 "Kazakhstan's Zhanaozen Syndrome," *The Diplomat*, December 9, 2016.
528 "According to Article 400, You Can't Go on Strike," Radio Free Europe, January 29, 2014. https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-draft-legislation-strikes-zhanaozen/25246563.html
529 "Report on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly in the Republic of Kazakhstan (October 2012 to September 2013)," Kazakhstan's International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law, November 14, 2014, https://bureau.kz/svoboda_sobranii/doklady/article_6479/.

Code of Kazakhstan, allowing the long-term lease of agricultural land to foreigners and companies with foreign participation. In late March 2016, Erbolat Dosaev, then serving as the Minister of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, announced that starting from July 1, 2016, approximately 1.7 million hectares of agricultural land would be put up for auction. These lands were planned be open for a 25-year lease to both citizens of Kazakhstan and foreign individuals or companies with foreign involvement.[530]

In April 2016, several cities in Kazakhstan, including Atyrau, Aktobe and Semey, Kizilorde, Almaty, Uralsk, Aktobe, Semey, Aktau, Zhanaozen, Kyzylorda, and Pavlodar, witnessed widespread protests opposing the new law. The protests, which lasted for a month, marked the first case of mass public expression of discontent after Zhanaozen and received substantial visibility through social networks. Opponents of the new regulations were concerned that permitting foreign leasing could lead to Kazakhstan losing control over its own land, especially considering factors such as the sharp decline in oil prices.

The protests swiftly shifted their focus from the changes in the Land Code to addressing more profound and long-standing social and economic issues, such as unemployment, inadequate housing, limited access to quality education, and insufficient healthcare and medicine availability.[531] As Andrey Chebotarev, a Kazakh political scientist, noted:

> *Against the background of crisis processes in the economy and social sphere, including those caused by the devaluation of the Tenge, there is a deterioration social well-being of the population. Against this background, dissatisfaction is growing, fueled by various initiatives of the authorities in the field of education, healthcare, to which there is ambiguity. And the land issue, as we see, overflowed a cup of patience*.[532]

Activists protesting the changes against the Land Code announced nationwide rallies and demonstrations on May 21. On the eve of the rallies, more than 20 people were detained. According to estimates provided by human rights non-governmental organization, the International Legal Initiative Foundation, over 1,000 people were arrested in the largest city, Almaty with hundreds more detained in Astana.[533] Among those who were detained prominent opposition activists, Maks Bokaev and Talgat Ayan received a 15-day sentence. However,

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[530] Isaacs, *Political Opposition in Authoritarianism*.
[531] J. Lillis, "Kazakhstan: Land Issue Fueling Social Discontent," Eurasianet. May 24, 2016, https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-landissue-fueling-social-discontent.
[532] Chebotarev, interview.
[533] "Kazakhstan: Crackdown on Peaceful Protest," Human Rights Watch, May 23, 2016.

during their time in custody, a criminal case was initiated against them. Consequently, in November 2016, both activists were convicted and sentenced to 5 years in prison on charges of violating the law on peaceful assemblies, inciting social discord, and spreading knowingly false information. Both activists maintained their innocence and claimed that the prosecution was a punishment for their civic activism. International human rights organizations have repeatedly called upon Kazakhstan to release both activists. Talgat Ayan was released from prison in 2018 and subsequently filed a motion to convert the remaining portion of his sentence into a term of restricted liberty. Meanwhile, Maks Bokaev completed his sentence in Atyrau and was released on February 4, 2021. Olga Klimonova, an Aktobe human rights campaigner who recorded the demonstration, was also summoned to the police station without any legal paperwork. She was, however, released shortly. According to her, it was just an intimidation technique intended to discourage others from joining or speaking up.[534]

The primary outcome of the mass demonstrations was the implementation of a moratorium on amendments to the Land Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which remained in effect until December 31, 2021. In July 2020, Tokayev stated: "The moratorium on certain provisions of the Land Code will end in 2021. In this regard, we need to take a final decision on this issue. We have identified the main problem. The land is not for sale to foreigners. We will not return to this issue."[535] Consequently, in May 2021, President Tokayev signed a law[536] that prohibited foreigners, stateless persons, foreign legal entities, Kazakh legal entities with foreign involvement, international organizations, research centers with international participation, as well as ethnic Kazakh repatriates from acquiring agricultural land for private ownership or temporary land use. The Majilis's statement concludes:

> *The amendments and supplements suggested by the Senate do not contravene the core principles of the bill ratified by the Mazhilis, which entail prohibiting foreign individuals, legal entities with foreign involvement, and agricultural land kandas from acquiring the*

[534] "Kazakhstan Communications: May 1, 2011 To February 28, 2017," Former UN Special Rapatuer, Communications Report, February 28, 20187, http://freeassembly.net/reports/kazakhstan-communications/
[535] A. Turebekova, "Kazakhstan Extends by Five Years' Moratorium on Controversial Land Code Amendments," *The Astana Times*, August 23, 2016, https://astanatimes.com/2016/08/kazakhstan-extends-byfive-years-moratorium-on-controversial-land-code-amendments/.
[536] Berikbol Dukeyev; "Do Kazakhstanis Care about Their Kin in Xinjiang?" Open Democracy Foundation, July 7, 2021, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/do-kazakhstanis-care-about-their-kin-xinjiang/.

right to private land ownership and land use. They do not diminish the bill's overall substance.[537]

The Kazakh government's actions once again demonstrated its lack of preparedness for handling this type of spontaneous protests, as well as its lack of a coherent strategy other than turning to violent tactics to suppress the discontent. These harsh actions, however, eventually forced the regime to concede to some of the population's demands. This pattern demonstrates that the regime's initial response, which seeks to dismiss protests with force, often leads to a strategic withdrawal.

The Wave of Public Protests in 2019

The year 2019 served as a momentous and pivotal period for Kazakhstan as the country experienced a series of large-scale protests and demonstrations, such as the protests by large families in February 2019 and one of the most significant protests in Kazakhstan over the past years focused on the transition of political power from Nazarbayev to his successor Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. These protests were triggered by a diverse array of economic, social, and political concerns, which included demands for political reforms, dissatisfaction with the centralised process of political decision-making, unfair elections, the release of political prisoners, review of unfair trials as well as socio-economic concern among majority of the rural population.[538]

According to the joint report by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs,

> … over 780 protests have occurred in Kazakhstan since 2018, with all but 47 of them coming since Tokayev became president. One-quarter of the protests in the country have focused on political reform and 20% related to demands for more state welfare, which was one reason Nazarbayev stepped down in 2019.[539]

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[537] Aslikhan Mamashulyi, "The Moratorium on 'Land Amendments' is perceived differently,"Radio Azattyq, June 6, 2016,
https://rus.azattyq.org/a/zemelnyi-kodeks-moratorji-kazakhstan/27719644.html.
[538] "Kazakhstan: Tested by Transition," Chatham House Report, November 29, 2019,
https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/11/kazakhstan-tested-transition.
[539] "Understanding Disorder in Central Asia," The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), February 9, 2021, https://acleddata.com/2021/02/09/understanding-disorder-in-central-asia/.

Kazakhstan also faced a high rate of violent responses to protests, especially those initiated or connected to opposition groups or individuals. Alarmingly, approximately 25% of all protests resulted in either arrests or the application of force.[540]

The wave of protest started with a tragic event that unfolded in the capital of Astana in early 2019, involving five girls from a sister family who lost their lives due to unfortunate circumstances. The girls were left alone at home while both of their parents were at work, residing in a makeshift shelter that was unsuitable for long-term living and in a state of disrepair. The news of this devastating event spread across the nation and served as a wake-up call for the citizens, highlighting the urgent need for better support and care for families with many children. Mothers of large families emerged as the most proactive and vocal advocates for change. The cities, such as Aqtobe, Karaganda, Astana, Almaty, and Shymkent, became the center of protest movement, with locals demanding guaranteed public housing for families with many children and increased child benefits. Joanna Lillis, describes how these mothers became the faces of dissent and a driving force behind the widespread civic response to the tragedy.[541]

As a response, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev took an additional step. On February 21, Nazarbayev called for the resignation of the government due to its failure in enhancing the living conditions of families with multiple children.[542] About a week later, Nazarbayev unveiled a comprehensive package of social welfare payments and assistance, amounting to $5.3 billion (2 trillion tenge). This package included the construction of 40,000 apartments primarily designated for families with multiple children. The implementation of these is expected to be completed by 2022.[543]

One of the most significant political events in 2019 took place on March 19 when Nursultan Nazarbayev, declared his departure from the office and appointed Kasym-Jomart Tokayev as his successor, who served as the Speaker of the Senate at the time. In the following presidential elections held in June, Tokayev, representing the ruling party, Nur-Otan, secured 70% of the votes, despite the widespread allegations of electoral misconduct. The OSCE pointed out to the "significant irregularities on the election day, including cases of ballot box stuffing, and a disregard of counting procedures meant that an honest count could not be guaranteed, as

[540] "Understanding Disorder in Central Asia."
[541] Lillis. "Kazakhstan."
[542] Catherine Putz, "Nazarbayev Fired the Kazakh Government," *The Diplomat*, February 22, 2019
[543] Aleksei Aleksandrov, Svetlana Glushkova, and Ganizat Ospanov; "Kazakh Mothers: Proving A Force for Change," CurrentTime, February 21, 2019, https://en.currenttime.tv/a/kazakhstan-mothers-protests/29880082.html.

required by OSCE commitments. There were widespread detentions of peaceful protesters on election day in major cities."[544]

The transfer of leadership served as a catalyst for the new wave of civil and political activity, as thousands of people took to the streets to express their dissatisfaction with the results of the presidential elections. This political discontent was mostly stemmed from the perception of continuity with the Nazarbayev era in terms of the style of presidency, as well as the contentious decision by Tokayev to rename the capital from Astana to Nur-Sultan, in honor of president Nazarbayev.

The key opposition groups and faces of the resistance active during the protests in 2019 were the unregistered political party "Democratic Movement of Kazakhstan" (DVK) led by Muhtar Abloyazov, as one of the leading faces of the so-called *Individual Opposition* for the past decade. As well as the newly form political movements, "Oyan, Qazaqstan," positioned itself as a movement; one of the activists, political scientist Dimash Alzhanov stated "We do not set ourselves the goal of coming to power. We set ourselves the goal of creating democratic institutions, fighting for the civil political rights of every citizen of this country."[545] The idea to initiate a civil movement arose in the aftermath of a significant event known as "You can't run away from the truth." This incident took place during the Alma-Ata marathon on April 21, 2019 when two activists, Asiya Tulesova and Beybarys Tolymbekov, took to the streets, displaying a poster with the message "You can't run away from the truth" as marathon participants passed by. Political movements based in Astana, including "Respublica" and "Koske party" also actively participated in protest activities. As a result o fthe cohesive measures, four members of Koshe party, namely Askhat Zheksebayev, Kayrat Kylyshev, Abai Begimbetov, and Noyan Rakhimzhanov, received five-year prison sentences, while two others were sentenced to two years of "restricted freedom," and the remaining individuals received one year of "restricted freedom."[546]

Following his presidential inauguration, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev wasted no time addressing public protests and demonstrations. The government mobilised the National Guard in the major

[544] "Rebublic of Kazkahtan; early Presindetial Elections," OSCE ODIHR Election Observation Mission; Final Report; June 9, 2019, 2, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/7/434459_0.pdf.
[545] Rayhon Demitrie, "Kazakhstan Chooses President: Youth Does Not Promise Him an Easy Life," BBC, June 7, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-48557969.
[546] Manshuk Asautai, "Civil activist Askhat Zheksebaev Released from Prison in Zarechny"; Radio Azattyk, March 3, 2022, https://rus.azattyq.org/a/31831718.html

urban centers to monitor public spaces. In addition, access to social media platforms, messaging services, and mobile networks were widely blocked. The precise number of individuals detained during the various protests remains uncertain. According to various sources and reports, between the day of the election on June 9 and June 13, around 4,000 people were detained across the country for participating in protests against the election results.[547] As the Minister of Internal Affairs of Kazakhstan Yerlan Turgimbaev stated, "The authorities refrained from deploying specialised equipment against the protesters, opting not to employ tear gas or rubber batons. Instead, they detained nearly 4,000 individuals."[548]

Following the uncontrolled protests and widespread discontent among a substantial portion of the population, the new president responded by opting for the liberalisation reforms and with an aim to transform Kazakhstan into a "Listening State"[549] as an alternative approach to comprehend the nature and magnitude of public grievances within the country. In 2019, the President initiated the formation of the National Council of Public Trust (NCPT), a dialogue and discussion platform for engaging in discussions with leaders of political parties regarding various reforms, by sharing policy solutions and recommendations with the government to resolve the ongoing socio-political issues.[550]

In addition, ahead of the parliamentary elections 2021, the law on elections was amended in May 2020 and electoral legislation was loosened. For the first time since 2004, a mixed system was used, with 69 deputies elected from party lists, and the remaining 29 elected in single-mandate districts. The threshold for the registration of new parties was reduced from 20,000 to 5,000 members. For the first time, independent candidates were permitted to run, resulting in unprecedented competition: over 250 candidates applied for five seats in the two capitals, Astana and Almaty.[551] Furthermore, in 2020, a law on the organization of peaceful assemblies

[547] Laura Mills, "Mass Arrests Cast Doubt on Rights Reform in Kazakhstan; President Should Make Good on Promises to Change Protest Law," Human Rights Watch, September 24, 2019, https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/09/24/mass-arrests-cast-doubt-rights-reform kazakhstan#:~:text=Riot%20police%20regularly%20round%20up,hundreds%20placed%20under%20administrative%20arrest.

[548] "Kazakhstan: 4,000 People Detained at Post-election Rallies," Azattyq.org, June 18, 2019, https://ru.krymr.com/a/news-kazahstan-na-mitingah-posle-vyborov-zaderzhali-okolo-4-tysyach-chelovek/30005422.html.

[549] Orken Zhoyamergen, "Tokaev's 'Listening State; What is Said vs Done," Azattykq.org, https://rus.azattyq.org/a/tokayev-said-vs-done/30999995.html. (Assessed on 29.02.2023)

[550] Nurseit Niyazbekov, "Democracy, the Tokayev Way," *The Diplomat*, March 3, 2020.

[551] Gaziz Abishev, "Has Kazakhstan Become More Democratic Following Recent Elections?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 12, 2023; Mihra Rittmann, "Kazakhstan's 'Reformed' Protest Law Hardly an Improvement Serious Restrictions on Right to Free Assembly Remain," Human Rights Watch, May 28, 2020.

was adopted, which somewhat softened the conditions for holding and media coverage of demonstrations in the country, thus allowing the first sanctioned opposition rallies in nine years.[552] As Tokayev stated:

> *The law on peaceful public gatherings we adopted is an important step for democratisation, no matter what people say about it. Nobody is against peaceful gatherings or demonstrations. There is no need to obtain permission for that. Just informing authorities about that is enough. But some people do not follow even that requirement.*[553]

Despite the official regulations, in practice the law limited demonstrations to only registered political parties and organizations, with authorities persistently refusing to grant permission for protests.[554]

By permitting protests, the authorities demonstrated a willingness to engage in a dialogue, providing an opportunity for the regime to gain insights into and address the underlying causes of public dissatisfaction. However, this approach ultimately proved ineffective in achieving its intended purpose. While the decision to allow protests initially appeared as a positive step toward open communication between the government and the disgruntled populace, the desired outcomes remained elusive. Even with the platform these protests offered, the regime struggled to grasp the full extent of the grievances and concerns held by the demonstrators. Consequently, the avenue for productive dialogue remained underutilized, leading to a lack of meaningful resolution to the underlying issues fueling public discontent.

Political Uprising of January 2022

A series of systemic errors made by the Kazakh government over decades eventually led to the tragic events of January 2022 that unfolded in Almaty and other cities of Kazakhstan. Civic protests that began in early January in western Kazakhstan swiftly escalated into state of chaos, disorder, and violent confrontations. The presence of poverty, marginalisation, and despair revealed significant social and economic gaps within Kazakhstan's population, including divisions between the centre and periphery, the wealthy and the disadvantaged.

The public demonstrations which erupted on January 2, 2022, in Western Zhanaozen, were sparked by a hike in liquefied natural gas prices from 60 Tenge to 120 Tenge (24 Euro cents)

[552] Rittmann, "Kazakhstan's 'Reformed' Protest Law."
[553] "President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's Address to the People of Kazakhstan," Akorda.kz; January 7, 2022,
[554] Human Rights Watch 2020.

per liter.[555] Civil society groups pushed for political reforms, fighting back against decades of autocracy and repression by the former and current regimes. As the protests evolved, they embraced additional conditions, such as demands for reduced food prices, resolution of water shortages, eradication of unemployment, and the resignation of the government and Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, unified under single slogan "Shal ket! ("Old Man leave!"). On the January 3, demonstrators blocked the transport networks of the region and occupied the railway station and the airport of its capital, Aktau. On the 4th of January, the protest spread to the south of the country, where it unfolded in Shymkent (Turkestanskaya oblast) and especially in the largest city, the former capital of Kazakhstan, Almaty. Governments' attempt to negotiate with the demonstrators and reduce the price to a 50 tenge (10 cents) price limit was not enough to defuse the situation.

Within a few days' peaceful demonstrations, escalated into widespread riots, leading to the destruction of the regional governor's administration, the presidential residence in Almaty, as well as multiple attacks on police stations and law enforcement personnel. According to official reports, the protests resulted in 225 fatalities, which included 19 members of the internal security forces. Moreover, over 4,500 people sustained injuries during the course of the events. The crisis also witnessed the arrest and detention of around 1000 protesters, reflecting the scale of dissent and unrest.[556] There was also an instance of gruesome beheading of two officers.[557]

As one of the anonymous respondents noted, the events of January also marked the beginning of a new chapter in the development of the Kazakh political activism:

> *Despite the existence in Kazakhstan of objective factors of social deprivation, capable of provoking discontent of the population, the January protests were characterised by organized anti-government actions. This included coordinated pattern of protester activities, such as taking control of public authorities, law enforcement agencies, and strategic infrastructure facilities like airports and highways. Additionally, there was the dissemination of protest action "manuals" via Telegram channels, active publication of*

[555] "'They would have eaten such a ministry with giblets a long time ago.' Reactions to Gas Protests in Zhanaozen," Azattyq.org, January 3, 2022.
[556] "Kazakhstan authorities raise death toll from unrest to 225," *The Guardian*; January 16, 2022.
[557] "Kazakhstan: Dozens Killed as Government Unleashes Military Crackdown," Eurasia.net, January 6, 2022, https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-dozens-killed-as-government-unleashes-military-crackdown.

anti-state content via different channels aimed at intensifying protests and attracting new participants. [558]

As a response, Tokayev ordered a brutal government crackdown and called in Russian troops to stabilize the situation. Referring to an external terrorist threat, Tokayev turned to the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a defensive military alliance of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan, which, for the first time since its creation in 2002, agreed to intervene. Eventually they stopped the protests across the country.[559]

During this critical juncture, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev skillfully used the opportunity to consolidate this power and eliminate political rivals, particularly targeting Nursultan Nazarbayev, his family members, and Nazarbayev's political elite. One by one president Tokayev orchestrated the removal of Prime Minister Askar Mamin from his position. Furthermore, nearly all family members and close allies of the former president lost their positions. Timur Kulibayev, who held the position of the head of the Atameken National Chamber, was dismissed from his role. Berik Imashev, known as the matchmaker of Dariga Nazarbayeva, also stepped down from his position as the Chairman of the Central Election Commission (CEC) under the decision of the current head of state.[560]

In addition, the choice to call for snap elections was directly linked to the January 2022 events and the widespread call for societal changes and Tokayev made sure to tailor this process and the system to his own needs. As a result, Tokayev gained control over all power structures, taking on the chairmanship of the Security Council, and consolidating political decision-making within Akorda as the exclusive center and a true source of power in the country.

The sequence of events, which included the tragic "Bloody January" events in January 2022, followed by unexpected referendum and presidential elections on November 20, 2022, along with parliamentary and local council elections that occurred on March 19, 2023, collectively served as an additional test for Tokayev's structural and political reforms aimed at shaping the 'New Kazakhstan."

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[558] Anonymous respondent, interview.
[559] Joshua Kucera, "CSTO Agrees to Intervene in Kazakhstan Unrest," Eurasianet, January 5, 2022, https://eurasianet.org/csto-agrees-to-intervene-in-kazakhstan-unrest#:~:text=The%20Collective%20Security%20Treaty%20Organization,Kazakhstan%20overcome%20this%20terrorist%20threat.%22.
[560] Sputnik Kyrgyzstan, "What Posts did Nazarbayev and his Relatives Lose?" ru.sputnik, January 28, 2022, https://ru.sputnik.kg/20220128/kakih-postov-lishilis-nazarbaev-i-ego-rodstvenniki-1061640663.html.

The concept emphasized societal unity and a rejection of radicalism as well as systemic reforms*:*

> *an image of the future of our sovereign country. Were constitutional rights of every citizen are respected; a new political culture is formed based on mutual respect and trust between the state and society and important decisions are made openly, with the participation of citizens, because the state will listen to the voice of everyone.* [561]

In addition, the term "Second Republic" also appeared in the political narrative of the president, which the head of state used to denote the transition to a new format of political reforms, providing for the preservation of political continuity with the previous regime.[562]

In mid-March of 2022, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev delivered the following message "New Kazakhstan: the path of renewal and modernisation", which announced a new model for the functioning of the state-political system. According to State Secretary Yerlan Karin,

> *Jana Kazakhstan is not only a change of state apparatus and officials. This is a broader and longer-term process that primarily involves a reset of social values and what social values we should be guided by in the future. This stage can take a year, or five, or ten years. … We must form new values, principles of the life of our society, the relationship between the state and society.*[563]

The social upheaval witnessed during "Bloody January" can be attributed to variety of factors, one of which is the prolonged one-party rule. Even with a change in leadership, as seen in the transition from Nazarbayev to Tokayev, this continued dominance of a single party can lead to political weariness within society. This fatigue affects both the political elite, who become disenchanted with the existing regime, and the general population, who grow weary of the political elite itself.

Furthermore, over the course of the past three decades of independence, Kazakhstan has experienced significant demographic shifts. These changes have affected the national composition of the population, educational and cultural levels, and overall well-being, with notable consequences for the age structure of the populace. According to data from the 2021

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561 "New Kazakhstan: Way of Updating and Modernization," Message of the Head of State Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to the people of Kazakhstan, March 16, 2022.
https://www.akorda.kz/ru/poslanie-glavy-gosudarstva-kasym-zhomarta-tokaeva-narodu-kazahstana-1623953
562 "Tokayev Told What the Kazakh Second Republic Will be Like" *Forbes*, May 26, 2022,
https://forbes.kz/process/tokaev_rasskazal_kakoy_budet_vtoraya_respublika/.
563 "Captured by Reforms; What is "New Kazakhstan" and How Should It be Built?" Qmonitor, March 11, 2022,
https://qmonitor.kz/politics/3854.

census, the average age of Kazakhs is 31 years, indicating that a significant portion of the population comprises youth.[564]

Despite President Kasym-Jomart Tokaev's promises of political reforms since assuming power in 2019, tangible improvements in Kazakhstan's poor human rights record have been elusive. Freedom of speech remains suppressed, and the so-called progressive reform, the peaceful assembly law, continues to restrict the right to peaceful protests. The Kazakh authorities have resorted to politically motivated prosecutions to silence government critics, often employing vague and overly broad charges such as "inciting discord " and continuing to ban political opposition groups, labeling them as "extremist."

Conclusion

The wave of political protest and the resulting crisis that unfolded in Kazakhstan, starting in 2012 showcased a notable departure from the traditional methods of opposing the government. The conventional forms of *Institutional* and *Individual* opposition were gradually replaced by a more spontaneous and grassroots resistance movements, commonly referred to as *Civic Opposition.* This new form of opposition was primarily led by ordinary citizens and grassroots opposition movements, who were primarily motivated by economic grievances and pressing social issues, which became the driving force behind public mobilisation.

This transformation of Kazakh political opposition led to several key observations. Firstly, it became evident that economic grievances and social issues emerged as the primary catalysts for public protests in Kazakhstan. The stark socio-economic inequality and the growing frustration among the general population played pivotal roles in fuelling public discontent over the years.

Furthermore, the regime's excessive reliance on repressive measures ultimately proved counterproductive, leading to uncontrolled mass mobilisation and widespread public uprisings. The failure of state's crisis management, the confrontations between protesters and security forces, and the violent escalation of events in January 2022 exposed the fragility of the Kazakh success narrative, which had proclaimed that authoritarian rule and economic prosperity were prerequisites for political stability.

[564] Dina Sharipova and Serik Beimenbetov, *Youth in Kazakhstan; Assessing their Values, Expectations, and Aspirations 2021* (Almaty: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2021), https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kasachstan/18450.pdf.

As a result of years of repression by the Nazarbayev regime, opposition entities, including political parties and movements, had been severely weakened, if not effectively eradicated. This created a vacuum in the opposition landscape, compelling ordinary members of civil society to take to the streets to assert their rights. The authorities, in their efforts to eliminate opposition actors from the political arena, unintentionally exacerbated this process. The authorities underestimated the consequences of their approach, assuming that the absence of opposition would quell protests, leaving them without a dialogue partner.

The final observation leads to the thesis's overall argument, that suggests that the absence of a credible opposition in Kazakhstan, because of the near-total elimination of both *Institutional* and *Individual Opposition* over the last two decades, has acted as a catalyst for the emergence of what is now known as *Civic Opposition*. The lack of a genuine alternative has had dual consequences. On the one hand, the regime has lost its communication channel with civil society, which used to run through opposition groups. On the other hand, dissatisfied citizens have lost trust in opposition leaders' ability to address their grievances or effectively lead protests. As a result, citizens have become increasingly proactive in advocating for their rights, evolving into a spontaneous and, at times, potentially regime-challenging force.

The recent mass uprisings show that, while authoritarian regimes may initially seek to eliminate opposition to consolidate power, the empirical evidence suggest that the absence of opposition can have unforeseen and far-reaching implications. It underscores the significance of a functioning opposition in managing societal unrest and guaranteeing political stability even to authoritarian type of regime.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

This dissertation has embarked on a comprehensive exploration of the dynamics of political opposition within authoritarian context, with a particular focus on Kazakhstan as the primary case study. The analysis showcased the need to challenge and reframe the conventional perception of political opposition in authoritarian settings, recognizing opposition as an integral element of political system. This involved unraveling the multifaceted nature of political opposition, exploring the various forms it takes, the roles it plays, and the diverse functions it serves within the complex dynamics of an authoritarian environment.

In pursuit of this objective, the study adopted an inclusive approach by extending its research scope beyond the conventional focus on *Institutional Opposition* and political parties as often portrayed by the classical scholars, such as Dahl[565], Ionescu & de Madariaga[566], Sartori,[567] Schapiro[568], Barker,[569] Helms[570] and others. Instead, by delving into the dynamics of political opposition in a non-democratic context, this research aimed to broader the research perspective beyond the conventional institutional opposition and gain a deeper understanding of its diverse manifestations and trends within authoritarian settings. Thus, the study encompassed wider understating of political opposition, focusing on various facets of opposition, including social movements, networks, political groups, civic activists, trade unions, and other elements that collectively contribute to the landscape of political opposition.

Consequently, the empirical analysis aimed to trace and map the developmental trajectory and transformation of Kazakh political opposition from 1989 until 2022 and identify the distinct forms and characteristics of opposition in each particular era. To achieve this goal, a comprehensive three-fold typology, introduced by Kazakh political scientist Andrey Chebotarev was employed to capture the diverse manifestation of opposition activity over the years. The analysis shed light on the transformation of political opposition, starting with its earliest forms of *Institutional Opposition* from 1989 to 1998, predominantly represented through parliamentary political parties and opposition movements. The research then moved on to the era of the so called *Individual Opposition* from 1998 to 2011, witnessing a significant decline in the influence and near elimination of institutional political parties. Instead, it marked the emergence of individual opposition figures (*Business and Oligarchic opposition*) who played a prominent role in challenging the established regime. Meanwhile, the third stage of opposition's transformation saw the rise of *Civic Opposition*, which evolved in 2011 and has persisted to the current day. This period saw a significant shift in the modes of expressing dissent to the ruling regime, where grassroots movements, spontaneous protests, and civil society initiatives took center stage as the primary means of opposing and contesting the government.

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565 Robert A. Dahl, "Political Opposition in Western Democracies," In *Comparative Government: A Reader*, ed. J. Blondel (London: Macmillan Education UK, 1969), 229–234.
566 Ionescu and de Madariaga. "Opposition."
567 Giovanni Sartori, "Opposition and Control: Problems and Prospects," In *Studies in Opposition*, ed. Rodney Barker (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1971), 31–37."
568 Leonard Schapiro, "Forward," *Government and Opposition* 1, no. 1, (1966), 2.
569 Rodney S. Barker, "Studies in Opposition" (London: Macmillan, 1971), 1–30
570 Ludger Helms, "Five Ways of Institutionalizing Political Opposition: Lessons from the Advanced Democracies," Government and Opposition 39, no. 1 (2004): 22–54.

Building upon the abovementioned analysis, the research further attempted to unravel the complex interplay between these diverse elements of political opposition and the Kazakh government. By exploring these multifaceted dynamics, the study sought to illuminate how the regime responded to various forms of opposition activity, offering an extensive viewpoint on how authoritarian governments adapt when confronted with challenges posed by opposition groups. These adjustments can span from cooperation and co-optation, involving the integration of opposition members into the system, to confrontations that encompass political conflicts and in certain instances, this adaptability may extend to overtly repressive efforts aimed at suppressing political opposition and dissent.

Through the analysis of distinct patterns and traits of Kazakh political opposition within each historical period, the study also attempted to trace how the actions and strategies of the Kazakh regime shaped the evolution of political opposition over the past three decades, transforming *Institutional Opposition* to *Individual Opposition* and, ultimately to the current form of *Civic Opposition.* This comprehensive analysis helped to highlight the dynamic interplay between the government and the opposition, illustrating how both sides continually influenced and adjusted to each other over the years, emphasizing that neither the opposition nor the government are the static entities, instead they are dynamic participants engaged in an ongoing and mutually constitutive relationship.

The primary research questions that this study attempted to answer are the following:

(1) What are the nature and forms of political opposition in Kazakhstan and how it has evolved overtime?

(2) How the Kazakh regime responds to these different forms of political opposition?

(3) To what extent might opposition agency shape regime durability in Kazakhstan?"

Building upon the analytical framework outlined above, this concluding chapter highlights the main empirical findings and central arguments of this research. It underlines the theoretical contributions, while also drawing on the trajectories for future investigation in this area of study. This chapter, in essence, serves as a bridge, establishing a connection between the immediate outcomes of the research and the broader academic landscape, paving the way for further exploration in this particular field of scholarship.

Empirical Findings and Key Arguments

As already indicated this analysis of the role and agency of political opposition in Kazakhstan, revolved around three key aspects. Initially, the study explored the diverse shapes and manifestation political opposition adopt in Kazakhstan, which emerged in response to the specific measures enacted by the government. The objective was to understand how political opposition navigates and transforms itself within the challenging landscape of an authoritarian regime, adapting to the constraints imposed by the authoritarian government. Secondly, the study examined the specific methods and strategies employed by the Kazakh government against those particular forms of opposition, unveiling the sophisticated mechanisms and approaches of repression, co-optation and manipulation utilised to maintain control and suppress political dissent over the years. Lastly, the analysis explored the dynamics of the interaction between the government and the opposition, with a particular focus on the potential role of political opposition in contributing to regime stability in Kazakhstan. It sought to reveal how the presence and actions of political opposition could influence the overall political equilibrium within the authoritarian setting.

The aforementioned aspects were thoroughly explored in four empirical chapters, each of which traced the evolution and transformation of political opposition in Kazakhstan, examining its interrelation with the regime from the 1990s to the present day. To conduct this empirical analysis, the research relied on variety of primary and secondary sources. Notably, the study included, semi-structured interviews with a wide range of stakeholders, encompassing representatives from local political parties and movements, activist, academics, journalists among others. Furthermore, the research relied on secondary sources, including reports from human rights organizations with a regional focus on Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan. It also incorporated speeches delivered by political leaders as well as scholarly papers, policy documents, historical records, and a diverse array of other textual sources.

The initial phase of this study involved offering a comprehensive analysis of the historical origins of authoritarianism in Central Asia, examining its trajectory from the pre-Soviet era through the Soviet and post-Soviet period. By delving into these historical roots, the analysis aimed to reveal how these legacies have left a profound imprint on the divergence and key characteristics of authoritarian regimes as well as political opposition across the region of Central Asia. This historical context was pivotal in comprehending the present-day complexities

and challenges faced by both the government and opposition forces in Kazakhstan, underscoring the historical continuity that has shaped the contemporary political landscape within the country.

Subsequently, an analysis was carried out to assess the range of political systems across Central Asia, while also investigating the factors responsible for the development of diverse forms of authoritarian governance. This exploration provided valuable insights into the challenges and possibilities that political opposition and civil society groups have faced over the years. Lastly, the exploration delved into an examination of the overarching features and different aspects of political opposition in the region, with a particular emphasis on Kazakhstan. This analysis established an understanding of the broader historical context, investigated the nature of the regime that emerged in Kazakhstan, and evaluated its impact on the general character and composition of political opposition groups within the region and Kazakhstan particularly.

The empirical analysis revealed that the emergence of authoritarian governance in Central Asia is a result of a complex interplay of factors, including policy choices, institutional design, and historical legacies of the country leaders. Central Asian governments, after an initial period of political competition in the early 1990s, witnessed a shift toward centralised authority under long-standing leaders, challenging expectations of fragility. Diverse strategies were employed by these leaders to legitimize power, ranging from performance-based governance to extensive repression and, in extreme cases, the use of violence.

The nature of governing regimes and the level of authoritarianism have profoundly influenced the formation and nature of political opposition in Central Asia, manifested in diverse patterns and forms, varying in freedom and activity based on the specific political environment and measures imposed by each state. This contextual analysis aided the research in comprehending the region's overarching authoritarian governments and the environment within which Central Asian and particularly Kazakh political opposition has been confined for the past three decades.

As previously indicated, the analysis employed a tripartite classification system, categorising opposition into ’Institutional’ (1989-1998), ‘Individual’ (1998-2011) and *Civic opposition* (2011-2022) which served as the basis for understanding the multifaceted nature of political opposition in Kazakhstan. Therefore, the central empirical chapters explored these distinct historical periods within Kazakhstan’s political history, analyzing the specific tactics employed by the governing regime, the prevailing political context, and the degree of freedom enjoyed by opposition forces during each of these distinct periods.

Building on the empirical findings of the three chapters focused on development and transformation of Kazakhstan political opposition during three specific eras, the study argues that evolution of opposition for the past three decades has been closely tied to its complex relationship with the ruling regime. This dynamic interplay between the government and the opposition has been pivotal in defining the nature and strategies of Kazakh opposition. This relationship has not only formed the regime's responses to the opposition but it has also played a significant role in shaping the overall trajectory and adaptability of the opposition within the shifting political scene. It emphasizes that this connection is not solely bilateral but rather multilateral, with both sides continuously responding and evolving in reaction to one another, thereby shaping the broader political opposition landscape of the country.

To support this argument, the research built on the comprehensive exploration of the early stage of Kazakhstan's political opposition that emerged after the country gained independence in 1991. This chapter particularly concentrated on the emergence of the institutional forms of political opposition to the government. Given that the institutionalised opposition mainly concentrated in the parliament and represented a significant challenge to the president's authority, the primary focus of this chapter's analysis revolved around the dynamic interaction between these two branches of government: the presidency and the *Institutional Opposition.*

The key findings of this chapter indicate that during the 1990s, the early opposition, while openly criticizing certain government policies, played a dual role. They not only voiced dissent but also served as sources of legitimacy within the Parliament, lending support to the newly elected government's policies during the initial phase of the country's independence. Consequently, the parliament started to perceive itself as having authority and significance on a par with the executive branch, often demonstrating a clear willingness to assert its independence and challenge the policies and decisions of the government.

This dual function of the early opposition was pivotal in shaping President Nazarbayev's approach to dealing with parliamentary opposition. Instead of resorting to overtly violent measures to suppress parliamentary opposition, Nazarbayev adopted a strategic and non-violent approach. His method entailed the use of indirect and quasi-legal mechanisms, including the manipulation of referenda, constitutional changes, and strategically timed re-elections, resulting in the gradual weakening and elimination of the parliamentary opposition.

As the influence of *Institutional Opposition* within the parliament waned, Kazakhstan's political opposition underwent a significant transformation. This transition saw the emergence of alternative forms of opposition, mainly composed of defectors from the political establishment and prominent figures from the business elite. These individuals collectively constituted what is often referred in this research as the *Individual Opposition*.

Thus, the next step in my inquiry was to observe transformative patterns of the so called *Individual Opposition* spanning from 1998 to 2012. This phase of Kazakhstan's political activism was characterised by the emergence of dissatisfied influential groups within the ruling elite, gradually competing to expand their spheres of interest and influence. Their primary goal was to exert control over the president and gain access to economic resources, leading to significant disruptions in the balance of power among the political elite and escalating tensions between the government and opposition entities.

This transformation was a direct outcome of the Nazarbayev regime's unwavering efforts to eliminate *Institutional Opposition*, fortify presidential authority, and tighten control over critical national resources. The emergence of this new variant of opposition posed a substantial challenge to the regime, prompting a complex and harsh response. To counter this new form of opposition, the government deployed a mix of highly repressive measures, including personal and organizational sanctions targeting prominent opposition leaders and their affiliated political parties and movements.

In tandem with repressive actions, the regime pursued 'institutional adaptation.'[571] This involved introducing amendments to key laws and the constitution, primarily designed to marginalize and weaken radical opposition elements within the political landscape. The government effectively isolated opposition parties and leaders from civil society through stringent laws that restricted their ability to organize rallies and engage with citizens. This isolation contributed to the challenges faced by opposition groups in mobilising the public. To further solidify its position, the regime deliberately cultivated a divided political environment within the opposition. The manipulation of opposition forces by President Nazarbayev's regime involved a delicate interplay between coercive and co-optative strategies. These tactics played a key role in

[571] Isaacs, *Political Opposition in Authoritarianism*.

managing and maintaining a relatively stable circle of elites while suppressing potential sources of opposition.

The analysis of the development and transformation of Kazakh political opposition throughout the country's first two decades of independence suggested a significant shift in the political climate. Genuine *Institutional Opposition* represented in parliament has increasingly disappeared and transformed into new form of resistance, characterised by individual leaders. Elements of the opposition that choose loyalty or moderation, on the other hand, have managed to survive, albeit in a performative capacity, typically in the guise of moderate political parties.

Over the years, the policies and measures implemented by the Kazakh government had a considerable impact on Kazakhstan's political opposition. The so called *'Institutional'* and *'Individual'* opposition forces have been systematically weakened and marginalised to the point where they no longer posed a genuine threat to the government. With political competition decreasing and alternative options diminishing the public has grown increasingly disengaged from politics. The lack of political competition and alternatives contributed to political apathy among Kazakhstan's citizens, who have become disappointed by a lack of credible political alternatives and compelled ordinary members of civil society to partake in street protests to safeguard their rights.

Hence, the final and current phase of opposition development in Kazakhstan adopted the self-organized opposition force referred to as *Civic Opposition* ('Narodnaya Opozitsia') prominent from 2011 to the present day. The regime's success in diminishing both institutional opposition and disloyal political and business elites, came at the expense of short-term stability. The established political system proved incapable of delivering enduring stability, giving rise to a new paradigm of grassroots and spontaneous activism. This phenomenon, represented by civil society groups and protest movements, injected a new and unpredictable dynamic into opposition politics, complicating the regime's ability to anticipate and manage social dissent. This marked a profound shift in the dynamics of political opposition in Kazakhstan, challenging traditional expectations and requiring the regime to adapt to a more fluid and unpredictable political landscape.

The final observation supports the thesis's core argument, which suggests that the absence of a credible opposition in Kazakhstan, resulting from the near-complete elimination of both *Institutional* and *Individual Opposition* over the past two decades, served as a catalyst for the

emergence of what is referred to as *Civic Opposition.* The absence of a genuine alternative has had dual consequences. On one hand, the Kazakh regime has lost its vital communication channel with civil society, which used to run through opposition groups. On the other hand, dissatisfied citizens have lost trust in opposition leaders' ability to address their grievances or effectively lead protests. Consequently, citizens have become increasingly proactive in advocating for their rights, evolving into a spontaneous and, at times, potentially regime-challenging force in Kazakh politics. This transformation is evident in the escalating frequency of protests and civic uprisings since 2011, gaining notable momentum, especially since 2019 and the occurrences during the January 2022 - "Bloody January" protests that surged across the country.

The recent large-scale mass uprisings in Kazakhstan demonstrate that while authoritarian regimes, in their pursuit of consolidating power, may initially seek to eliminate political opposition. However, empirical evidence suggests that the absence of a viable opposition can give rise to unforeseen and far-reaching implications. It underscores the significance of a functioning opposition in managing societal unrest and safeguarding political stability, even within the context of authoritarian rule.

Hence, this research challenges the prevailing notion that authoritarian regimes benefit from the complete elimination of opposition as a means to preserve their authority and underscores the nuanced relationship between political opposition and regime stability. In the case of Kazakhstan, the authorities' misguided strategy of isolating and suppressing opposition elements resulted in unintended consequences. The Kazakh regime mistakenly assumed that the absence of opposition would suppress protests, effectively leaving them without a dialogue partner.

The events in Kazakhstan illustrate the complex relationship between political authority and societal stability. While suppression of opposition may appear to be beneficial to short-term stability, it can unintentionally generate conditions conducive to widespread unrest and popular mobilisation. The upheaval in Kazakhstan is an acute indication that political opposition not only serves as a check on government authority, but also as a channel for citizens' concerns and grievances. In the absence of such a system, discontent can erupt into large-scale protests, demonstrating the complex and delicate equilibrium that authoritarian regimes must navigate in order to maintain control and stability in their governance.

While authoritarian regimes may initially seek to eliminate opposition to consolidate their power, the empirical findings of this research reveal that the total absence of opposition can inadvertently act as a catalyst for civic uprisings and therefore help manufacture new threats to regime stability. Thus, the presence of even a critical form of opposition, can serve as a channel for addressing societal grievances and potentially contribute to the durability of the regime by offering a platform for dissent and a mechanism to prevent widespread mobilisation against the government.

Theoretical Implications:

This thesis makes a broad contribution to the scholarship on Kazakh politics, authoritarian regimes and the agency of political opposition in authoritarian settings.

On a conceptual level, the thesis sets to contribute to the broader understanding of political opposition in authoritarian context, expanding the scholarly discourse on diverse forms and manifestations of political opposition in authoritarian settings, with a specific emphasis on the post-Soviet countries. As already indicated, in academic discourse, it is a common perspective to predominantly examine political opposition in authoritarian regimes through the lens of institutionalised forms, often neglecting the broader spectrum of opposition activities that extend beyond traditional party politics.[572] While there is a substantial body of research observing non-institutional forms of political opposition in authoritarian regimes, contemporary study falls short of thoroughly investigating alternative and informal forms of dissent within authoritarian environments.[573]

Hence, this thesis sought to challenge conventional perspectives on political opposition by exploring its dynamics in non-democratic settings. In doing so, the study emphasized the importance of broadening the understanding of political opposition beyond the traditional forms

[572] Dahl, *Political Oppositions in Western Democracies*; Ionescu and de Madariaga, "Opposition."; Sartori, "Opposition and Control," (1966); Leonard Schapiro, "Forward," *Government and Opposition* 1, no. 1, (1966); Barker, *Studies in Opposition*, 1–30; Helms, "Five Ways of Institutionalizing Political Opposition."

[573] Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World*; Sartori, "Opposition and Control," (1966); Blondel, "Political Opposition in the Contemporary World."; Brack and Weinblu, "What Do We Mean by 'Political Opposition"; Gelman, "The Extinction of Political Opposition in Russia."; Foltz, "Political Oppositions in Single Party States of Tropical Africa."; Bassam, Tibi, (1993), "Politische Opposition in Westasien und in Afrika. Einige vergleichende und typisierende Betrachtungen, "in Euchner, Walter; Rico Isaacs "Political Opposition in Authoritarianism Exit, Voice and Loyalty in Kazakhstan", 2022; Albrecht, "How Can Opposition Support Authoritarianism?".

of opposition such as institutional opposition and explore multiple avenues of expressing dissent in authoritarian settings, such as through social movements, opposition networks, political groups, civic activists, trade unions, and even more unconventional and informal means, such as creative expression through mediums like art, cinema, and comedy.

Therefore, through a comprehensive examination and the generation of empirical knowledge on the complex nature of political opposition in Kazakhstan, the study aimed to enrich the understanding of the role and agency of political opposition, recognizing opposition as a dynamic and multi-dimensional phenomenon, playing a pivotal role in shaping the political landscape within authoritarian environment.

The second contribution of this study revolves around the role of political opposition within authoritarian settings and the dynamics of its interaction with authoritarian rulers. Exploring the multifaceted roles and functions of political opposition in authoritarian environment provided new perspective on complex relationship between various forms of dissent and the regimes they oppose. Employing Kazakhstan as a case study, this research aimed to uncover the responses of authoritarian regimes to various forms of dissent and how these reactions, in a reciprocal manner, shape the evolution of political opposition over time, providing insights into the adaptive strategies of authoritarian regimes against opposition.

Exploring the intricate dynamics of regime-opposition relations in Kazakhstan and it impact on the evolution and transformation of political opposition, led the research to the conclusion that political opposition can serve as a source of stability for authoritarian regimes. This perspective aligns with the arguments put forth by scholars such as William Zartman[574], Holger Albrecht[575] and Rico Isaacs[576] and others researching the dynamics of authoritarian regimes and political opposition, who contend that the actions and influence of political opposition can have a direct or indirect impact on the stability and durability of authoritarian regimes.

Within the ongoing discourse regarding the role of political opposition in authoritarian systems, number of analysts of political affairs contend that political opposition, despite restrictions imposed by the authoritarian rule, possess the capacity to exert influence that contests the established regime. A notable aspect of this discourse highlights the idea that co-opted

574 Zartman, "Opposition as Support of the State."
575 Albrecht, Holger. "How can opposition support authoritarianism? Lessons from Egypt." Democratization 12, no. 3 (2005): 378-397
576 Isaacs, *Political Opposition in Authoritarianism*.

opposition can also function of authoritarian support and contribute to the stability of the political system and aid durability of authoritarian regimes. Central to this debate is the influential argument presented by William Zartman in 1988, which assumes that "government and oppositions have interests to pursue within the political system, and this complementarity of pursuit reinforces the state. Neither uses the other, but each serves the other's interests in performing its own role. Thus, stability in the contemporary Arab state can be explained not only by the government's handling of opposition but also by the opposition's handling of itself and of government".[577] Zartman also offers and explanation of political opposition by analyzing political opposition as a complementary support to the state and are "involved in contentious politics with the regime" … "government and oppositions have interests to pursue within the political system, and this complementarity of pursuit reinforces the state. Neither uses the other, but each serves the other's interests in performing its own role. Thus, stability in the contemporary Arab state can be explained not only by the government's handling of opposition but also by the opposition's handling of itself and of government".

Also, Holger Albrecht by conceptualising on the Zartman's argument characterises opposition as an integral part of certain authoritarian systems, "performing a regime-sustaining function" - They are tolerated by authoritarian regimes to increase their legitimacy and help serve as a "transmission belt" for patronage and policy to head off stronger oppositional challenges.[578] Albrecht also defines opposition as complementary the regime and contributor to its stability - "which was born and grew, which lived and developed over time in an authoritarian context without contributing to systemic changes" … "even in non-democratic settings opposition should be viewed as movements or parties which are involved in contentious politics with the regime."

Rico Isaac's recent book, "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty in Kazakhstan: Political Opposition in Authoritarianism," stands as a noteworthy addition to the body of literature concerning political opposition in authoritarian environments. Isaac's work specifically centers on Kazakhstan and investigates the novel typology of Kazakh political opposition - *Individual*, *Organizational* and *Grass-roots Opposition.* [579] By employing Albert Hirschman's framework of exit, voice, and loyalty to examine how the Kazakhstani opposition has influenced the dynamics of authoritarian

[577] Zartman, "Opposition as Support of the State."
[578] Albrecht, "How Can Opposition Support Authoritarianism?".
[579] Isaacs, *Political Opposition in Authoritarianism*.

regime development spanning three decades, the analysis suggests that the Kazakhstani regime has responded to opposition activities in an ambiguous manner, leaving the regime vulnerable to spontaneous, grassroots non-institutional opposition in the longer term. The book underscores the notion that authoritarian regimes treating opposition threats ambiguously are prone to enduring instability. The absence of clear feedback from opposition agency leaves the regime exposed to unforeseen and spontaneous opposition movements, jeopardizing its long-term stability.

Based on research findings, this study contends that an authoritarian regime's approach of eliminating political opposition may result in unforeseen and unpredictable consequences. The outcomes manifest primarily as widespread discontent and spontaneous protests, posing a significant threat to the regime's survival and long-term stability. The suppression of all forms of political opposition, rather than consolidating power, can backfire and ultimately undermine the authoritarian regime's hold on power.

Drawing on the Kazakh example, the thesis contends that the absence of a credible opposition in Kazakhstan, a consequence of the near-total elimination of both *Institutional* and *Individual Opposition* over the past three decades, acted as a catalyst for the emergence of what is termed *Civic Opposition.* This, in turn, led to an uncontrollable civic uprising that posed a threat to the stability and durability of the Kazakh regime.

The dissertation asserts that political opposition, beyond being a mere check on government authority, also serves as a conduit for citizens' concerns and grievances. The turmoil in Kazakhstan serves as an illustration that political opposition not only acts as a restraint on government power but also functions as a vital channel for expressing the concerns and grievances of the populace. By preserving this channel, authoritarian regimes may strategically deploy opposition as a shield to safeguard their stability and longevity. Through the lens of the Kazakh case study, this dissertation makes modest contribution to this growing discourse regarding the role of political opposition as an intermediary between the regime and the citizenry, and the role it can potentially play in supporting the durability of authoritarian regimes.

The third contribution of this study seeks to elevate the debate on Kazakh political opposition and transcend the confines of single case study to the broader authoritarian context, contributing

to the field of comparative studies on political opposition in non-democratic countries of the former Soviet-Union.

The empirical findings of this study reveal shared patterns and trends in the nature and characteristics of political opposition observed in Kazakhstan, along with responses of the regime against different forms of dissent, demonstrating similarities with other non-democratic regimes within the post-Soviet space.

The three distinct forms of political opposition, namely *'Institutional', 'Individual'* and *'Civic'* opposition evident in Kazakhstan, reflects a broader tendency observed in various post-Soviet states. This trend, encompassing countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Georgia, is characterised by similar manifestations of political opposition and the corresponding government responses in different contexts, along with similarities in the patterns of opposition transformation over the year.

The historical trajectories of Georgia and Kyrgyzstan ranked as "Partly Free"[580] for Georgia and "Not Free"[581] for Kyrgyzstan diverge from the enduring autocratic regime in Kazakhstan. However, both countries have undergone a similar phase of transformation following their independence in the early 1990s. This was marked by the emergence of the first instances of political parties and movements, represented by *Institutional Opposition* in 1990 and the rise of the so-called *'Individual Opposition'* leaders, exemplified by figures such as Mikheil Saakashvili and businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili in Georgia and Kurmanbek Bakiyev in Kyrgyzstan.

In contrast to Kazakh case, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan once regarded as "Beacon"[582] and "Island" of Democracy[583] aspired to establish democratic states while being surrounded by authoritarian and non-democratic neighbors, making them unique anomalies.[584] Both countries have witnessed notably vibrant political opposition and civil society engagement throughout the years. Kyrgyzstan, saw significant revolutionary events, including the "Tulip Revolution" in 2005, the "April Events" in 2010 and the so called "Third Kyrgyz revolution" in Kyrgyzstan.

[580] Georgia: Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report
https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-world/2023
[581] Kyrgyzstan: Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report
https://freedomhouse.org/country/kyrgyzstan/freedom-world/2023
[582] Emerging Europen, "Georgia, once a beacon of democracy, is fading away" (Accessed 02.08.2023)
https://emerging-europe.com/voices/georgia-once-a-beacon-of-democracy-is-fading-away/
[583] Anderson, John. Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's island of democracy? Routledge, 2013.
[584] Authors Interview with Levan Tsutskiridze, Executive Director of EECMD

Similarly, Georgia underwent the transformative "Rose Revolution" in 2003 and peaceful power transition in 2012.

Despite their significant democratic achievements both countries have undergone democratic backsliding and notable departure from democratic norms and standards, underpinned by several important political developments that unfolded during the past decade. Georgia's political space has been characterised by deepened political polarisation after the Parliamentary elections of 2020, the Georgian government's failure to advance to EU Membership Candidate status, the recent attempt of the Georgian government to adopt the law on "Transparency of Foreign Influence" (Also referred as the "Russian Law") and its reluctance to meet the EU's recommendations are threatening to alienate Georgia from its democratic allies and exacerbate its socioeconomic and political problems.

Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan has been navigating through unstable political environment, marked by one of its most severe political crises, in the aftermath of the contested 2020 Parliamentary Elections and the resignation of President Sooronbai Jeenbekov. Moreover, the recent political turbulence ushered in a change in leadership with the election of President Sadyr Japarov. This change brought substantial alterations to Kyrgyz governance and authoritarian tendencies, reverting the political system back to a presidential one and ending the eleven-year period of parliamentary authority, leaving the state of authoritarianism in Kyrgyzstan fragile.

The parallels between the present authoritarian-leaning governments of Georgia and Kyrgyzstan are also evident in their similar approaches to eliminating and marginalising diverse forms of political opposition and civil society. Notably, both governments have sought to enact Russian-style "Foreign Agents" Laws in 2023 as part of their suppressive measures. Much like the Kazakh case, the persistent suppression of *Institutional* and *Individual Opposition* over the years has led to the active marginalisation of opposition political parties *Institutional and Individual* opposition forces in both Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. In response to this boiling political environment, ordinary citizens have increasingly turned to grassroots activism, employing mass protests and demonstrations as a means to assert their rights and exert influence over the political landscape. Instances of recent large-scale uprisings include the events in Georgia in March 2023 against the imposition of the "Russian Law on Foreign Agents" and so called "Third Kyrgyz Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan in 2020.

The deliberate suppression of traditional opposition avenues in both Georgia and Kyrgyzstan catalyzed a shift toward more decentralised and spontaneous forms of civic engagement, such as the large scale protests in 2020 in Kyrgyzstan and March 2023 protests in Georgia, threatening to the stability and longevity of the non-democratic regimes of both countries. This in turn, contributes to the current debate about political opposition by offering a nuanced perspective that goes beyond the limitations of a single case study. This expansion of knowledge is crucial for improving our theoretical frameworks and developing a deeper understanding of the complexity inherent in studying political opposition in authoritarian regimes.

And finally, this research stands as a meaningful addition to our collective knowledge on political opposition in Kazakhstan, offering valuable insights that enrich our broader understanding of political dynamics within the country. Grounded in empirical evidence, detailing the emergence and evolution of various forms of political opposition, this study aligns with the ongoing scholarship led by figures such as like Rico Isaacs[585], Andrey Chebotarev[586], Barbara Junisbai[587] with a particular focus on the role and agency of political opposition in Kazakhstan. In making this modest yet impactful contribution, the research delves into the nuanced aspects of Kazakh political opposition, scrutinizing the forms it adopts, its operational mechanisms, and how it has been systematically managed by the Kazakh regime over the years. Moreover, the study provides insight into the potential role of Kazakh political opposition in influencing the regime's durability, expanding our understanding of the nuanced dynamics inherent in authoritarian contexts. This study adds to our understanding of the delicate balance and power struggles inside authoritarian systems by providing a comprehensive analysis of the varied relationship between the regime and opposition.

Implications for the Future Research

As previously emphasized, in this concluding chapter, despite the wide array of subjects covered in this dissertation, there still remain numerous unexplored areas that require deeper investigation in future research, enhancing understanding of the complexities of political opposition in authoritarian settings. This includes conducting further research into how political

[585] Isaacs, Rico. Party system formation in Kazakhstan: Between formal and informal politics. Vol. 26. Routledge, 2011.
[586] Andrey Chebotarev, Political thought of Sovereign Kazakhstan, Origins, Evolution, Modernity
[587] Junisbai, B. (2010). A tale of two Kazakhstans: Sources of political cleavage and conflict in the post-soviet period. Europe-Asia Studies, 62(2), 235–269.

opposition entities interact with the governing regime and its resulting effects on their agency, not only in Kazakhstan but also within the wider authoritarian context.

The finding of this research indicate at least two avenues for future research:

What happens to political opposition after political transition? Focus on Tokayev's Rule: While centered on specific case of Kazakhstan, there is potential for the research to benefit from an extended examination of the political developments and the agency of political opposition under President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's leadership. Given the dominant political landscape that has revolved around Kazakhstan's first president Nursultan Nazarbayev's nearly thirty-year rule, this research has primarily focused on the leadership of this central figure. Despite the thorough exploration of political developments and civic activism in Kazakhstan following the 2019 government transition, coupled with an in-depth analysis of the policy choices of the second president, Tokayev, there remains an imperative for further examination.

In particular, it is essential to evaluate how President Tokayev's shift toward relatively more moderate policies, especially following the events of January 2022, may impact the trajectory of political opposition, but most importantly *Civic Opposition* in Kazakhstan. This includes introduction of new reforms, the easing of constraints on public gatherings, and the emergence of new political parties and movements. Hence, further research could serve as a testing ground for the proposed hypothesis, offering insights into whether President Tokayev's relatively moderate policies hold the potential to reduce the frequency of spontaneous protests in the future.

To elaborate on this point, an in-depth exploration of how President Tokayev's approach on opposition politics shapes the reemergence of opposition groups and their effectiveness in advocating for civil society's concerns is a pivotal aspect. Such research would involve an examination of the consequences of the government's recent initiatives, including the relaxation of restrictions on public gatherings and the establishment of novel political parties and movements, on citizen's willingness to participate in ongoing political processes. Furthermore, it could assess the extent to which the government responds to the changing political environment and the demands of civil society.

Moreover, an examination of the potential shifts in the frequency and nature of spontaneous protests under Tokayev's governance would provide valuable insights into the adaptability of

authoritarian regimes in the face of changing societal dynamics. Comparing these developments with the period of Nazarbayev's rule could illuminate whether Tokayev's milder policies lead to a more accommodative environment for opposition activities and civic uprisings.

Conducting a longitudinal analysis of political opposition in Kazakhstan, specifically during President Tokayev's tenure, would offer a profound exploration of the evolving political landscape over an extended period. By tracing the trajectory of opposition and civic movements and the strategies employed by both the opposition and the regime, researchers can gain a more nuanced comprehension of the complex interplay between power and resistance in Kazakhstan.

Comparative analysis of agency of political opposition: As already indicated, the analysis of the Kazakh case presents a compelling opportunity for comparative studies to go beyond the case of Kazakhstan and advance our understanding of political opposition in wider authoritarian context, particularly former Soviet countries of Georgia and Kyrgyzstan.

In order to refine and strengthen the core argument, the further analyses could delve into similar patterns of opposition transformation and corresponding responses of authoritarian regimes in different contexts. By examining commonalities and variations across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Georgia, researchers can uncover overarching themes and distinctive features of political opposition dynamics, facilitating a more holistic understanding of political opposition within non-democratic systems. In addition, investigating how different authoritarian regimes respond to challenges posed by opposition movements, and whether they opt for more accommodating or repressive strategies, would enhance our knowledge of political dynamics in autocratic systems.

By extending the preceding discussion, the research could benefit from a more comprehensive exploration of the role and agency of political opposition in terms of its potential impact on authoritarian stability in a broader context, particularly within the case of Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, enabling a deeper understanding of how the dynamics of political opposition influence the longevity of authoritarian regimes across this region and beyond.

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