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SPECIAL FEATURE

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: How Kazakhstan's Civil Society Navigates Precarity

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Abstract

What forms of precarity do civil society actors experience in Central Asia? What are the sources of these precarities? In this article, I synthesize literature from political science and development studies to identify five top-down mechanisms of precaritization for civil society: (extra)legal restrictions on operations, financing activities, flows of funding from the Global North, professionalization, and the sociopolitical atmosphere. I draw on twenty-seven interviews with activists and human rights defenders in Kazakhstan to consider how civil society actors navigate structural constraints on their work. In line with the literature on authoritarian regimes, I find that civil society actors who criticize the regime face precarity through coercion and bureaucratic demands. But whereas development studies scholarship has been pessimistic about the effects of professionalization, Kazakhstan's civil society actors see their technical training and pressure to formalize their organizations as beneficial to their reputation and institutional leverage.

A key turn in the study of civil society and state–study relations was the recognition that some regimes adopt ostensibly democratic institutions but tweak the rules of the game enough to tip the playing field in the ruling elites' favor.[1] Indeed, autocrats have gotten savvy with dissent management, paying attention to the techniques their peers use to manage civil society and building regulatory regimes that structure civil society both to limit potentially disruptive collective organizing and to reap the legitimate benefits of civil society.[2] How does civil society navigate these constraints? In this article, I apply the frame of precarity to analyze how civil society actors—including formally registered nongovernmental organizations and loosely organized grassroots groups—in Kazakhstan pursue their advocacy goals.

The frame of precarity is generative to analyze civil society actors' approach to advocacy and the public sphere in Central Asia. The conceptualization of civil society is deeply linked with capitalism and the assumption that post-socialist and post-communist states needed to adopt principles of neoliberal governance on their transition to democracy.[3] Scholars have conceptualized precarity in two broad approaches. First, precarity can be an "economic category,"[4] looking at the phenomenon through the lens of contingent labor relations.[5] Second, precarity can be seen as

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a synonym for vulnerability or insecurity broadly. This affective framing captures not only the "tenuous conditions of neoliberal labor" but also the "states of anxiety, desperation, unbelonging, and risk experienced by temporary and irregularly employed workers."[6]

Studies of labor precarity as it relates to activism have largely centered on people organizing *as* precarious workers, including adjunct professors, migrants, and youth.[7] In this paper, I extend the category of analysis to civil society actors. Civil society actors serve multiple roles, including service provision performed on behalf of the state, strengthening a sense of community that bolsters democratic institutions, and promoting "transparency, accountability, and other aspects of 'good governance.'"[8] Individual civil society actors working in collective organizations do not carry out these tasks in a vacuum, but in a tangled regulatory environment built and enforced by state and international actors alike. Per Ziegler, "Groups [in Central Asia] cannot function outside the state" because "the state provides basic legal and security conditions and sets the parameters for group activity, in the form of laws, regulations, and incentives that both enable and constrain civil society."[9]

Of course, precarity is not just imposed, but lived, meaning there is agency within structure. Civil society actors judge which framings are persuasive and which strategies are feasible based on structural features. As such, a conceptual framework that bridges top-down and bottom-up mechanisms is needed in order to understand how grassroots actors navigate labor precarity. A synthesis of scholarship from political science and development studies yields five structural features of authoritarian regimes and mechanisms that drive precarity in associational life. This includes the regulatory regime and extralegal restrictions on CSOs' activities, financial flows from the Global North, legal constraints on CSO financing, incentives to professionalize, and the sociopolitical context. Drawing on twenty-seven interviews conducted on Zoom with activists and human rights defenders in Kazakhstan, I consider whether and how civil society actors experience precarity because of these top-down restrictions.

I find that Kazakhstan's authorities use a range of legal and extralegal tactics to suppress civil society actors who criticize the regime, in line with expectations from the literature on authoritarian regimes. The government has leveraged Kazakhstan's natural resource wealth to fund a manicured civil society, but the civil society actors I spoke with were widely skeptical about accepting government funds. Activist groups skirt restrictive regulations on financing by using crowdfunding through a mobile banking app to support projects. Although the development studies literature frames professionalization as a counterproductive, depoliticizing process, respondents described formal institutionalization and expertise as tools to achieve their advocacy goals. Extensive education required for expertise is one reason that civil society is largely concentrated in Kazakhstan's biggest cities. The urban-rural divide of Kazakhstan's civil society resembles the siloing of associational life by language-speaking communities. Despite the challenges in overcoming the language barrier, leaders of large NGOs and social movements strive to translate materials from Russian to Kazakh and have taken steps to reach the Kazakh-speaking population.

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Case Selection and Data Collection

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

Between April 2021 and November 2021, I conducted twenty-seven semi-structured interviews with civil society actors in Kazakhstan. To identify participants, I used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. I began with a purposive selection strategy, reaching out to relevant organizations' social media accounts or following up with activists I had met during prior fieldwork. I adopted an abductive approach to coding and interpreting transcripts—meaning I came to the data with theoretical ideas and concepts they plan to apply—but remained open to surprising and unexpected findings.[10] I interviewed representatives from different kinds of groups, including one state-affiliated organization; one umbrella coalition of independent NGOs; a human rights NGO and youth organization, both formed in the early 1990s; and three organizations focused on media, women's rights, and internet freedom founded in the last five years. In addition, I spoke with seven civil society actors who are not affiliated with a formal NGO but participate in civic groups and initiatives. All but one of the interviews was conducted in Russian, with one conducted in Kazakh. Ideally, future research will involve interviews with groups that are more closely affiliated with the government. Despite my persistence in getting in touch with these civil society actors, including batches of emails, Facebook messages, and Instagram direct messages, I could not secure interviews with them and relied on materials available online, including social media channels, YouTube videos of conferences, annual reports, and local news coverage.

Researchers are implicated in the social worlds they study, and the knowledge produced from their studies should be viewed in light of these relations of power. The primary effect of positionality stemmed from my not being *in* Kazakhstan and needing to access the field from thousands of miles away. Even mediated through screens, features of my social body—my whiteness, my gender, my age, my accent in Russian, and my ability to switch briefly into Kazakh—shaped the interactions that generated data for this project.

Given that Kazakhstan's government has surveilled and suppressed those who criticize the regime, concern for interlocutors' personal and professional safety is of the utmost importance. But what are the ethical obligations for a researcher whose interview partners explicitly state that they want their words attributed to them? Writing

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on the study of online groups in China, Wang and Liu acknowledge that it is a tough question to engage with research subjects via social media in an era of internet censorship.[11] There can be backlash and legal consequences for researchers, but—more worryingly—for informants.[12] When should the researcher override the wishes of their interlocutors? Is it patronizing to do so, or respectful? This concern about anonymizing or respecting interviewees' wishes speaks to the importance of centering the dignity of those contributing to research, which requires "treat[ing] everyone as 'ends' in themselves and not as a 'means' to some other end, such as a book or dissertation."[13] Many of the people I spoke with openly promote their advocacy, indeed leaning on media attention in Kazakhstan and beyond for support in achieving their goals. Even so, I opted to anonymize interview data.

Theoretical framework

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

(Extra)legal constraints

Autocrats have developed complex regulatory regimes to govern associational life. Laws constraining civil society sideline or silence potentially threatening groups, while encouraging "acceptable" groups to organize.[14] Leeway in the description of procedures to grant registration gives authorities leverage over denying NGOs' registrations and banning or de-registering NGOs. Governments can become threatened by civil society organizations that provide public services that the government relies on for its justification for holding onto power.[15] In response, state authorities sometimes restrict the autonomy of NGOs by granting state control over NGO management and activities.[16]

It is also common for autocrats to allow extralegal repression of dissenting voices in the form of police brutality, unauthorized surveillance, and strategic lawsuits against public participation.[17] Civil society actors and organizations do not experience equal levels or forms of pressure, however. For example, Plantan demonstrated how China and Russia engage in selective repression, rather than across the board application of restrictions, to adjudicate risks from civil society.[18]

Constraints on CSO financing

Civil society was heralded as a magic bullet for governance and democratization in the 1990s.[19] Billions of dollars in aid have been channeled through NGOs, with a preference for a neoliberal, privatized approach to development that coincided with a decentralization and hollowing out of the state.[20] Where state bureaucracies once oversaw the provision of public services, now some third sector actor—a consulting

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firm or an NGO—is expected to do that work more cheaply and effectively, if not volunteered for free.[21] Despite the responsibility placed on civil society to fill gaps in service provision, many NGOs struggle with financial constraints. These constraints are exacerbated by rules about how civil society organizations should record and report their financial assets. These laws target different aspects of civil society's finances, such as whether it is legal to access funding from abroad, how these funds should be recorded and shared with the government, and how civil society organizations should pay taxes. Restrictive laws can impede the ability to raise funds through domestic and/or foreign means.[22]

Cooptation—the exchange of rewards for acquiescence—is a central pillar in authoritarian resilience strategies.[23] Scholars have recently sought to understand patterns of cooptation among non-elite political actors, and research has found that cooptation fragments social movements by sowing distrust and giving the regime leverage to deter future protests.[24] One core but often unstated assumption of the political science literature on civil society—particularly in Eurasian autocracies—is that restrictive regulatory regimes replace "real" civil society with "virtual" politics.[25] Certainly, autocratic regimes encourage high numbers of registered NGOs for purposes of international legitimation, but many of these so-called "virtual" groups are not actually fake.

Financial flows from the Global North

The Global North sends massive amounts of development aid and funding to civil society groups in post-socialist states and the Global South.[26] Some development studies scholars have theorized that this funding redirects accountability away from local communities and constituents and toward international donors.[27] Empirical studies of civil society actors in Cyprus and Nicaragua found that the availability of foreign funding affected the way civil society groups approach social change.[28] This is because foreign funding shifted NGOs' influence in relation to unformalized grassroots organizations. Additionally, NGOs face an incentive to commercialize their projects in a way that keeps them attractive and interesting to international audiences.[29] This is heightened given that pots of international funding are finite, which Jalali has argued can induce competition among NGOs, thus distracting groups from working toward similar goals.[30] On the other hand, competition for finite funding could encourage NGOs to hone their skills and improve their activities.

In shifting the locus of accountability from local communities to international donors, flows of funding can reproduce global inequalities by creating dependency relations.[31] Over time, donor-funded NGOs have become instruments for maintaining the interests of global and domestic elites over the needs of communities.[32] Luciani argues that foreign aid is distributed based on donors' preferences and geopolitical ambitions, rather than recipients' needs, and presents the case of LGBT+ politics in Georgia as an example.[33]

Professionalization

Development scholars have warned of "professionalization" as an unintended consequence of streams of international development aid. As an analytic concept,

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professionalization does not just connote competence, but rather is defined as a process of pivoting from grassroots mobilization to formal entities participating in mainstream politics.[34] Empirical studies from across the world have demonstrated how many local NGO workers experience a sense of isolation that they see as a result of their working with the international development industry.[35] Mackie argued that this isolation stems from the existence of "hierarchies based on linguistic and cultural competence, access to more or less privileged languages and access to the technologies which facilitate transnational communication."[36] In the case of global civil society, English is the lingua franca, and international donors have their own jargon and buzzwords to be learned.[37]

Professionalization can also have material consequences for civil society actors. While donors may claim to support a variety of organizational structures, "the 'tools' used by donors—application processes, due diligence forms (including monitoring and evaluation requirements), the whole reporting cycle—do not, in practice, allow for innovative alternative structures."[38] The tidy-looking series of documents for application forms and monitoring policies is closely related to a second mechanism—the timeline of aid projects. Funding for activists and civil society actors is normally project-based, which means it is short term. Working up new funding proposals is a frequent task, which burdens activists and rights defenders with paperwork.[39]

The literature emphasizes civil society actors' coordination with international donors as a mechanism of professionalization, but authoritarian states can also expect a certain degree of legibility from CSOs that can lead to professionalization. Both are organizations seeking to create order and enforce legibility, though their ostensible reasons for wanting this differ in their political and social agendas.

Sociopolitical context

Whether civil society actors can successfully pursue their advocacy depends on buy-in from state actors and local communities alike. The factors I presented above reflect institutionalized constraints from state actors, but the broader sociopolitical context can also undermine or support civil society's efforts. I take sociopolitical context to encompass the central values of society and political culture; this could be shaped by geographical, ideological, linguistic, or historical cleaves. As civil society has become more visible in politics, it has faced ideological backlash, often in the form of accusations of being agents of the West.[40] This can be the result of governments' intentional counter-mobilization or vilification of foreign aid and NGOs.[41] Indeed, lack of public trust in NGOs is evident in many countries worldwide,[42] and skepticism can undermine NGOs' efforts and ostracize civil society actors.

Civil Society in Kazakhstan

I now turn to explore the five mechanisms laid out in the previous section to illustrate whether and how they apply to the Kazakhstani case.

(Extra)legal constraints

Although Kazakhstan's constitution guarantees the right to free assembly and expression, myriad rules in the Criminal Code restrict these rights in the name of law and

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order. Depending on the nature of a collective organization's mission, they should apply to a legal entity. Registration is required for collective organizations to conduct any activities, open a bank account, or establish an office. Participation in unregistered public organizations may result in administrative or criminal penalties, such as fines, imprisonment, the closure of an organization, or suspension of its activities.

Registration is a multistep process,[43] but going through the steps of gathering all the proper documents and submitting the state duty does not guarantee an organization registration. It is not uncommon for a group to be initially denied registration over small mistakes in their paperwork. Civil society actors working in the sphere of civil liberties and human rights understand the denial of their registration as a government tactic to slow their advocacy efforts.[44] In addition to requiring registration, Kazakhstan's national government has adopted several laws that constrain CSOs' activities. One interlocutor explained, "[The government] goes to great lengths to keep civil society to be manageable, so that civil society can't exercise independence from the state."[45]

Precarity is most pronounced when authorities use laws not directly related to civil society to target dissent, especially those related to antiterrorism and extremism. In addition to targeting activists with extremism charges, the government often accuses civil society actors of inciting social unrest and spreading false information. These charges come with prison time, heavy fines, bans on social and political activism, and probationary periods of "restricted freedom."

Kazakhstan's government has leveraged the expansion of telecommunications to target civil society actors in several ways. First, what constitutes false information can easily be politicized, as in the case of activist Alnur Ilyashev, who was sentenced to three years of restricted freedom and a ban on involvement in social or political activism for five years for Facebook posts criticizing Kazakhstan's ruling party during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.[46] Throughout the pandemic, the government has pursued stricter laws on social media. In May 2022, Tokayev signed into law a bill that requires foreign social media companies to set up local offices and register to operate in Kazakhstan. The bill, which was first proposed in September 2021, frames this move as a way to combat cyberbullying and harmful content for children. Civil society actors see it as a way for authorities to restrict communication and get more leverage from foreign social media companies in censoring content deemed problematic for the regime.[47]

Civil society actors navigate legal constraints on their activities, but they also face surveillance and extralegal pressure from security forces. One woman recounted being pulled aside for "random inspection" during the 2017 EXPO, but she did not see anyone else in the massive crowd get the same attention from police. She said that "it seemed like they have some kind of database, like, who's in the opposition."[48] Another interlocutor, who spent time in prison for trumped up charges unrelated to his advocacy, echoed this idea: "The power structures, especially the security agencies, act in the same way they would have in Soviet times, except they do not imprison people. It's exactly the same surveillance and observation, and in some cases intimidation too."[49]

Technological advances have enabled new methods of surveillance, but interlocutors said they could often figure out when they were being tracked. One interlocutor, whose Instagram account is private, posted about a slurry of new follow requests

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following a protest; the accounts had few followers or identical bios, leading the activist to understand that they were somehow affiliated with the regime. In December 2021, Amnesty International announced that it had amassed sufficient evidence to prove that Kazakhstan's government had used spyware to surveil some two thousand people, including prominent activists.[50]

Authorities have also resorted to harsher extralegal methods to pressure civil society actors into silence. Interlocutors described their offices being burned down, having drugs planted on them, and arbitrary detention several days before an election or planned protest. "They detain you under some pretext, like, 'Oh, you broke a rule,' or 'Oh, you don't have a mask on.' Of course, they can't say, 'We are detaining you because you are an [independent] election observer.'"[51] Two young men who had been active in opposition protests in April and May 2019 were called in to enlistment offices and sent to rural parts of Kazakhstan to complete one year of military service, despite having documented medical exemptions.[52] Pressure on civil society actors has led to tragic outcomes, such as the death of activist Dulat Agadil, just a few hours after their arrest in February 2020, or the escalation of small-scale protests to violent lockdown across the country in January 2022 that led to hundreds of deaths.[53]

Importantly, not all civil society actors experience the precarity stemming from these (extra)legal constraints in the same way. One informant said that "it is a little harder to be an activist than a rights defender" because "we talk about political reforms."[54] This is reflected in data collected by the public association Dignity, which conducts monthly monitoring of threats to civil society. Drawing on data from Dignity's monthly reports from January 2019 through January 2022, Figure 1 illustrates the extent to which civic activists are targeted more often than other types of civil society actors. Dignity collects data on threats to rights defenders, activists working on the environment, labor, and religion, public figures, journalists and bloggers, political opposition, human rights lawyers, and civic activists. Between January 2019 and February 2022, threats to civic activists outweighed threats to all other kinds of civil society actors combined in thirty-one of thirty-eight months.

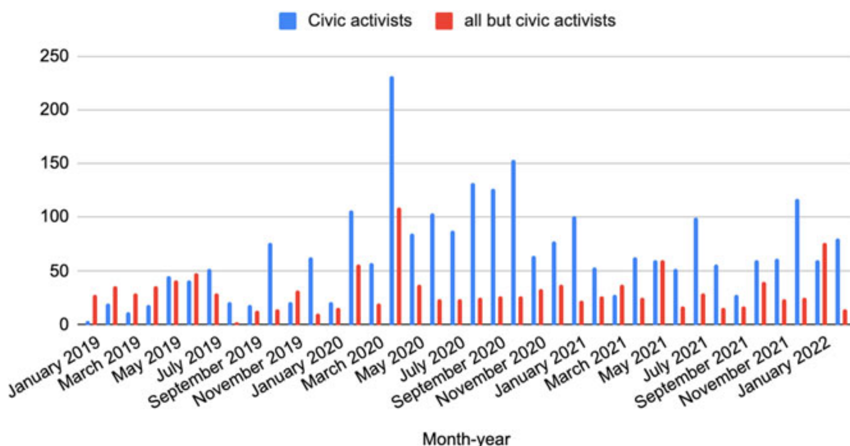

Figure 1. Threats to civil society actors, recorded by Dignity

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Financing

Kazakhstan's elite have leveraged the country's natural resources to develop a competitive economy, which has also been wielded to fund civil society. A 2005 law on State Social Contracts formalized the process for state financing of CSOs. Between 2005 and 2019, Kazakhstan increased government spending on CSOs from $100,000 USD to $40 million.[55] As of 2017, 34.6 percent of NGO financing came from government sources.[56] There was a massive uptick in government funding for CSOs between 2014 and 2016, following the adoption of restrictive financing procedures in December 2015 called "Rules for Providing Information by CSOs." This law—proposed by the Civil Alliance of Kazakhstan, an umbrella NGO affiliated with the Ministry of Information and Culture—imposed burdensome information requirements for all NGOs. A law mirroring legislation passed in Russia in 2012 was adopted in 2016 and instituted additional reporting requirements for organizations that receive foreign support.[57]

The pressures to rely on state funding mean that in order "to stay alive, [CSOs] had to choose between changing their tactics and relying on state funding."[58] But respondents who work at registered noncommercial organizations nearly universally said they would never take money from government sources. Many independent NGOs expressed concern that accepting government funding could undermine their credibility.[59] A human rights lawyer told me that "some of the organizations that began to work using grants offered by the government turned into GONGOs."[60] Slightly different from fears of cooptation, others explained their decision to avoid government grants in terms of impartiality. One interlocutor, with many years of experience in politics and civil society, also spoke of the desire to maintain independence: "We have never received financial support here in Kazakhstan. We need this in order to maintain our independence, impartiality, and in fact . . . so that we are not pressured, influenced, but although there is always pressure, at least they cannot interfere in our activities directly."[61] An activist involved at a registered NGO, echoed this sentiment, "We should remember that Kazakhstan is an authoritarian country and that we won't be able to criticize the state and take money from them at the same time."[62] This interlocutor described having worked with a local NGO worker ("NPO-shnik") and parting ways with that NGO after two years because of government funding: "I got disillusioned with him when he took government orders, took money and so on. So I was like, 'Goodbye.'"

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

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mothers of large families or trapping wild animals or helping homeless people. It's all politics. It all stems from how the budget is distributed."[64]

Regulations on civil society organizations' financial reporting have also been weaponized to silence dissent. One interlocutor explained, "Today, legislation in the field of finance, taxation, commercial structures is very stringent, and any organization can be shut down for any reason."[65] This was demonstrated in November 2020, when Kazakhstani tax authorities targeted over a dozen human rights NGOs with fines and threats of suspension.[66] These organizations were told they failed to properly report on foreign funds. In interviews, representatives from three of these organizations asserted that these charges were not based in reality, but were an attempt to distract watchdog organizations in the weeks before parliamentary elections in January 2021.

Financial flows from the Global North

After gaining independence in 1991, the West began sending development aid to Kazakhstan to support privatization and neoliberal reforms. In his annual address to the people of Kazakhstan in October 2000, President Nazarbayev acknowledged that this aid came with strings attached. He hinted at wanting to move away from dependence on foreign support: "To be or not to be an independent Kazakhstan?"[67] It was not until the financial crash of 2008 that aid flows began to decrease.[68] Even as the global economy recovered, development assistance to Kazakhstan did not rise significantly. Kazakhstani authorities framed this decrease in foreign aid as a result of the country's successful development.

Multiple informants working in independent NGOs described a reduction in internationally funded projects that began in 2015. One rights defender told me this was "because [donors] thought that now Kazakhstan is an independent enough country and can work on its problems on its own."[69] Indeed, after consultations with the OECD's Development Assistance Committee in 2014, Kazakhstan's government adopted a series of directives on the distribution of development aid in 2015.[70] Interlocutors explained that the reduction in development aid pushed organizations and civic movements to think creatively about how to fund their activities.

A seasoned consultant in human rights responded to my question "Can civil society actors change the system from within or not?" with a financial perspective. She said, "The big question here is about money. I mean, of course, you need creativity. We need people that can use legal methods and so on, but … creativity can achieve something interesting."[71] Creativity speaks to the use of art and clever "flashmobs" to gain attention, but also to making events happen on a minuscule budget. This includes paying for materials, food, and space from their own pockets, as two activists associated with Oyan Qazaqstan recounted.[72] Beyond self-financing, activists can draw on a wider community for financial support. One interlocutor explained that while groups that are not registered cannot have a bank account or collect financial assistance, "We don't need to be bothered with that … there are other ways, like donations there to an individual."[73] With the spread of mobile banking apps in Central Asia, crowdfunding has proven a useful tactic for quickly raising money to pay activists' fines or buy materials.

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Professionalization

Empirical studies of civil society in Kazakhstan find that NGO workers have sought to professionalize so as to be more legible to donors.[74] A human rights lawyer explained that international donors do not technically require organizations to professionalize: "Donors, they might not have a requirement that the organization must be locally registered. Though, because requirements are strict and bureaucratic … [donors] can only work with registered organizations."[75] Interlocutors explained that donors prefer to work with registered organizations to maintain consistency with internal budgeting requirements, and they recognize that international donors operate in Kazakhstan at the discretion of the government and need to follow local laws.

The pressure to professionalize does not only stem from international donors, however. One informant mentioned that the downsides of registration come after becoming a formal organization; "there are all kinds of reports having to do with your work, just lots of reports."[76] A lawyer and leader of a prominent human rights organization called the requirement to have founders, a board of trustees, and a charter "a kind of forced institutionalization."[77] This institutionalization or professionalization stems from authorities' interest in "efficiency of interaction with non-governmental organizations."[78]

From the perspective of authorities, professionalization is a tool of efficient (and compliant) service provision. Consider the example of the public foundation Strong Mothers Nur-Sultan, which was registered in March 2020. The foundation's leaders distanced themselves from a spate of "mothers' protests" that took place across Kazakhstan in February 2019 following the death of five children in a house fire. "We were not with those aggressive mothers, but those who asked the state for fair benefits, benefits, housing," the director of Strong Mothers said in May 2021.[79] Strong Mothers Nur-Sultan fills an immediate need for many women in Kazakhstan's capital city, and they do so through financial support from the government, with close support from local bureaucrats and up-and-coming party functionaries.

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

In contrast to the development studies literature that is skeptical of professionalization, interlocutors described many benefits of formalizing their work. Without clear institutional structure, an advocacy campaign or coalition can falter. An interlocutor who directed a large NGO and participates in an informal collective of civil society organizations was frustrated that "Our membership is a little blurry, and there's been a stagnation in our work." As such, she explained that she wanted to "sort out the organizational structure, [to figure out] who are members are, what our strategy is, and … where to position ourselves in [civil society]."[80]

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Professionalization and expertise are useful for achieving civil society actors' goals. Reflecting on the transition to human rights from another industry, one informant said, "I realized that I didn't have enough legal training, so I trained as a lawyer from 1996-1999. And since 1999, some twenty plus years, I have been a lawyer, international expert, and specialist in the field of human rights and international law. This is my profession."[81] Some 80 percent of employees at this interlocutor's organization are trained as lawyers, "not just activists or concerned citizens." It is important to have technical training, both for more institutional leverage to achieve their advocacy goals and to gain legitimacy in the eyes of both the population and state authorities. One interlocutor explained, "Taken together—the NGO experts, the lawyers, the scientific experts—we have a strong mind." Having a "strong mind" is a responsibility, she told me: "Civil society can teach and hold seminars or lectures for people, and we can organize advocacy campaigns in line with the law."[82]

Sociopolitical context

Two broad features of Kazakhstan's sociopolitical context are especially relevant to the prospects for civil society actors' advocacy efforts: the geographic gap between urban centers and villages and the siloing of Russian and Kazakh-language-speaking communities. Political unrest in early 2022, referred to locally as "Bloody January," followed by Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 have amplified the stakes of identity politics and civil society in Kazakhstan. Kudaibergenova and Laruelle argued that the mass protests of January 2022 and the regime's harsh crackdown stem from the government's failure to heed citizens' calls to address socioeconomic inequalities. They explained that urban-rural tensions and sociocultural tensions stemming from Kazakhstan's wide urban-rural gap, which is heightened by "emotionally loaded" divisions between urban Russophones and Kazakhophones who have "successfully preserved their national identity."[83] This was further intensified after Russia's mass invasion of Ukraine, which fueled the trend of an uptick in interest in Kazakh-language media and content—including among informal citizens' groups, registered civil society organizations, and the government.[84]

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

The urban-rural divide closely resembles the linguistic divide, with villages tending to speak more Kazakh and cities being Russian-speaking hubs.[88] This has resulted in the siloing of media consumption by language-speaking communities, with fewer Kazakh-language outlets of repute.[89] The leader of a large NGO described it as if,

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"the Russian-speaking and Kazakh-speaking audiences live … in two different worlds."[90] In response, some civil society organizations are keen to reach out to Kazakh speakers and facilitate more Kazakh-language content. For example, the government-affiliated umbrella NGO Civil Alliance conducted a project to teach NGO leaders Kazakh.[91] The Youth Information Service of Kazakhstan (MISK) has actively begun to develop Kazakh-language content and hopes that their materials will be split evenly between Russian and Kazakh by the end of 2022. Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law has coordinated the translation of Kazakhstan's international legal agreements into Kazakh. Their translation of the Declaration on Human Rights has been used by the UN. One informant involved with Oyan Qazaqstan commented, "It's really remarkable that a culture is emerging and people [in the Kazakh-speaking sector] are appearing who talk about important things like democratic institutions."[92]

Conclusion

In this article, I identified top-down processes that make associational life precarious in authoritarian regimes. These include (extra)legal coercion, finances, undue influence of the Global North, professionalization, and the sociocultural environment. Interviews with twenty-seven civil society actors—including lawyers, rights defenders, and managers of formal NGOs as well as activists and members of loosely institutionalized civic movements—show how precarity is experienced in Kazakhstan in this field.

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

While the development studies literature is quite pessimistic about the effect of professionalization on civil society, civil society actors from Kazakhstan spoke favorably of expertise and institutionalization of their efforts. Some interlocutors expressed frustration with the forced institutionalization that comes with registering as a public association, while one interlocutor—a member of an unregistered coalition of rights defenders and NGOs—described the fuzziness of the organizational structure having a negative effect on their work. Those working in legal advocacy spoke of the importance of education and experience, not only as tools to effectively perform their job,

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but also to appear legitimate in the eyes of the state and communities they work with. Given that the people I spoke with are highly educated and represent some of the most prominent human rights organizations and activist networks, the ambiguity I identified is likely not representative of civil society in Kazakhstan as a whole. The ambiguity of this interpretation suggests conceptual stretching, with various disciplines understanding the process of professionalization differently. Further research is warranted to understand whether professionalization exerts uneven pressure on smaller campaigns in more rural areas or in communities with less education.

Civil society actors' comments about a rural-urban divide that mirrors linguistic siloing echoes concerns articulated in three decades of research on language, identity, and politics in post-Soviet countries. However, civil society organizations—even those staffed by higher-educated, ethnic Russian, or Russian-speaking people—recognize the need to bridge these gaps and are actively developing Kazakh-language content.

Just days into January 2022, protests over skyrocketing fuel prices took on a broader antigovernment framework. In addition to requesting support from the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Russian-led military alliance, to combat the threat of "20,000 terrorists," President Tokayev called for police to shoot without warning. At least 238 people died at the hands of state forces during the January events, and hundreds more suffered in detention.[93] Russia's escalated invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 not only raised the stakes of Kazakhstan's geopolitical relationship with Russia,[94] but has also heightened desire for Kazakh-language material and national unity.[95] In June 2022, just six months after the violent events in January, Tokayev again tried to signal a transition to a "New Kazakhstan" with a referendum on constitutional amendments. The amendments, which were accepted by a wide margin in the referendum, did not materially change the relationship between state and society so much as they reinstituted limited checks on presidential power and undermined Nazarbayev's cult of personality.[96] All interviews for this paper were conducted before the tumultuous turn of 2022, which warrants further investigation on both national and geopolitical structures of precarity on activists and rights defenders in Kazakhstan.

Notes

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17. Mariia Tepliakova, "Neo-authoritarianism and Media Systems Transformation in Central and Eastern Europe" (Master's Thesis, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2021), 7, 32.

18. See Alisha Holland, "Forbearance," *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 2 (2016): 232–46.

19. Larry Diamond, *Developing democracy: Toward consolidation* (Baltimore, MD, 1999).

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