

“The space for independent activism, including youth activism, is narrowing down” in Kazakhstan, mentioned Sergey Marinin, a participant of the CABAR.asia School of Analytics. Why are the voices of active and civic-minded youth perceived so radically by the authorities?

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Marathon (running) in Almaty on April 21, 2019. Photo azattyq.org

Brief overview of the article:

- Young people in Kazakhstan are not interested in politics and rarely take part in state-sponsored youth initiatives, which indicates the low effectiveness of the latter.
- The fundamentally new approach of independent youth activists is based on informality, horizontal structure of the association, proto-political agenda, and the use of online platforms;

- The authorities are not happy with unpredicted bursts of discontent, but they fail to create effective feedback channels. It is necessary to develop a constructive dialogue with all actors involved in social and political processes, including representatives of independent youth organizations.

Do young people have a choice?

On April 21, 2019, two young people in Almaty, unfolded a banner on the side of the road where the running marathon took place, with the words “You can’t run away from the truth # I have a choice.” For this action, both were charged with 15 days of administrative arrest.

In short order, an artist was charged with 5 days of arrest for posting a quote from the Constitution of Kazakhstan on a banner in support of earlier arrested activists. All this happened, ironically, against the backdrop of the “Year of Youth” - the government’s grand strategy to support young people and develop youth initiatives. Why are the voices of active and civic-minded youth perceived so radically by the authorities?

One fifth of the total population of Kazakhstan is young people under the age of 28.[\[1\]](#) Traditionally, young people are considered to be more apolitical than older people. Young people are less interested[\[2\]](#) in socio-political processes, do not have real levers of influence on decision-making, and are more frustrated, since they cannot change anything. All this is superimposed on the lack of developed social lifts for young people.

According to the National Report “Youth of Kazakhstan”, which was conducted with the assistance of the Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2019, 50% of young people surveyed have not followed the development of state youth policy at all. Almost a quarter of respondents have not even heard anything about state programs that support youth, and 75% of respondents have not taken part in these programs at all.[\[3\]](#)

According to the data of a regional study of youth in Central Asia by the F. Ebert Foundation, a little over 15% are interested in political processes in Kazakhstan.[\[4\]](#) In general, there is a rather low level of involvement of young people in government measures to support youth initiatives. What about non-state initiatives?

Traditionally, the authorities of Kazakhstan suppressed any independent manifestations of civic activism, including youth activism. However, 2019 marked an important milestone - the first alternative presidential election without the “leader of the nation” Nazarbayev. The new political cycle and the presidential campaign, during which massive violations were

committed, caused a surge in youth activism. Before the June elections, a group of activists, youtubers and actors, released a short video entitled “Men oyandym”[\[5\]](#) (I have woken up), which talks about the pressing problems of Kazakhstan. The video became a national hit and collected hundreds of thousands of views on various platforms.

Such popularity of the video was followed by an instant response from the state. Pro-government content makers filmed an alternative video, and surprisingly the new president had reacted to the #MenOyandym campaign. The old tactics of ignoring new creative protests using online means were deemed ineffective by the authorities.

Which methods and tools does the 2020 youth activism use in Kazakhstan? How effective are they and is there a future for such activism?

The history of independent youth activism in Kazakhstan - old means, new form?

Creative protest is not a new phenomenon. Political actionism, posters in their hands or none at all, walks around the city (“Seruen”), or singing songs, reading patriotic prose - all this has been experienced by the Kazakhstani activism back in the 2000s and early 2010s. According to a political scientist D. Satpayev, youth activism in modern Kazakhstan has several phases of development.[\[6\]](#)

During the period of “Khrushchev thaw” with the change of power in the USSR, the students and intelligentsia became more active. On this wave, in 1963, Kazakh students of Moscow universities initiated an association called “Zhas Tulpar”,[\[7\]](#) which promoted Kazakh culture, art, and literature. The second most important stage was the Zheltoksan events (‘Zheltoksan’ is Kazakh for December, as it took place that month and since then symbolically is called this way) of 1986 in the capital of Kazakhstan, when young people strongly opposed Moscow’s decision to appoint a new leader of the republic.

The researcher calls the third stage as “pro-Western romanticism”, when at the beginning of independence, young people became more active in the third sector. The fourth phase, 2000s, was marked with the emergence of new political structures with the participation of the party elite - the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DCK) and Ak Zhol.

The state riposte against such civil manifestations also turned out to be not new - suppression of protests, blurring and hijacking the agenda, mimicking, in some cases even extremely radical response such as mass detentions. However, the most important difference between the present-day activism and the past one is that the state, which previously dominated all sectors of public life and controlled communication channels and

the media, does not have overwhelming control over the Internet, where the ideological struggle and the so called the struggle of generations unfolded. The so-called “untamed youth” who grew up in the Internet era have realized their ability to influence change through educational and civic initiatives.

The all-too-common “hashtag activism”^[8] of Kazakhstani youth resulted not only in mass protests after the June 9 elections, but also in the formation of both, organized youth structures and informal interest groups that defend the interests of the large young generation. In this sense, there is some commonality of approaches with the Zhas Tulpar movement, although back then, activism was much more limited.

Implicit activism and decentralization of new youth civic organizations

As it was already mentioned, the new political cycle gave impetus to a more organized development of youth activism. Such associations as “Oyan Kazakhstan”, “Kakharman”, “Republic” appeared on the civil forefront. All three structures are united by one common principle – they have a horizontal structure, which is typical for many youth organizations in the world lately.

Without going into details of the essence of the movements’ demands, I will note their general reformation nature – activists demand changes in the established socio-political and administrative structure of the country.

However, there are many less formalized structures, unions, circles, interest groups that are engaged in social activism – volunteering, educational projects, and other civic initiatives that are the prototype of political and civic activism.^[9] Under the conditions of authoritarianism, activism acquires not so much explicit forms as many hidden modalities. According to Irina Mednikova, a well-known Kazakhstani human rights activist and youth policy expert:

“Kazakhstan is on the threshold of the birth of civil society. Various initiatives are taking place in the city. Especially in the field of urbanism, “young people who have grown up” up to 35 years old come together to hold events such as “My House”, “My Yard”. It is not necessary to create organizations, there are already many active young people ”.^[10]

These and other bottom-up initiatives with a social inclination, as well as various educational online projects prevail in Kazakhstan now.

New youth activism is characterized by

fluidity and lack of clear agenda.

New youth activism is characterized by fluidity, lack of clear agenda, as opposed to more resilient non-governmental organizations, which are also dependent on donor organizations' demands that shape their activities. The new activism is more socially oriented and more flexible. It uses horizontal methods of engagement and organizational structure. Probably, this is some kind of opposition to the authoritarianism of the government's administrative system or any formalized structure. It is also important that this type of activism is subject to greater fragmentation, division into interest groups, and ultimately demobilization and decomposition. This type of activism is mostly found in the urban educated populations.[\[11\]](#)

Searching for the middle ground

Kazakhstan is an authoritarian hardliner according to many international metrics.[\[12\]](#) Kazakhstan's authoritarian system is differently interpreted by many researchers. Some call it a soft authoritarianism, others a hybrid regime.

However, the essence remains the same – the space for independent activism is narrowing down and the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens are systematically violated.

Following massive protests that came on the heels of the presidential elections, the law on peaceful assemblies was revised and a number of measures were taken to strengthen the state youth policy in response to new challenges and discontent among young people.

However, this attempt does not pursue the goal of a real dialogue with young people on equal terms. The new law turned out to be a wolf in sheep's clothing,[\[13\]](#) and the state continues to restrict the constitutional right to peaceful assembly, and the modified strategies in the field of youth policy continue to focus on the conformist majority.

Another attempt by the authorities does not pursue the goal of a real dialogue with young people on equal terms

The authorities are not happy with sudden displays of discontent, but they fail to create effective feedback channels. When peaceful civil actions are suppressed in the country, there is no tradition of peaceful protest, any new reason – be it a change in political leadership or an unpopular decision, will lead to spontaneity and unpredictability of the flow of the civil movement, which will inevitably continue to grow. It is necessary to develop a constructive dialogue with all actors involved in social and political processes, including

representatives of independent youth organizations. Creation of feedback tools, dialogue platforms, assessment of youth needs are the most important elements of improving the state of affairs in youth policy.

Government activism often deprives the younger generation of a sense of belonging. In the era of “New Sincerity” and “New Ethics” to act by old methods is to sign in advance in their own inefficiency. Independent youth activism, which does not have a huge material and technical base, human resources, is still able to mobilize a certain part of the youth. As events in other post-Soviet states have shown, the mobilization of youth occurs spontaneously and can be destructive for non-democratic regimes.[\[14\]](#)

The state should understand that young people have a demand for honesty and openness, and a desire to be heard.

Therefore, it will be impossible to build effective communication without working out the feedback channels.

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[\[4\]](#) Op. cit. 2.

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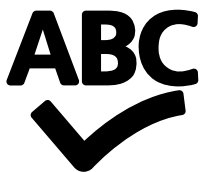
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