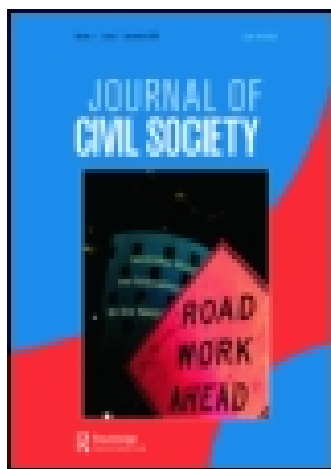


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# State-Society Relations: NGOs in Kazakhstan

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**ABSTRACT** *Kazakhstan has provided the economic exemplar for other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries since its independence in 1991 following the collapse of the Soviet Union. It has been classified by the World Bank as an 'upper middle income' country and witnessed sustained growth in spite of the global recession. Political reforms however have been slower to realize, and the Presidential Republic still remains a highly centralized and autocratic regime. Some 24 years beyond independence this article assesses whether the role played by the non-governmental organization (NGO) sector has changed and, as a consequence, the asymmetric state-society fulcrum has shifted in favour of a stronger societal voice in Kazakhstan. It finds mixed evidence of partnership between NGOs and Government and ongoing problems in exercising public voice and moderating the power of the state.*

**KEY WORDS:** Kazakhstan, non-governmental organizations, civil society, citizenship, voice and accountability

## Introduction

There are claims and counterclaims about how serious Kazakhstan, a former Soviet republic, is in its attempts to democratize. On the one hand, critics argue it is a repressive regime which stifles opposition, limits press freedom, and suppresses the growth of civil society (Kelly, cited in Amnesty International, 2013; Nicol, 2013). The National Social Democratic Party Azat, for example, argued that Kazakhstan has 'an ugly political system which apart from trampling upon citizens' rights and freedoms creates a pseudo-democratic façade' (Kosanov, 2010, p. 2). On the other hand, supporters claim Kazakhstan is a young democracy, has made significant achievements when judged against the progress of other Central Asian countries, and is committed to political and civil society reforms at a pace consistent with its low starting point. As the Minister for Foreign Affairs put it: 'please don't expect Jefferson's democracy today, tomorrow, or even the day after ... it will come if evolution allows' (Idrissov, 2013, p. 1).

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Critics cite a concentration of power in the executive branch of government (representing the state) under the tight control of the President which dominates both the legislative branch (parliament) and the judiciary. There is an inadequate system of checks and balances, and hence the legislative and judicial powers provide a mechanism for the controlling executive power, also referred to as ‘soft authoritarianism’ (Schatz, 2009; Schatz & Maltseva, 2012). Freedom of speech is guaranteed by the Constitution but effectively restricted by constitutional provisions protecting ‘honour and dignity’; the continued criminalization of defamation and insult; and the higher protection afforded to the President and public officials (insulting the President and senior officials is a criminal offence). The Civil Code does not provide for a limit to damages awarded for defamation and insult or for a limitation period. According to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), ‘the fact that defamation and insults can still result in imprisonment, and an increasing number of lawsuits with exorbitant damages are awarded against journalists and media outlets, induce restraint and self-censorship’ (2011, p. 12).

Corke, in evidence to the US Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, has argued that Kazakhstan is ‘heading down a path of increasing instability’ (2012, p. 2). She cites the way in which the social unrest in Zhanaozen (the centre of a long-running industrial dispute by oil workers) has been handled by the Kazakh authorities; unfair elections and significant restrictions on multi-party competition; tightening controls on religious freedoms and public expression; and a clamp down on media outlets extended further to websites with ‘destructive’ content. Specifically referring to civil society, Corke argued:

Civil society in Kazakhstan had already operated under tightly controlled and repressive conditions, with government harassment, including police visits and surveillance of NGO [non-governmental organization] offices and personnel. Real civil society efforts have been squeezed out by government NGOs which the government mobilized to create the impression of a thriving Kazakhstani civil society in the West. (2012, p. 7)

She recommended an increase in material support for civil society in Kazakhstan in cases of direct repression against non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their activists.

The focus of this article is to examine whether civil society has, since the independence of Kazakhstan in 1991, played a role in the democratization process. The article explores the role of civil society as a potential independent voice and a bulwark against a centripetal regime despite evidence of growing political stability under a highly centralized Presidential Republic. Our starting point draws on the seminal study of Luong and Weinthal (1999) on environmental non-governmental groups working specifically in the energy sector in Kazakhstan. Their work, more generally, offered an early assessment of state-society relations in Kazakhstan. They argued that support for NGOs, from the perspective of Western liberal democracies, is perceived as laying the ‘initial building blocks of a civil society’. Their study highlighted the adverse impact of the political climate on the development of an active NGO sector and concluded that

overall, NGOs face insurmountable difficulties in Kazakhstan owing to the limited degree of democratisation that has taken place in the system as a whole since independence . . . NGOs’ goals and strategies are constrained by the very government they are trying to influence. (Luong & Weinthal, 1999, p. 1276)

Some 16 years on from their original study we assess whether the role played by the NGO sector has changed and whether, as a consequence, the asymmetric state-society fulcrum has shifted in favour of a stronger societal voice in Kazakhstan. Given the importance of context, we begin by examining the political milieu in which civil society is located.

### Background and political context

Kazakhstan is a central Asian state which is bordered by Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and the Caspian Sea. It is a vast country of steppes, mountainous areas, and desert with a population of some 16.9 m people of whom around 60% are Kazakhs, 25% Russians, and the remainder a huge mix of ethnically diverse groups (more than 130 ethnic groups and 40 religious denominations) (Kazakhstan Agency of Statistics, 2014). Historically, Kazakhstan was recognized in 1936 as a full union republic of the USSR. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, Kazakhstan declared independence and joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) under President Nursultan Nazarbayev (former head of the Kazakh Communist Party) who won uncontested elections with 91% of the vote (Cummings, 2001, 2002).

In the first decade following independence there were three stages of reform: (a) dismantling of the Soviet control system and Communist Party political monopoly; (b) change in the political structures consistent with the separation of powers (executive, judicial and legislative) adopted through the first Constitution in 1993; and (c) the election of a bicameral Parliament with a new Constitution in 1995 (Isaacs, 2010). Presidential elections took place in 1999, two years ahead of schedule while the economy was growing, and Nazarbayev was re-elected with 82% of the vote, although the OSCE expressed concerns about fairness and irregularities. Further Presidential elections were held in 2005 with Nazarbayev taking some 91% of the vote. Again the OSCE recorded a number of significant shortcomings in the election process. In 2010 the President's grip on power tightened further when legislation was introduced which designated him 'Leader of the Nation' and gave him and his immediate family life-long immunity from investigation and prosecution. The law gives Nazarbayev the power to veto legislation and address Parliament at will, even when he is no longer President. This followed a popular uprising in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan which ousted President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and caused concerns amongst other Central Asian leaders about their own positions (Cummings, 2012).

In December 2010, a public campaign was launched in support of a national referendum to extend the President's term of office until 2020 without elections. This was declared unconstitutional and the President went to the polls in April 2011 where he was re-elected for a third term with 95.5% of the vote in a poll boycotted by opposition parties. In 2012, parliamentary elections (*Mazhilis*) were held in which the President's Party (*Nur Otan*) won 83 of the 98 seats available. OSCE observers noted that the elections 'did not meet fundamental principles of democratic elections' and that the authorities 'did not provide the necessary conditions for the conduct of genuinely pluralistic elections. Several political parties were blocked from standing and a number of candidates were de-registered without due process' (OSCE, 2012, p. 3).

President Nazarbayev challenges critics of his regime pointing to significant achievements in a relatively young independent nation, given its origins and the need for strong leadership from the outset (Kubicek, 1998). The Presidential Republic of Kazakhstan got off to a difficult economic start as the country experienced industrial recession,

hyperinflation and a significant decline in living standards, despite its rich mineral resources. In part, these problems emerged because of Kazakhstan's entry into a market-based economy where it lacked knowledge and experience. The President responded with a series of tough economic reforms and, in so doing, extended his power base over Parliament which wavered in its resolve to tackle deepening problems facing the country. Since 1999, strong oil prices and a good macroeconomic performance resulted in a sustained period of economic growth. Health spending increased ten times in the last decade, higher pensions and more jobs have reduced the number of people living in poverty, literacy rates are almost 100%, and there are generous scholarships for young people to study abroad (World Bank, 2013).

External factors have played an important role in the development of civil society in Kazakhstan, as Silitski (2010) has observed (see also Cummings & Ryabkov, 2008). Following his examination of the internal and external reactions by post-Soviet countries to the 'coloured revolutions' in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, he described an authoritarian backlash aimed at buttressing surviving autocracies, citing Kazakhstan as an example of a country which feared revolutionary contagion. He noted the refusal to publish independent newspapers on the eve of the presidential elections in December 2005 and 'even tighter restrictions on NGO activities in Kazakhstan under the semblance of anti-terrorist laws' (Silitski, 2010, p. 342). Silitski concluded that the autocratic reaction in Kazakhstan to the coloured revolutions undermined any efforts to develop a strong and organized opposition and civil society and stymied attempts to generate a democratic and pluralist society.

### Definition and scope

The starting point in examining state-society relations is to offer a working definition of civil society of which there are many (Buxton, 2011; Candland, 2001; Deakin, 2001; Foley & Edwards, 1996; Jensen, 2006; Keane, 2009; Lewis, 2009). Keane (2009, p. 461), for example, refers to civil society as 'a dynamic ensemble of legally protected non-governmental organizations that tend to be non-violent, self organizing, self-reflexive, and permanently in tension, both with each other and with governmental institutions that "frame", constrict and enable their activities'. However, given the origins of civil society in Kazakhstan we draw on Crotty's research (2009) which examined NGOs and civil society in Russia. She offers a more context-relevant definition, derived from Kuchukeeva and O'Loughlin's work in Kyrgyzstan, in which civil society is defined as 'the sphere . . . situated between the state and the market which can serve as a promoter of democratic values, provide models of active citizenship, and temper the power of the state' (2003, pp. 557–558).

In addition to adopting a working definition there is a need to enumerate the size and composition of civil society in Kazakhstan which is also challenging. The non-profit sector is regulated through two pieces of legislation: *On Public Associations* (1996) and *On Non-Commercial Organisations* (2001). However, these laws include a variety of organizations such as joint stock companies, consumer co-operatives, religious associations, foundations, unions, and associations, making it difficult to differentiate the traditional boundaries of civil society. Following independence in 1991, there was a flurry of activity and more than 400 NGOs were established mainly in the areas of human rights and democratization, consistent with the reform agenda in Kazakhstan (Huseyin,

2003). This growth was accelerated through assistance from international donors in the USA and Europe during the late 1990s. By the year 2014 the Department of Social and Political Work in the Ministry of Culture and Information listed more than 35,000 non-profit organizations, including 18,000 NGOs, which are distinguished from non-profit organizations mainly by their objectives. There is however uncertainty about the numbers involved. Nezhina and Ibrayeva (2013), for example, claim that many of the registered NGOs are dormant or non-functioning and estimate that the number of active NGOs in the whole country amounts to little more than 800. These numbers are at odds with research by Makhmutova and Akhmetova (2011) who claim there were 8000 NGOs in Kazakhstan of which 2000 were active at the time they wrote. Kazakh legislation allows for NGOs which are created specifically to implement state social contracts and non-commercial organizations which include non-profits such as religious groups and labour unions; government officials use these terms interchangeably and hence create difficulties in researching the NGO sector (Asanova & Sedova, 2013).

The functional activities undertaken by NGOs ( $n = 18,000$ ) include: environment (15%); children and young people (14%); women (13%); medical (13%); culture, arts, science and education (12%); human rights (8%); social welfare (7%); community initiatives (7%); disability and rehabilitation of children (7%); and miscellaneous (4%) (Ministry of Culture and Information, Kazakhstan, 2014). Although civil society encompasses a much wider role than the work of NGOs, given problems in identifying the scope of civil society in Kazakhstan, the focus of this research is on NGOs which represent 'building blocks of a civil society', to adopt Luong and Weinthal's (1999, p. 1267) frame of reference.

### Research on Kazakh civil society

What does the extant literature and scholarship tell us about civil society in Kazakhstan? The limited scholarship on civil society in Kazakhstan can be summarized as ranging from a sector which works in partnership with government in public service provision and is meeting social development challenges, to one which is almost entirely controlled and regulated by the state, offering a fig leaf for claims of greater democratization and the strengthening of voice and accountability. According to Makhmutova and Akhmetova (2011, p. 3), knowledge about the state of civil society in Kazakhstan is limited, and two contrary views are held: that civil society is a strong and influential actor and that civil society is embryonic.

The evolution of civil society in Kazakhstan is rooted in the Soviet system where non-governmental activities were confined to youth, sports, cultural, and scientific organizations. By the 1960s however, social movements began to emerge that confronted the dominant party and state structures, demanding new economic and political ideas, and approaches as the Soviet Union weakened (*Jas Tulpar*, for example, united many Kazakh students studying in Moscow against repression and raised the question of national identity). The period of *perestroika* associated with Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s created the conditions for greater openness, pluralism, and independent civil initiatives in Kazakhstan. This period witnessed the growth of political groups such as *Adilet* and *Azat*, which were actively critical of the totalitarian system of government and promoted the democratization of society, and environmental groups, such as *Nevada Semipalatinsk*, which successfully campaigned for the closure of a nuclear testing site.

Kazakhstan's political antecedents therefore make literature on civil society in post-Soviet Russia relevant to our examination of Kazakhstan. Noteworthy is the work of Crotty (2009) and, more recently, Ljubownikow, Crotty, and Rodgers (2013). The former examined the environmental movement in Russia and its impact on the development of civil society and concluded that 'despite "kernels" of civic activism that were present at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian civil society remains weak and ineffective in the face of an ever strengthening state' (Crotty, 2009, p. 87). In their most recent work they report that the state in Russia now plays 'a dominant, directing and all-encompassing role with regard to civil society formation and development' (Ljubownikow et al., 2013, p. 155). A significant lesson from this scholarship is the call to understand civil society in Russia (which they describe as civil society *po-russki*) as 'a sphere shaped by its context, rather than constituting a driving force for democratization within that context' (Ljubownikow et al., 2013, p. 163). In short, the Western perception of the roles played by civil society in strengthening democracy and challenging the state simply does not transfer to post-Soviet countries. The wider relationship between civil society and strengthening democracy has been discussed by Evers (2010, p. 116), who argued that not only does it take 'social capital to make democracy work' (Putnam, 1993, p. 185) but the opposite applies—'it takes democracy to make social capital work'.

An interesting literature on civil societies in authoritarian regimes offers a theoretical framework to help understand Kazakhstan (Cavatorta & Durac, 2011; Rivetti & Cavatorta, 2013). Scholars in this area challenge the assumption found in democratization studies which suggests that a strong civil society is a *sine qua non* for transition from authoritarian regimes. Rather, they argue, there is authoritarian resilience to civil society groups in which, through a process of state domination and co-optation, their voice is muted and for all intents and purposes, there is no obvious dissent—a superficial stability exists. In short, the linear path between a strong civil society and democracy does *not* exist. The key assumptions of transitology no longer seem able to explain how democracy and authoritarianism can co-exist in countries which have been described as 'liberalized autocracies' (Brumberg cited by Aarts & Cavatorta, 2013), a term which seems apposite for Kazakhstan. Hence, Aarts and Cavatorta, in their work on civil society in Syria and Iran, argue that instead of civil society activism being linked directly with democratization, 'a more neutral definition, stripped of its liberal normative content, can be a more useful tool to analyse what the reality of activism is on the ground in authoritarian systems rather than what liberal democrats would like it to be' (2013, p. 6).

In a fascinating series of case studies which explore civil society in China, Cuba, and Russia, Froissart (2014b), Geoffray (2014) and Daucé (2014), respectively, explain how 'organized contention can co-exist with authoritarian rule and even consolidate it' (Froissart, 2014a, p. 222; see also the work of Lideaur, 2012 on Myanmar; Strecansky, 2012 on South Korea). Geoffray's study of Cuba provides evidence of 'channelling' citizens' claims towards specific social and cultural issues and, in so doing, preventing political dissent. This has the effect of isolating or marginalizing political dissidents from other dissenters. In Cuba, she argues, 'the government has managed to combine political opening, selective repression and channelling tactics in order to avoid the emergence of a unified contentious movement' (Geoffray, 2014, p. 234). Daucé, using a case study of the Moscow Helsinki human rights group, finds evidence of 'hybridity' exercised by the Russian authorities—repression of activists sitting alongside institutionalized co-operation with NGOs through grants. She argues that this hybrid policy has led to a decline in



violence against activists and ‘the civility of oppression exerted by the government over NGOs’ (Daucé, 2014, p. 239). Froissart, using case studies of the rights of migrant workers in China, shows how some legal activists have used the law (public interest litigation and administrative law) to empower civil society. She concludes that these new forms of political participation ‘take place *within* the authoritarian regime and should be understood as being an integral part of its mode of operation rather than a means to spread democracy and the rule of law’ (Froissart, 2014b, p. 268). In short, these research contributions show that authoritarian regimes endure ‘in part *thanks to* certain forms of discontent by showing that the way they are expressed is an integral part of authoritarian governance’ (Froissart, 2014a, p. 219). The work rejects the idea of ‘authoritarian resilience’ through suppression of discontent but rather highlights mechanisms used by illiberal regimes to depoliticize organized contention so that authoritarianism and elements of democracy can subtly co-exist.

Turning specifically to existing research on Kazakhstan, Ziegler’s work (2010) offers a comprehensive account of the sector. He describes the state’s dominance of civil society as less thorough than in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan or Belarus; yet, he finds, the sector is weaker than in the Baltic States or the Ukraine. Ziegler’s research addresses how Kazakhstan has managed the tension between building a post-communist state and, at the same time, trying to accommodate an embryonic civil society. He argues that Kazakhstan has an ‘in-between’ form of civil society which does not fit the traditional roles of either ‘fostering civil responsibility in a democratic polity or providing a protected sphere which resists the tyrannical (communist) state’ (Ziegler, 2010, p. 799). Instead he suggests that the role of civil society is in flux because it sits between a centralized, absolutist state and an unrealized stable democracy. He concludes that the state has accommodated civil society ‘by co-opting, regulating and pressuring civil society organizations into a cooperative rather than a confrontational relationship with the state’ and is therefore different from civil society in liberal democratic societies (Ziegler, 2010, p. 815). In summary, he suggests:

Kazakhstan’s civil society is less willing to confront the state, more cooperative with the authoritarian system, and wary of the potential for civic activism to degenerate into instability. Few civic organizations have the resources to sustain their activities without state backing, so civil society has evolved into a mix of grass-roots organizations and groups sponsored and supported by the state . . . While contestative elements are not entirely absent in Kazakhstan’s civil society, they have at least for now been implicitly subordinated (or sacrificed) in return for effective governance. (Ziegler, 2010, p. 816)

Other researchers, a number of whom are Kazakh scholars, are however more supportive of, and positive about, the role played by civil society. Bhuiyan and Amagoh (2011), for example, argue that NGOs perform an essential role in the delivery of public services and that the political context has been supportive of the growth and development of civil society in Kazakhstan. They suggest even greater potential for a vibrant civil society in the development and maintenance of democracy and good governance. Drawing on the work of Ovcharenko (2004), who examined obstacles to cooperation between the state and civil society, they conclude that the Government of Kazakhstan ‘has endorsed the functions of civil society as essential tools for ensuring the quality delivery of public services’ (Bhuiyan & Amagoh, 2011, p. 240). Specifically in the area of health care reform in

Kazakhstan, Amagoh (2011) contends that there are now well-developed partnership models in which staff are shared between public sector agencies and NGOs who are also involved in health sector policy-making. Beginning in 2005, he argues, the government started to allocate public funds to NGOs working on the prevention of ‘socially significant’ conditions, and this has been significant in the delivery of health care: ‘the flexibility, autonomy, and responsiveness of NGO structures have made a difference in the speed and effectiveness of primary health care services reform’ (Amagoh, 2011, p. 575, citing Kulzhanov & Rechel, 2007). In a similar vein, Amagoh and Kabdiyeva (2012, p. 38) examined issues which could improve the sustainability of NGOs in Kazakhstan and concluded that, while they are in a ‘nascent state’, NGOs have had ‘positive results in elevating some issues of societal concerns to the public discourse, and persuading the government to take positive actions’. Kabdiyeva’s research (2013) uncovered early signs of collaboration between NGOs and the business sector. She saw significant potential for both parties in developing strategic partnerships. Saktaganova and Ospanova (2013, p. 1281) are even more sanguine when they claim that Kazakhstan NGOs are ‘now beginning to operate to international standards’ (see also Karzhaubayev & Sydykova, 2013). In a very balanced account of NGOs, with a specific focus on environmental groups, Soltys (2013) posed the research question as to whether they are ‘the harbingers of the democratization of the country that many observers hope to see?’ Notwithstanding Soltys’ description of Kazakhstan as a highly centralized corporatist state which ‘is learning to share power only slowly’, he sees some positive developments:

The national government has liberalized its legislation on civic associations and has begun to allocate financial resources in support of NGOs’ social activities and ENGOs’ environmental ones. President Nazarbayev, the key figure in Kazakhstan’s centralised political system, seems aware that certain kinds of social activism are both inevitable and desirable. Being personally secure in office and having a broader national view, he has instructed local executive officials to be more amenable to civic initiatives than these officials would have been otherwise. (2013, p. 15)

Given the somewhat different assessments of the role of civil society in Kazakhstan from existing scholarship we consider additional evidence as a contribution to this ongoing debate.

### **Methodology**

The data gathered for this study draw on empirical evidence from secondary sources and, in addition, report the findings of qualitative research gathered through focus groups with NGOs in Kazakhstan. The focus of the data gathering linked directly to Crotty’s operational definition referenced above. In both the primary and secondary research we looked for evidence of how civil society, using NGOs as the medium for investigation, promoted democratic values, provided models of active citizenship, and tempered the power of the state. Primary research was gathered through focus groups with NGOs. We categorized NGOs into their key areas of activities: environment; children and young people; women; medical; culture, arts, science and education; human rights; social welfare; community initiatives; disability and rehabilitation of children; and miscellaneous. We then invited representatives from across these sectors to attend focus groups and share their experiences of working in Kazakhstan on the three themes above (democracy, citizenship and challenge function to the state). Three focus groups were held in

Astana during September/October 2013 with between eight and ten people in each group. There was no prior allocation to specific sessions, but dates were offered to facilitate optimal attendance and to keep numbers in each group to a manageable level that would encourage debate and allow for a spread of opinion. The focus groups were co-facilitated by the authors and conducted in Russian and Kazakh. Not all sectors were equally represented and no claim is made here about the extrapolation of these qualitative data to NGOs as a whole—in short, this was a convenience sample (Bryman, 2008). Some of the organizations involved are relatively small-scale and with local reach. In an attempt to encourage frankness of opinions expressed given the sensitivity of the subject under review, participants and organizations were guaranteed anonymity, and there is no attribution of comments to individuals involved in the focus groups. Data were however recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVivo qualitative software, which clustered the data broadly around the 3 thematic areas described above.

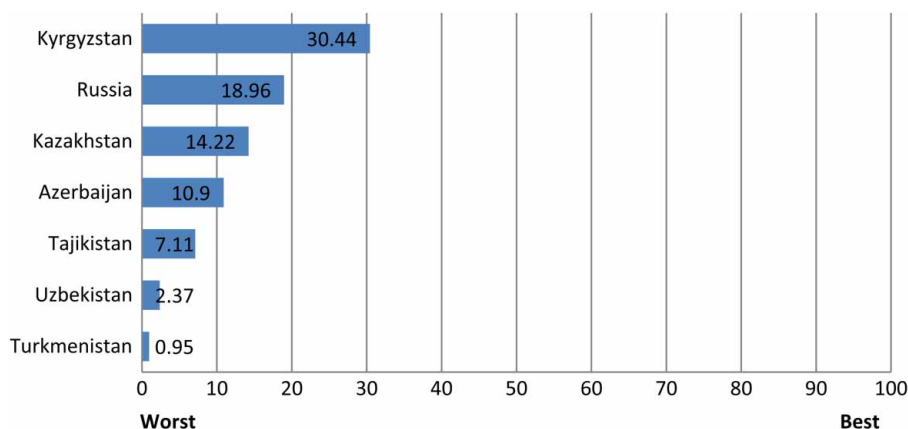
### The findings

There are a number of secondary empirical sources which offer some means of verifying Kazakhstan's journey towards democratization. The World Bank, for example, reported on Worldwide Governance Indicators for 215 economies over the period 1996–2013 along six dimensions: voice and accountability; political stability and absence of violence; government effectiveness; regulatory quality; rule of law; and control of corruption (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2010).<sup>1</sup> The indicator of most relevance to this discussion is 'voice and accountability', which captures perceptions of the extent to which a country's citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association and a free media.

Figure 1 shows the percentile rank of each of the former Soviet countries neighbouring Kazakhstan. Percentile rank indicates the percentage of countries worldwide that rate below the selected CIS countries in Figure 1. Higher values indicate better voice and accountability ratings. Hence, in the case of Kazakhstan, around 15% of 215 countries rate worse, or 85% rate better, than Kazakhstan on voice and accountability measures.

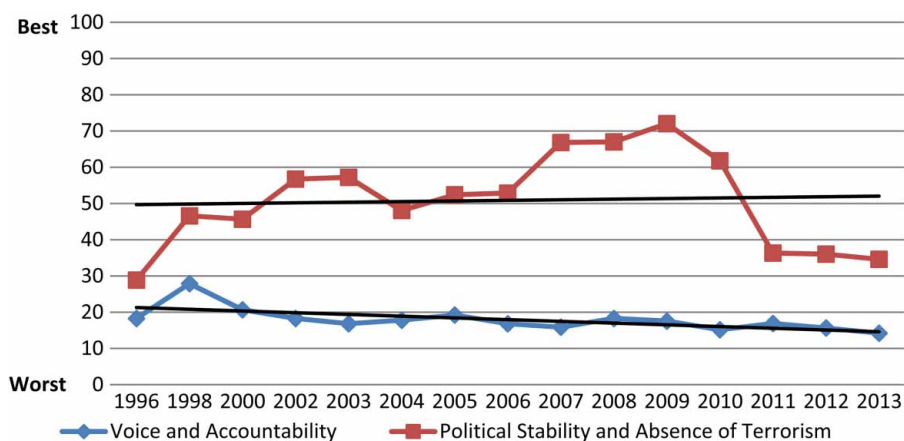
If one looks at the trend in measurement of voice and accountability for Kazakhstan since 1996 (see Figure 2), there is a slight downward trajectory in the extent to which Kazakh citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association and a free media. Compare this with another composite World Bank measurement on political stability and the absence of terrorism, defined by the likelihood that the government will be destabilized by unconstitutional or violent means, including terrorism, where the trend-line has been upwards until 2010 (since then there is a danger of unrest and destabilization in Central Asia from the growing spread of radical Islamist ideas and also lack of cooperation between the region's countries). In light of these data, can civil society in Kazakhstan provide a bulwark against the excesses of a highly centralized and controlling regime where independent voice is limited and accountability remains weak?

In terms of primary data, the focus groups' sessions with NGO participants were analysed under three broad headings arising from the definition adopted for this research (promoting democratic values; providing models of active citizenship; and moderating the power of the state). We discuss each of these in sequence.



**Figure 1.** Voice and accountability 2013.

Source: Calculated from World Bank group—worldwide governance indicators, 2013.



**Figure 2.** Kazakhstan governance indicators.

Source: Calculated from World Bank group—worldwide governance indicators (1996–2013).

### *Promoting democratic values*

Participants in the focus groups thought that while promoting democratic values may be a laudable goal, it did not particularly fit the context of Kazakhstan and was more apposite to a Western perspective on the role of NGOs. Kazakhstan, they argued, was still a relatively ‘young’ country following independence and needed an incremental approach to democracy. Several participants questioned what precisely was meant by ‘democratic values’ and insisted that Kazakhstan held elections, implemented the rule of law, and had a growing economy, positive socio-economic indicators and stable government institutions (ministries). What ‘additionally was required’, they asked, and what could NGOs do to help achieve these ‘democratic values’? As one participant noted:

Kazakhs are a proud people with a rich history of self-help and strong family ties. To suggest that we should aspire to some model of democracy that ignores our heritage is like giving a small child unpleasant medicine and telling her it will be good for her. We have not experienced these ‘democratic values’ that you imply will be good for us and which ignores our previous ‘medical record’!

This led to a discussion of the role of international NGOs in Kazakhstan. Some participants from local NGOs were suspicious of the intentions of internationally funded NGOs. Whilst grateful for the funding which they invested in Kazakhstan and the help afforded to vulnerable people in the field of welfare services, some questioned the ulterior motives of the international NGOs. This sentiment was captured by the comment:

Are they here first and foremost to help a developing country and, in turn, to evangelize to us about how we should reform to comply with how their countries operate. What, for example, has the UK or USA to teach us about ethnic co-operation when we look at racism in these countries?

Examples were offered that illustrated the ‘fear of government’ towards international NGOs which had, or wanted to have, a presence in Kazakhstan. Licensing and operational rules were constantly being tightened to restrict the entry of international NGOs or limit their activities for those which were already in-country. They have to sign agreements outlining the nature of their work and from where their funding is derived, and to adhere to strict lines of accountability to the relevant ministry. In espousing ‘talk about human rights and democratic values’, the fear is that international NGOs could mobilize people against the state which would result in social unrest in a country which prides itself on multi-ethnic stability. Given the ethnic demographics of Kazakhstan, this could create volatility where Russians have a significant presence:

The issue for the Government of Kazakhstan is that we want to raise our democratic profile on the international stage with developed countries. One aspect of international respectability is to show the existence of a well-developed civil society. The Government put in place a programme [Development of Civil Society 2006–11] to assist in achieving this with associated indicators of performance. Problem is that we missed the targets set and hence state-NGOs were established, some of which were no more than an address and email to present a front or shop window to the outside world.

There was however a clear acknowledgement of, and welcome for, the expertise that international donors could offer in capacity building for Kazakh NGOs which were under-resourced and lacked training in core areas of service delivery. Moreover, participants accepted that external funding allowed NGOs greater freedom of expression and less reliance on ministries and government organizations in Kazakhstan.

### *Providing models of active citizenship*

Concepts such as ‘active citizenship’ were not fully understood by focus group participants. They did however characterize Kazakh people as being ‘passive citizens under Soviet rule’ because of the dominant role played by the state in their lives. With such a recent history of state pervasiveness it had proved difficult for NGOs in Kazakhstan to

encourage volunteerism and persuade people to take a more active role in society. As one participant described it:

This was a whole new approach for us—getting people involved in organizing activities for their communities was alien to us. We were used to a top-down model underpinned by a strong network of kinship and family support. At first we were challenged to take control of our own communities through a self-help model assisted financially by government in the form of grants.

Focus group participants claimed that over the last ten-year period there has been a significant shift in the attitude of government toward NGOs. In 2005, for example, a new law ‘State Social Bid’ (literal translation, which means the commissioning of social services from NGOs) created a new operating environment for NGOs and was the start of a period of partnership working with state organs. This development was consolidated further through the ‘Civil Society Development Concept’ in 2006 which improved the legal, economic and organizational milieu for NGOs drawing directly on international standards to inform the Concept. One of the core objectives of the Concept is ‘to establish harmonious and equitable partnerships between governmental organizations, the business sector and NGOs’ (Nazarbayev, 2006, p. 4). The Concept also included economic incentives for the business sector to collaborate with NGOs.

There were dissenting voices amongst focus group participants, however. The state-led NGOs have been a convenient mechanism for government to shift public service delivery into the third sector. This has had two results. First, ministries can blame NGOs when services fall below quality standards which, in part, can be because of poor funding from government. Second, increasing the number of state-led NGOs adds to the total number of NGOs and thus enhances Kazakhstan’s public image as a country with a growing civil society. As one contributor described it:

There is no challenge coming from the NGO sector to government. State-NGOs are an integral part of our public service delivery machinery. They also provide an opportunity for corruption. State officials can skim off funding to state-NGOs through contract procedures. The same is true of independent NGOs. If you want to survive as an organization, then you pay officials. Funding is the key way of controlling the sector. Everyone knows this—it is part of Kazakhstan mentality. We all understand not to bite the hand that feeds us. Conflict and dissent are discouraged because they will have funding implications. To ‘rock the boat’ is to contribute to your own demise—stay below the radar and you get a monthly salary. Agitate and you lose your source of income. There is no choice for me.

NGOs simply reflect the wider environment in which they work—corruption is rife, nepotism is the order of the day, ministries are all-powerful in the survival of independent NGOs. The unspoken ‘agreement’ is to acquiesce to the status quo or risk your continued existence as an organization. The system becomes self-perpetuating as a result.

One suggestion from participants which attracted significant support amongst NGOs was the wider political imperative towards decentralization of public services. This idea was described as follows:

The Government has been keen to promote self-government through greater decentralization. So far this has not been very successful. People are not yet ready for this development. Local NGO development could help achieve this goal. If public services can be provided through a partnership approach between the state and NGOs, then this could stimulate the idea of local government which the authorities are keen to endorse. This is why I think there is more funding going into the NGO sector. The government now recognizes how well NGOs understand local need and can respond more effectively to it, as opposed to the detached nature of some of our ministries and Akimats (a municipal, district, or provincial government).

The nature of state-society relations has therefore moved on significantly in recent years, participants claimed. Government increasingly sees NGOs as 'partners' in service provision and is prepared to increase grants available to them to deliver welfare/social services given their closeness to the point of delivery and understanding of local needs.

### *Moderating the power of the state*

The language used in this thematic area was again quite alien to NGO participants. They did not see their primary role as 'challenging the state' and preferred to think of it as a partnership model in which they felt comfortable expressing alternative opinions and views which may or may not be accepted. As an example of this development, several cited the Community Commission<sup>2</sup> which is a forum chaired by officials from the Office of the President to seek the views of NGOs. It acted as a 'sounding board' for government and allowed NGOs to promote ideas for new legislation or make amendments to existing laws and policies. One participant offered the following example:

There have been major reforms in the senior civil service in Kazakhstan where top officials are divided into two cadres (Corps A and Corps B). As a measure of the influence of NGOs, some of us are now involved in the recruitment process for Corps A civil servants. This gives you an indication that our sphere of influence has increased significantly. In the Community Commission we continuously push for greater transparency in public services through our involvement in the current reforms on performance management.

Each of the ministries has its own consultation forum in which relevant NGOs participate and which acts as a platform for ideas or new initiatives. In addition, yearly civil forums (Гражданский Форум) are held as showcase events and are opened by the President of Kazakhstan. An Alliance of NGOs (Гражданский Альянс) now operates as an umbrella group for more than 500 active NGOs.

Notwithstanding these collaborative activities, NGOs continue to lobby for change through their contacts in Parliament and the media and through research and advocacy work. Kazakh people cultivate personal networks through family and clan connections and therefore lobbying is somewhat different than in Western societies. Typically NGOs will lobby for additional funding, training resources, and capacity building in the sector, legislative changes, and the need for a greater number of NGOs in the fields of disability and social welfare.

Several focus group participants dissented from this view of the ‘partnership model’ as outlined above. They considered the actions of government to be opaque, impervious to ideas coming from the NGO sector, and repressive in their actions towards them. As one contributor pointed out:

We do not have a partnership with government as this implies an equal relationship with the state. We don’t have that. To the outside observer, it appears that civil society works well with government. In fact, this relationship is controlled by financial support from government. If you don’t comply, you don’t receive government funds. Simple as that. Without government funding many of us could not exist. With limited funding there are no resources to develop professional capacity in NGOs and hence the quality of our organizations is low. It’s a vicious circle.

Some participants claimed that the legislation on civil society is unclear, a situation which results in different interpretations being applied across ministries. They called for new legislation similar to that which exists in Russia as a way to protect them against the excesses of government and clarification on their rights under the law.

In summary, Kazakhstan NGOs are being better funded by government, but this could limit any potential ‘challenge’ function. Some see the evolving relationship as a dynamic and growing partnership with government in which there are mutual benefits and they consider their influence to be increasing, although there was no consent on this position. The long-term goal of NGOs is to mobilize Kazakh people to play a much more active role in society and to become much less reliant on the state.

## Conclusions

In reaching some conclusions, we return to the research question posed at the outset: has the asymmetric state-society relationship evident since Kazakhstan’s independence in 1991 shifted in favour of a stronger societal voice through a more vibrant civil society? This research has clearly identified shortcomings in trying to address this question, not least definitional issues. It has proved difficult to circumscribe civil society in Kazakhstan, and our attempts to operationalize this through the narrower lens of examining NGOs has not been easy given the interchangeability of the terminology used by government officials and the fuzziness of the boundaries.

Our work offers a much more nuanced resolution to the polemic that there are two contrary views held about Kazakhstan: that civil society is a strong and influential actor and that civil society is embryonic (Makhmutova & Akhmetova, 2011). We suggest that civil society is neither embryonic nor strong and influential, but importantly the fulcrum of state-society relations is shifting towards a stronger societal voice through the work of NGOs. It is easy to see how, examined from the perspective of liberal democracies, one could conclude that civil society in Kazakhstan falls short of the operational definition used to structure this article: promoting democratic values; providing models of active citizenship; and moderating the power of the state. This, however, fails to fully appreciate the Soviet heritage of Kazakhstan and the cultural mentality of kinship, clan, extended family and self-reliance, synonymous with Kazakh society. International NGOs fail to understand these significant cultural factors. Nezhina and Ibrayeva (2013, p. 356), for example, conclude in their research that ‘NGOs inspired by Western donors are currently ineffective in Kazakhstan’.



The evidence gathered in this study is mixed. The World Bank data are more sanguine than other empirical assessments which suggest a static or declining role played by civil society as a bulwark against a highly centralized and controlling state. Research by Kazakh scholars and the opinions of NGO workers who took part in our focus groups, on balance, tend to be more positive about recent legislative and funding changes in favour of a growing and stronger sector. There also appears to be a level of optimism about the future potential of NGOs now that they have been endorsed by the President and are working collaboratively with ministries.

None of this is to deny real problems in the operating environment of NGOs about which a number of our focus group participants spoke at length. We heard claims from one NGO in our focus groups that where NGOs compete for social contracts,

the allocation process is opaque, corruption is pervasive, technical specifications are written in a way which prevents competition, and conditions of offer are replete with language that appeals for the ‘promotion of patriotism’ and the necessity of ‘establishing a positive image of Kazakhstan’.

That said, NGOs provided evidence of much greater interaction between state organs and the non-governmental sector both in the delivery of contracted public services and direct participation on key consultation and decision-making fora. This growing ‘partnership’ has been bolstered by a supportive legislative framework and greater levels of public funding available to NGOs which are increasingly operating in the field of social welfare as an agent of government. All of this might simply illustrate two points made by Aarts and Cavatorta (2013, pp. 8–9) that (a) the combination of repression and co-optation by authoritarian regimes has guaranteed political stability and (b) the unquestioned acceptance of authoritarian frameworks by civil society has lowered expectations of changes—the status quo prevails and is unlikely to change. Participants in this study were clearly resigned, although in some cases grudgingly, to this conclusion.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Notes

1. The World Bank aggregate indicators combine the views of a large number of enterprise, citizen and expert survey respondents in industrial and developing countries. The individual data sources underlying the aggregate indicators are drawn from a diverse variety of survey institutes, think tanks, NGOs and international organizations.
2. The Commission included the following groups (in Russian): Экспертные советы при местных исполнительных органах [Expert Councils of local executive authorities]; Координационный совет по взаимодействию с неправительственными организациями при Правительстве Республики Казахстан [The Coordination Council for Cooperation with NGOs under the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan]; Экспертный Совет Комиссии по правам человека при Президенте РК [The Expert Council of the Human Rights Commission under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan]; Общественная палата при Мажилисе Парламента РК [Public Chamber under the Majilis of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan]; and Общественные и консультативные советы при всех министерствах и агентствах [The Public and the Advisory Councils under all Ministries and Agencies].

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