Evolving Political Cultures in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan: Trends and New Paradigms

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Abstract: In the 21st century, new means of information and communication technologies have become an important tool for many countries in terms of expanding political rights and freedoms, forming a rule-of-law state, and achieving the ideals of a democratic society. The paper aims to study trends and carry out a qualitative assessment of the interdependence of the media and social platforms and political culture of citizens of three Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. This work aims to fill the existing theoretical gap regarding the issues of mutual influence of political culture and media in the states above. The study reveals the factors of public political participation in the three countries examined through the prism of comparing indicators of public participation in political processes in the context of the development and emergence of new types of media and social network platforms. The paper analyses the essential features of each country's development of democratic institutions and civil dialogue, considering the role of traditional media and social networks as implementation tools. Based on the experience of the three countries examined, the results of the study give reason to say that the media (including social networks and media platforms) do not have a decisive influence on the formation of political culture. Transformation processes in the sphere above of these countries are fragmentary, affecting to a greater extent issues of individual perception of political processes, as a rule, without significant external manifestation. The findings of the study provide grounds to assert that the theoretical comprehension of political culture in the examined countries is scarcely distinguishable from the concept of political awareness.

Keywords: Central Asia, civic engagement, civil society, democracy, institutionalism, media communication, political participation

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Forming an effective political system heavily depends on individuals' political involvement and understanding of their role in forming a sustainable society capable of managing social well-being within the state (Amaechi & Motalenyane, 2023; Clark & Inglehart, 2018). Only with a pre-existing set of values and life orientations can society establish its own set of rules of conduct. Such a set of rules of conduct is designed to preserve a group of people's integrity, domestic order, and local specifics (Grass, 2024). According to the factor above, the legal nature of a separate social group gradually becomes part of the nation over time due to natural, political, and religious influences. It is thus capable of forming a competent political elite. Hence, political power is centralized to govern society as a point of contention between various political subjects and entire social communities. Political power can be studied to understand better its nature, as well as significant trends in the organization of public policy and how this policy is communicated to the population (Comer & Jacobi, 2021; Knill & Tosun, 2020). Studying political power also allows people to predict a country's future development. When a state does not have long-standing traditions, customs, and ways to get involved in politics, the competitive side of political culture comes into play. This is exemplified by the Central Asian countries, which have spent the last 30 years transforming their political lives and defining their place in global processes (James, 2019; Tabaeva et al., 2021).

The concept of political culture has several definitions proposed by different scientists, but similar. For an initial introduction to the term, it would perhaps be appropriate to define Britannica: political culture is a set of general views and normative judgments held by the population regarding their political system (Winkler, 2022). The concept of political culture is closely related to the concept of civic culture. Despite some theoretical differences in the understanding of these terms, they are often used interchangeably (as a result, the term "civil political culture" is sometimes used as a synthesis of the two concepts). The emergence of these terms is attributed to Agger (1965), who wrote a fundamental work on the study of the behavior and preferences of citizens in the field of knowledge at the intersection of culture and politics.

Civic culture can be seen as a combination of locally competing political cultures that mediates the political system in emerging civil societies² in the context of a contesting political culture rather than as a requirement for accepting state power (Edwards, 2009). This is typical of countries in transition or those planning to implement a combined approach to public relations management, such as Kyrgyzstan (Urmanbetova, 2019). In contrast, authoritarian traditions persist in countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. Although some public administration reforms have been implemented in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, authoritarian political norms continue to gain ground in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan (Horák, 2021). The long-term effects of a shift in political power are felt most acutely in the form of shifts in national identity and how people view the world. In any event, altering one's attitude may profoundly impact one's spiritual and financial well-being and that of the whole society. The main concern lies in the difficulty of establishing procedures to improve the newly implemented political participation structure in the region and identifying potential drawbacks that could impede the process. Political participation, in this case, is considered in the broadest sense as a concept that refers to the activities of citizens aimed at choosing politicians and making and implementing political decisions (Uhlaner, 1986). The special features of media coverage of all changes in light of the nation's social stability constitute a separate issue. When examining the realities of Central Asian countries, the following elements stand out:

• political tribalism (Beyer & Kojobekova, 2019);

² Hereinafter, the term is used in a broad sense as a collection of citizens and voluntarily formed non-profit directed associations and organizations, protected from direct interference and arbitrary regulation by government authorities, as well as other external differences (Edwards, 2009).

• the centralized, collectivist nature of political activism inherited from the Soviet past (Sairambay, 2021);

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• changes due to the countries' political vacuum during the 1990s and 2000s.

The formation of models of interaction between civil society and government in these countries was accompanied by different ways of establishing government institutions, ranging from declarations of democratic transition to the transformation of ruling regimes into regimes that are a mix of democracy and autocracy. At the same time, scholars often ask the question of what is the fundamental difference between the Central Asian countries and the countries of the so-called Global West in this context and what place political culture and the role of the media occupy in these models (Akchurina, 2022).

The regimes established in Central Asia during their more than 30-year existence were able to confirm their viability (Garbuzarova, 2021). This even comes not about regimes but about one – an authoritarian regime with different modifications. However, regardless of its "modification," authoritarianism in the Central Asian countries has survived and ensured relative stability in the states. In none of the Central Asian countries has anyone been able to put forward a real alternative that is understandable to society. In some countries, there was internal political (including intra-elite) confrontation, but it could not succeed liberal forces since they were simply absent from the political map of the region. Central Asian authoritarianism is usually divided into hard and soft. The Uzbek and Turkmen regimes are considered hard. Soft ones include Kazakhstani, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The difference between the second type of authoritarianism and the first is the presence of relative freedom of the press and non-governmental organizations (Garbuzarova, 2021; Malashenko, 2011). At the same time, globalization and regional integration processes require a revision of the existing framework of political regimes, and in general, in the countries of the region, there is a tendency towards a cautious departure from authoritarianism towards expanding democratic freedoms and strengthening political participation. The latter, in turn, requires an understanding of citizens' readiness for such participation, which involves assessing its interaction with political culture as an instrument of participation.

The problem of forming and improving a different type of political culture that is more adequate to the democratic direction in the development of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan is very relevant for all three countries. In this sense, there is a need to rethink it from the perspective of an increasing commitment to democratic values (Garbuzarova, 2021; Petrov, 2019; Torogeldieva, 2009). In this regard, a special role is given to the question of the place of media in political participation and political culture as its instrument and independent variable.

The current study's objective in this regard is to identify tendencies that directly impact citizens' behavior and political participation in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan in the context of the mutual influence of political culture and media in three countries. Besides, the paper examines the media sphere as a communication platform between different social groups to highlight the similarities and differences in how civil societies function in these countries. The following tasks are included in the material to achieve the objective:

- to examine existing approaches to defining political culture and political power phenomena;
- to give a qualitative assessment of the trends in the influence of the media and social platforms on the political culture of citizens, paying special attention to the regional characteristics of the considered countries of Central Asia;
- to identify new instruments and meaningful political and civic activism patterns among Central Asian citizens.

The methodological component of the work is based on the use of secondary research methodology, including a systematic literature review and content analysis. The novelty of the topic under consideration comes from determining the distinctive features of civil society transformation in Central Asia under current globalization conditions. A comparative analysis of political participation³ among citizens of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan using media tools has been conducted, identifying distinct aspects of how media and social platforms influence societal political culture. The media component of this study will help create an unbiased picture of the public's attitudes through their use of media products and social networks, thereby helping to establish reliable data on current social attitudes and activities.

Theoretical Context and Sources Overview

For terminological certainty and to anticipate possible discrepancies, it should be noted that the concept of political culture is not generally accepted. Based on an aggregate of definitions, the term "political culture" can be defined as a set of beliefs, values, norms, customs, and practices that characterize the attitude of citizens towards politics, the state, and political institutions (Chilton, 1988; Formisano, 2001; Milbrath, 1981). It describes how individuals and society perceive and participate in political life, as well as how they evaluate and interact with political leaders and the system of government (Welch, 2016). Political culture can be diverse and multi-level. It includes such aspects as political values, beliefs, political norms, customs, and practices, as well as attitudes toward political institutions and leaders. Political culture can vary from country to country and even within the same country depending on history, culture, economic development, and other factors. It plays an important role in shaping political processes, the stability of state institutions, and the development of democratic societies. For example, the political culture of the United States has been heavily influenced by the origins of the first immigrants, as it is a settler society. Huntington (2006) defined American politics as having a "Tudor" character, with elements of the English political culture of the period, such as the common law, strong courts, local government, decentralized sovereignty among institutions, and reliance on popular militias instead of the standing army brought by the early settlers. China's political culture is closely related to political socialization, as children are instilled with the collectivist viewpoint of the Chinese Communist Party (Wasserstrom, 2018). In India, due to the colonization of the country by the British Empire, modern political culture was influenced by Western ideas that had not existed before. These influences include democracy and the parliamentary system, two institutions that were ideologically opposed to the caste system that previously dictated society (Chiriyankandath, 1996).

In contrast to the countries represented in Central Asian countries, after gaining independence, the concept of political culture has no clear outlines. After the USSR's collapse, the states of Central Asia were left on their own in vast political voids, which undoubtedly affected how they formed their worldview. However, it is important to note that the neighboring nations helped to shape political participation. Self-determination was a natural step for Russia, the most important neighbor to the north and a former metropolis. With the country's new political direction after the fall of the USSR, the Russian Federation, with its flawed political culture, was forced to make a very difficult decision: to follow the Western or the Eastern model of development or to create its concept of development that would be unique to Russia (Ivanov & Dzyuban, 2019).

Nonetheless, it cannot be stated that the political institutions and traditions that Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan received from the Soviet past have been forgotten. The Soviet political legacy has proven to be much more difficult to eradicate, as many elements of the old system continue to actively influence the daily state of affairs in the countries, despite efforts to revive pre-Soviet identities, promote a targeted escalation of violent nationalism, and implement market-based economic reforms (Burkhanov, 2021; Burkhanov & Collins, 2019).

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³ Hereinafter - activities of citizens aimed at choosing politicians, as well as making and implementing political decisions (Milbrath, 1981).

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The semi-autocratic nations of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and hybrid Kyrgyzstan are still affected by this Soviet legacy. When the dynamics of 2005–2021 are considered, democratic governance levels tend to decline, while authoritarian governance, on the other hand, tends to rise against a backdrop of diminishing democratic performance. In situations where swift response is crucial for survival, such as during an economic crisis, pandemic, or large-scale military action, it can sometimes be challenging to distinguish consolidated autocracies from democracies. In contrast to hybrid regimes, they are seen by their population as having the potential to guarantee political sustainability. The result is that authoritarian regimes, despite restricting civil liberties and opposition freedoms, have shown high rates of increase in institutional trust, the ability to guarantee political order, and confidence in the future for their citizens. These variables contribute to the country's civil society's subjectivity (Natalina, 2022).

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While discussing current civil society activism, one should consider the institutional and technological aspects, which, when handled skillfully, can achieve a resonance that will influence the authorities to take specific actions. For instance, many studies contend that social media encourages both online and offline political participation (Ahmad et al., 2019). Overall, regarding ongoing research on media communication, it should be highlighted that information and communication technology began to profoundly affect people's social interactions more than a decade ago. For instance, social and political discourse, communication styles, and interpersonal interactions have all changed due to new media and technologies (Golan et al., 2019). Today, the Internet is critical in informing the public about political happenings, engaging users, and increasing their engagement in offline political activities. The Internet has become essential for political debate and involvement. The way political views are expressed is important and requires a quality framework that highlights the critical role that communication internet platforms play (Nasimov, 2021).

In the Central Asian context, on the other hand, the sphere of political positioning in the media and information space is only beginning to develop. The region has not had centuries of experience in building public policy institutions that involve an open exchange of opinions and the distribution of power among members of society. Accordingly, it is only in the last decade that the political class has begun adopting political technologies that can mobilize the electorate to manage political and electoral processes effectively.

The research of the recent years concerning the issues of the relationship between political participation and development of political culture in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are devoted to such issues as: the features of the national mindset and the role of historical prerequisites in the context of the formation of the political culture of the Kyrgyz Republic (Kanatbekov, 2020, 2021), dynamics of development of political culture of the Kyrgyz Republic in the post-soviet period (Toktosunov, 2019), political culture of youth of Kyrgyz Republic (Kerimkulov, 2017), political tolerance as a principle of functioning of the political system of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Amanova & Tsepkova, 2017), current issues of political socialization of youth of Kazakhstan (Sagyndykova, 2023), features of electoral space and behavior in Kazakhstan (Kaliev, 2021), theoretical aspects of the political culture of journalists in Kazakhstan (Petrov, 2019), particular aspects of improving political and legal culture in Uzbekistan (Mamatkulov, 2022), digital political values of youth of Uzbekistan (Ergashev & Abdullayev, 2022), the influence of the media on the political culture of youth in Uzbekistan (Madaminov, 2018). An analysis of sources generally suggests that in recent years, the issues of mutual influence of the media sphere and the political culture of these three countries have not been considered at all or have been considered only indirectly. At the same time, some studies incorrectly interpret the concepts of political culture, equating it with professional ethics (Petrov, 2019).

Ultimately, it should be noted that isolated works represent modern research in this area and contain very little empirical data or objective analysis. This is true both from the point of

view of analyzing the subject of research in the context of three countries and about each of the countries considered separately. This work is intended to eliminate the existing theoretical gap regarding the issues of mutual influence of political culture and media in three countries.

Materials and Methods

The documentary basis of the study includes reports from non-governmental organizations (in particular Central Asia Barometer reports and analytic materials), regional organizations (OSCE Report on Parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan), as well as reports from UN structural divisions and other external actors who monitor election processes and civil society. The theoretical limitations of this work cover questions about the role of the media and social platforms as tools for the formation of political culture, in particular, the influence of the media on increasing the participation of citizens in domestic political processes, electoral preferences, and issues of interest in foreign politics. To assess the function of contemporary media as a medium for citizen political participation, the study implies establishing how voting patterns in parliamentary elections changed to the proportion of the population that uses social media, electronic media, and other information and communication technologies. The study, using secondary research methodology including systematic literature review and content analysis, discusses various perspectives on how the media can shape the political agenda in light of the current situation in Central Asia states. Online visitor statistics tools such as Statcounter and data from the independent, non-profit Institute of Applied Research and Analytics Central Asia Barometer (including primary data from the World Values Survey as part of the Central Asia Barometer initiatives or secondary data concerning sources), which are regularly updated and available to the public, were used to provide an unbiased view of the reach of media platforms such as social media. An auxiliary tool in this work is the method of system analysis, which involves considering objects or phenomena in their interdependence. The paper also employs the legal-historical method, which is used to systematize the factors that have influenced the current state of political culture in the distinct states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, given the significance of identifying the underlying causes of the current state of social relations. Within this method, it was assumed to determine the conditions that resulted in the creation of the current framework for political involvement. This was done by researching the sociopolitical life of the researched nations when they were Soviet members. At the end of the study, distinct factors were determined for each country that directly affect how citizens behave and participate in politics when viewed through the lens of media production, television distribution, and online content. The study also examined current strategies for addressing elements that encourage or discourage civic engagement, such as government or private citizens' employment of media campaigns.

The study's limitations related to the validity of the data for each country listed above, as various social groups dispute the findings due to political disagreements between the opposing and governing parties in each nation, as well as the availability of some updated World Values Survey data. Moreover, some data sets are not publically accessible due to the politics of the state in question, which implies that the conclusions may not be full and may require further research.

Results

Media and Political Culture: A Kazakhstan Case Study

In the early 1990s, Kazakhstan gained its first open electoral system. For the first time, civil society was given the potential to affect the balance of power. This took place in the political void that emerged with the fall of the communist system and the end of the Communist Party's dominant state-building role. Although there was a formal electoral system in place, the

political elite that emerged in Soviet Kazakhstan actively discouraged public participation in the governance of the fledgling state. Simultaneously, judicial and legislative counterbalances to the executive power were dismantled, and the president's powers were disproportionately expanded. Kazakhstan held parliamentary elections in March 1994, which led to the country's first national parliament since it became independent. Thus, 72 of the 177 deputies in the new lower house of parliament were directly connected to the president. His Union of People's Unity (SNEC) won 30 seats, and candidates on his list won 42 deputy seats. Observers from the OSCE deemed the election unfair, citing the inflated voter turnout (OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, 1995).

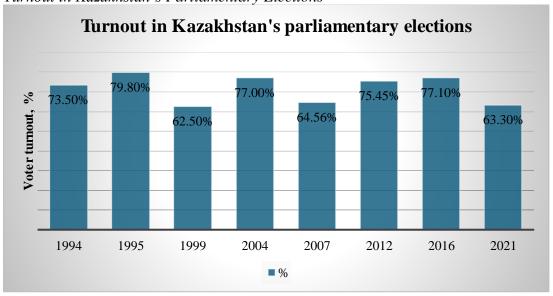
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Despite flaws in the electoral process, the new parliament took on a notably independent and critical stance (with a majority of deputies supporting a vote of no confidence in May 1994). In response, the government concentrated its efforts on disbanding the parliament. The Constitutional Court declared in March 1995 that the 1994 parliamentary elections were unlawful; parliament replied by voting to suspend the court's powers. A few days later, President Nursultan Nazarbayev dissolved parliament and legislated through executive decrees for 1995 (Human Rights Watch, 1999). Therefore, the presidential power consolidated its influence with the help of society at large, advancing its objectives in all areas of public life, including parliament, thereby establishing a super-presidential power and stifling non-systemic opposition.

As socio-political life became more stable, society began to take action only to address local problems without claiming political transformation. The confirmed voter turnout during the parliamentary elections, as shown in Figure 1, is a typical sign of public engagement.

Figure 1
Turnout in Kazakhstan's Parliamentary Elections

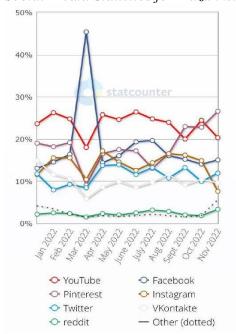


Note. Developed by the authors based on public data from Kazakhstan's Central Electoral Commission

With the available data, it should be highlighted that some changes might have affected party preferences despite the political landscape remaining unchanged. First and foremost, it was a generational shift. The younger generation of Kazakhs had no preconceived notions about the objectivity of elections and the necessity of their involvement, as elections were merely a formality for them. Young people needed to find different sources of information to get a full picture of what was going on in politics. These sources included the Internet as well as others that emerged in the 2010s, including social networks, chat apps, and video-hosting websites like YouTube (Shaimardanov, 2022). While minor, such changes impacted politicians' and

connected parties' declining electoral ratings. Internet platforms were especially popular during the January 2022 events. The Alma-Ata government shut down the Internet nationwide on January 5—the day of the city's bloodiest protests—to stop people from using the information to make things worse and 'in the interests of public security' (NetBlocks, 2022). Given the Internet outages, it is not insignificant that the lack of information escalated to the point where the protests became violent, ultimately resulting in fatalities. It was difficult for many Kazakhs living abroad to maintain contact with their family and friends as violence broke out. However, once the situation stabilized at the end of the month, content from the scene was published retroactively. As a result, many people gained objective knowledge about the situation. They formed their own independent opinions about the causes and progression of events and whether or not the actions of the police were appropriate given the circumstances. After the Internet outages were canceled, the interest in this topic was confirmed using data from Internet traffic. Thus, Figure 2 shows detailed social media statistics for Kazakhstan.

Figure 2
Social Media Statistics for Kazakhstan (December 2021 to November 2022)



Note. Adapted by the authors using data from Statcounter 2022 online visitor stats tool

YouTube prevailed among Internet users (24.38%) during the protest events of January 2022. Neither could Kazakhstan's society remain unaffected by events in its immediate neighborhood in the background of the war that began in Ukraine. In March 2022, as the battle was reaching its climax, Facebook's social network audience was 45.3% of users. Nevertheless, with 24-25% of Kazakhstan's audience still using YouTube as a source of material, it continued to be the top destination. Facebook and Instagram kept a lesser proportion of 14-16% of Meta's social media audience (Statcounter GlobalStats, 2022a). This percentage was lower than offline TV viewers (59%), but social media still had a significant impact, especially for the younger and middle-aged audience. For instance, only 32% of the audience aged 35-54 watch TV regularly, compared to 21% of the population aged 18-34 who use the Internet (61% of the total audience) (Kantar, 2022).

In most of Kazakhstan, outside of the major cities, there was a lack of civic participation in January activities, at least according to European standards. Even so, official numbers show that bloody protests led to the deaths of 238 people, including 19 police officers, and injuries to more than 4000 other people in Kazakhstan's Bloody January unrest. The economic damage

was estimated at \$2-3 billion. Kazakhstani authorities imprisoned over 12,000 persons as of 13 January 2022, including civic activists, trade union organizers, and independent media. The president fired the entire government and reversed the outrageous fuel price increase. President Tokayev offered a reform program pledging decentralization of authority and a transition to democracy after promising a 'new Kazakhstan' (Zhandayeva & Rosenberg, 2022). Analyzing what happens in the rest of 2022, it becomes clear that the situation has altered, if not because of any progress in democratization, then because of the increased political participation of citizens. Social media platforms like Facebook and TikTok, which use algorithms to bring together disparate protest communities, are once again serving as a hub for organizing protests and coordinating action. The current public uproar over social policy issues, especially such a delicate subject as gender equality (Khamzina et al., 2021), cannot avoid using internet technologies, just like earlier protests by mothers of numerous children before the January events. The wide range of issues—up to the transfer of property back to the state—is used to gauge the political engagement of citizens, and this is due to a number of reasons, including:

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- The need for legal analysis to improve the efficiency of public property management;
- Further development of national companies, holdings, and other corporate public bodies in charge of state property administration;
- Inadequate oversight of public property management; lack of transparency in management procedures (Taitorina et al., 2016a, 2016b).

Regarding Kazakhstanis' participation in foreign policy issues and international events, for instance, given the context of the outbreak of war in Ukraine and Kazakhstanis' divisive attitudes towards it and the extent of their involvement, the current state of affairs could not help but have an impact on the country's leadership, which reportedly accelerated Kazakhstan's transition to the path of reforms. Regarding risk assessment, in addition to the current circumstances, Kazakhstan retains a welcoming attitude towards foreigners, especially Russians who fled their homeland due to the policies taken by the Russian government and the announced partial mobilization. According to a telephone survey conducted in September, 28% of respondents blamed Russia, 19% blamed Ukraine, 10% blamed the US for the conflict in Ukraine, and 27% had trouble answering (Eurasianet, 2022). This suggests that Kazakh citizens generally maintain a neutral stance, seek to avoid toxic internal discussions, and refrain from openly taking a side in the conflict through extensive public activity. However, the variables for acquiring information about the war in Ukraine differ based on the age of the target audience; in Kazakhstan, 76% of those aged 19 to 29 regard the Internet to be their primary source of international news, whereas the older generation continues to rely on state television. Notably, even for those over 60, the Internet is now their primary source of global news, which does not shield them from propaganda, particularly on widely used social media platforms like the video hosting website YouTube or the messaging app Telegram (Eurasianet, 2022). Social movements in Kazakhstan initiated discussions about the revival of national pride, the triumph of national identity, loyalty to their homeland, and their stance regarding trust in the nation's governmental institutions. The aim was to mitigate potential disagreements on geopolitical grounds. Previous studies on this topic have found that an individual's trust in political institutions is a significant explanatory variable for civic and, to a lesser extent, patriotic attitudes. It has been established that citizens who trust the country's political institutions are more likely to participate in inclusive civic statehood (Sharipova et al., 2017). In January 2022, however, the authorities took only cautiously optimistic steps. Future political developments in Central Asia and Europe in the context of a worsening crisis may be related to further prospects for societal polarization.

Geographical and, of course, historical factors can be recognized as influencing the development of civil society in Kazakhstan. Historical occurrences connected to the shift from

a nomadic to an industrial society have produced new needs that must be met. Regarding civic awareness, the media plays the most important role in its growth and 'pushing' people to participate in social action. This is because media and social networks can quickly deliver information to the end consumer based on their needs. Meanwhile, the authorities will not increase coverage of social campaigns, especially those involving political issues, as they view it as a destabilizing political climate.

The Role of Media in the Formation of the Political Culture of Uzbekistan

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Uzbek lands there formed a prosperous society with high levels of self-organization and hierarchy. Uzbek's civic consciousness grew in tandem with the spread of communist ideology. Communism reigned supreme in Central Asia, encouraging citizens' civic engagement and political participation to combat feudal and capitalist legacies (Critchlow, 2018).

Over the past 25 years, the legal framework for inter-ethnic relations has been created to meet the rights and needs of every citizen to achieve self-fulfillment in areas where one wants to be in demand. The adopted norms declare that they ensure equality and freedom of citizens, as well as the equal suffrage of citizens, albeit with the de facto lack of alternatives that the country faced under the many years of rule of the first President Islam Karimov. The legislation also proclaims the possibility for all citizens, irrespective of race, nationality, religion, or other grounds, to take an active part in the life of the state and society (Ziyadillaevich, 2022). These freedoms were subject to contentious issues and occurrences, such as the 2005 protests in Andijan. Nonetheless, contemporary society cannot be classified as completely authoritarian because it can discuss pressing local socioeconomic issues without pushing aggressive political slogans, as an autocratic rule may permit.

In terms of the media, as Uzbekistan celebrates its 30th anniversary of independence, a new generation of citizens has emerged, capable of diversifying their information intake. Notwithstanding the authorities' directives, they do not restrict Internet access, and any citizen, to the degree of their capacity, can consume the content they choose. On the other hand, this state of circumstances only sometimes takes place. Mass riots in Andijan in 2005 and the Three-Day July 2022 Karakalpakstan protests show that the government is unyielding to any kind of opposition to changes to the political status quo. As for recent events in the city of Nukus, which is the capital of Karakalpakstan, the people of the republic protested against the fact that the right of this region to break away from Uzbekistan was taken out of the country's constitution. The lack of radicalism that characterized these demonstrations was indicative of the citizens' civil society maturity. For instance, when the authorities held public hearings on the proposed constitutional revisions, they provided a phone number where citizens could submit amendment suggestions. Hence, the locals actively dialed the short number 1341 to draw attention to their situation rather than resorting to violence. However, this did not prompt the authorities to participate in a fair discussion with the dissatisfied, resulting in information concerning the incarceration of activists and the stationary Internet in the region ceasing to function, blaming weather circumstances. As a result of the authorities' actions, protests in the republic have been suffocated; riots have been crushed; a curfew has been enforced in the region, which includes a prohibition on rallies, and mobile Internet has been intermittently available. When it comes to addressing political matters and exercising power, the events demonstrated once again that the current Uzbek authorities were not committed to transparency and free civic discussion within society (Oxford Analytica, 2022). In reaction, the autonomous and national authorities then asserted that the unrest was an attempt by external forces to compromise the geographical integrity of the country without elaborating on the underlying cause of the people's outcry. Later, information coverage of the first few days of July became available via multiple TV

and their suppression to emerge.

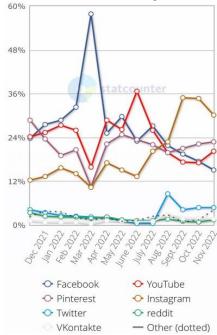
http://dx.doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1914 channels and the remarks of eyewitnesses, allowing for a relatively clear picture of the protests

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As long as there is no emergency, social networks are generally accessible nationwide. According to publicly available information, Uzbek citizens are interested in using the platforms shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3Social Media Statistics for Uzbekistan (November 2021 to November 2022)



Source. Adapted by the authors using data from Statcounter 2022 online visitor stats tool

Given the high-profile events surrounding Ukraine's full-fledged war and station restrictions in Russia, where many Uzbek citizens live and work, the local audience for the Facebook social network lost 57.86% of users. Moreover, in different months, the most popular places to watch content were the video hosting service YouTube, with a peak retention rate of 36.67% in June, and later the social network Instagram from Meta, with a retention rate of 34% for autumn 2022. YouTube and Facebook lost users and had 20% and 14% of the market, respectively (Statcounter GlobalStats, 2022b).

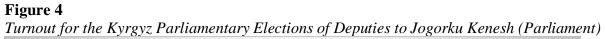
Overall, 68% of young people ages 18–29 say the Internet is their primary source of information. This number drops to 39% and 37% for those aged 50–59 and 60+, respectively. However, when it comes to reviewing international events by retirees, national television (47% of the target audience) takes precedence over Russian television (Central Asia Barometer, 2023).

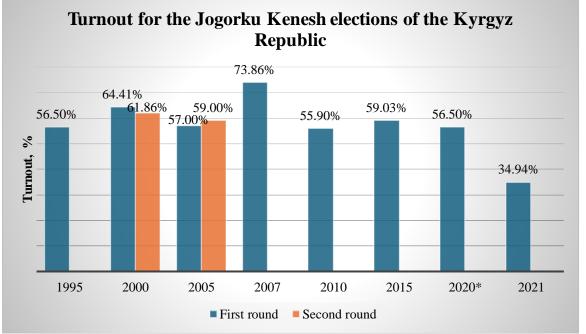
The informational aspect of Uzbek society continues to be intricate. The nation has been described as a non-free territory despite the lack of fully prohibitive measures due to website filtering and blocking, censorship in various forms, self-censorship, and instances of social media and messengers being blocked (Freedom House, 2022). Recent events in Karakalpakstan have only confirmed this status quo.

Media in the Formation of the Political Culture of Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan's political system, which is more democratic than those of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, distinguishes it from those two nations. Thus, Kyrgyzstan stands out from other

nations in the region by having a more democratic form of government, specifically a parliamentary republic. This is evident from the official election results for the country's local parliament, also known as Jogorku Kenesh (Figure 4).





Note. * – Elections declared null and void by Kyrgyz CEC Resolution No. 249 of 06.10.2020 *Source.* Adapted by the authors based on public data from the Kyrgyz CEC

According to the numbers, mass mobilization of the populace occurs most frequently in times of extreme political crisis, such as the Tulip Revolution. However, recent events, including the 2019 parliamentary elections and the rise to power of new president Sadyr Japarov, have accelerated trends towards an increased role of autocracy in political life. Kyrgyzstan's Democracy Index (DI) was still the highest among its neighbors in 2021. Still, it was only 3.62, which put it in the category of 'authoritarian regime' countries instead of 'hybrid regime' countries, which it had been before (The Economist, 2021). In 2021, Kyrgyzstan remained a hybrid regime, according to The Global State of Democracy Indices (IDEA, 2021). To comprehend this process, one must comprehend the thorny path to Kyrgyz statehood as its essence.

Despite the regional diversity of the various Kyrgyz groups, Kyrgyzstan is the only post-Soviet nation to have gone through three revolutionary upheavals, culminating in 2005, 2010, and 2020 changes to the ruling elites as well as a notable increase in civic consciousness. Following the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004–2005 and the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, the Tulip Revolution of March 2005 was the third in a string of color revolutions in the former Soviet countries. The 14-year authoritarian rule of President Askar Akayev ended with the Tulip Revolution. The 2010 uprising was dubbed the April Revolution. It was marked by intense violence and ended with Bakiyev's overthrow. In contrast to the previous head, Askar Akayev, his former opponent, Bakiyev, was from the south. Following the April successes, Roza Otunbayeva and Almazbek Atambayev assumed power. The former served as president pro tem, and the latter oversaw the nation for six years while juggling the interests of northern and southern clans. Subsequently, Atambayev clashed with Sooronbay Zheenbekov, his comrade and potential presidential successor. Their fight seemed to end when Jeenbekov

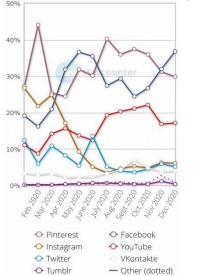
won the election and put Atambaev in jail. However, Jeenbekov, a representative of the southern clans, lost his position when he was challenged by another coup, mostly backed by clans from the north of the country, in October 2020. Sadyr Zhaparov, the current president, is attempting to draw from historical precedent and alter public opinion so that there is a desire for a detachable but powerful presidency that is above internal regional squabbles.

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Many factors have contributed to this increase in protests, not the least of which is the participation of groups that should be made aware of what is happening. The Internet is a primary means of communication, and people between the ages of 18 and 29 are its most avid users. This demonstrates that the younger generation is engaged in the social process and can relay information about the status of specific problems and coordinate actions to resolve them, including protests. According to open data, the people of Kyrgyzstan have the same priorities as their neighbors regarding the most important way to get news about the scandalous elections and mass unrest that happened in early October 2020. Figure 5 illustrates the information in greater detail.

Figure 5Social Media Statistics for Kyrgyzstan (January – December 2020)



Note. Adapted by the authors using data from Statcounter 2020 online visitor stats tool

In 2020, 26.77% of Kyrgyzstan's population used Facebook; by December of that same year, another 10% of the Kyrgyz audience had joined. On the other hand, according to StatCounter's 2020 report, YouTube's local audience share decreased from 22.1% to 17.2% and then to 9% by the end of 2022 (Statcounter GlobalStats, 2020). Meanwhile, despite its underdeveloped infrastructure, the Internet is in high demand in the country. Moreover, the government does not prohibit social media and undesirable electronic media en masse. Consequently, the nation has maintained its Internet status as 'partly free' for many years, according to the NGO Freedom House (Freedom House, 2022).

The issue of who should own the Kempir-Abad reservoir, which Kyrgyz authorities decided to hand over to neighboring Uzbekistan to settle a border dispute that had been going on since Soviet times, sparked a new wave of media-based civic engagement (Rodríguez et al., 2022). Based on a decision made by the local kurultai on 15 October 2022, the town of Uzgen formed a committee to protect the Kempir-Abad reservoir from opposing this transfer. It comprised politicians, party members, and civil society activists. Due to the reservoir's strategic importance for agriculture in the Osh and Jalal-Abad Regions of Kyrgyzstan, the transfer of the asset irritated the local populace. Despite this, the authorities reportedly arrested 22 people,

including nearly all committee members and sympathetic citizens, on suspicion of organizing mass disturbances. In response, mass protests in support of those detained occurred in Uzgen and Bishkek throughout October and November. The protesters used social media, including Facebook, YouTube, the messaging apps Telegram and WhatsApp, and live demonstrations in front of the authorities to make their demands and appeals known. Importantly, unlike in Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, local authorities in Kyrgyzstan chose to guard state facilities instead of actively trying to limit and disperse the protestors. Instead, they solely targeted the organizers for incarceration. International human rights organizations like the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT), the Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC), the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR), and Freedom Now all responded, and their responses played a significant role in these actions. As a result, the protests faded, the organizers were arrested, and their cases were brought to court; however, the activists did not achieve any essential outcomes. Meanwhile, society's political culture enabled active players to sustain the issue's political and journalistic rebirth.

Regarding Kyrgyz society's participation in the global information agenda, such as the state of war in Ukraine, preferences are dictated by the resources that the country's citizens employ. According to the Central Asia Barometer, the 18-to-29-year-old demographic uses the Internet at 82% to examine information regarding the situation in Ukraine. On the other hand, the target audience's 30-39 and 40-49 age groups use the Internet to a slightly lesser extent (71–73%). As for the older generation, the target audience groups aged 50–59 and 60+ have also started to prefer the Internet (50% and 37%, respectively). However, 20% and 29% of the older audience watch Russian TV channels, which may change how they see the situation in Ukraine (Central Asia Barometer, 2023). The results indicate the increasing prevalence of digital media in everyday life in the Kyrgyz Republic, as seen by the preference for online resources for gathering and organizing news of both domestic and international significance.

A distinctive feature of Kyrgyzstan in matters of mutual influence of the media and political culture in recent years has been the incitement of ethnic hatred within the state. The latter was the reason for the establishment of international donor programs that recognized "hate speech" as a problem in the country (UNESCO, 2023).

Consequently, it may be said that the information component influences citizens' political involvement in the domestic agenda to a significant but not necessarily determining extent. Instead, escalation is caused by the social community, which has historically shaped the ethnic and regional diversity of the Kyrgyz people. This leads to both diversity and the chance to share different points of view when dealing with complicated issues and social tensions. Therefore, more steps should be taken to stabilize and create new institutions to get more people involved in local issues, lessen the influence of clans and oligarchs, and ensure that the law and the rule of law are respected.

This research suggests that the regional mindset, which has traditionally been oriented towards paternalism and following a hierarchy with the ability to adopt useful practices and technologies from the outside world, is a distinctive phenomenon in the realm of relationship-building within civil society. Likewise, this has impacted the culture of information consumption, notably that of young people. Table 1 summarizes the specific features and qualities that comprise the components of social process involvement.

Table 1Civil Society Development Models

Countries	Features	Communication content
Kazakhstan	Information	Locally focused informational campaigns and events
	doldrums	occasionally incorporate political action when high-profile
		events occur beyond the purview of the state media.

	Political continuity	However, most information conversation focuses on domestic issues and foreign policy shocks. Communication between government branches and society is based on recognized and mutually acceptable narratives of public non-interference in political processes at the highest level in exchange for respecting socio-economic rights and getting political rewards and local self-
Uzbekistan	Demographics	governance powers. There are varying manifestations of the communication palette based on national and cultural characteristics that in turn are tied to the historical trajectory of relations between different groups within a given country (Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Karakalpaks). Increases in population density and
	Centralization	urbanization tend to favor tighter government oversight, notwithstanding the benefits of faster information flow. The political system has been built on the consolidation of power in the hands of the President, who is the only head of the executive, for the past 30 years to avoid anarchic government. The official media supports the information coverage of presidential actions by adding public discussion on the most salient economic issues or addressing regional issues. In general, the informational debate focuses on
Kyrgyzstan	Information diversity	foreign policy developments or the resolution of local government concerns through the use of social media, which is occasionally prohibited. Communication and information sharing among civil society actors are based on the geographical specificities of the many influential social groupings in a particular region of the country. Internal politics are generally determined by internal discourse, which is represented by information support narratives of one or more external parties, even when international actors (Chinese, Russian, and American
	Regionalism and cronyism	humanitarian programs) are involved. Northern and southern regions of the country have varying degrees of ingrained ethno-political stereotypes that influence communication between social groupings. If social clans do not make trade-offs and share their interests fairly, there is a high risk of protests, which could lead to power shifts.

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Consequently, it is important to recognize that shared approaches partly formed the experiences of the examined Central Asian nations. These shared approaches might be employed against the backdrop of the dynamics in the early 1990s as the three countries gained independence and entered a new era of civil society creation. In response to rising authoritarianism, some of the countries under study were able to adapt. This segment of society now focuses on local problems without openly contesting the authority of the ultimate authorities. Conversely, countries with a distinct regional identity, such as Kyrgyzstan, exhibit extensive civic engagement and rapid information exchange. Large socioeconomic strata with different geographical, ethnic, and, in certain cases, religious specificities stimulate civic involvement through active political action. Considering the current challenges, future

assessments of the health of civil society should pay special attention to the impacts of globalization and widespread informatization driven by non-regional actors with significant political influence in the Central Asian region.

Discussion

While discussing the unique communication challenges of creating a political culture, it is important to remember that solutions will emerge from the continued digitization of the economy and the response of politicians and the media pool (press service, public media) under their control. Taking into account what has happened worldwide in terms of civic engagement, steps are being taken in the digital environment to brand political activity and create a way for civil servants and the public to talk to each other (Eady et al., 2019). Social media are quickly becoming the most important route for interactive online involvement. Local governments are seizing the chance to improve public participation in political and social matters by leveraging this new medium (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018). According to current trends, government workers, politicians, and agencies in Central Asian nations have also adopted political marketing techniques, including their use of social media platforms. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, which are all part of Meta's collection of social media platforms, as well as Twitter, the microblogging site, have all been managing verified accounts for politicians for years. Some of them support e-reception. There are currently no exact numbers on how many people offer ideas and complaints, as well as how the e-government approach is de facto implemented. Further study will reveal the practical outcomes of this endeavor.

Considering the example of Kazakhstan, it should be noted that the country is experiencing a gradual strengthening of the role of unofficial sources in social networks. During the protests in the country at the beginning of 2022, "unofficial" sources (groups and private pages on social networks) played a major role in the transition of large-scale protests in 2022 to the acute phase. It is emphasized that attendance and interest in state media and official pages on social networks were significantly inferior to private sources (Kappasova & Turanova, 2022). The latter thus became relays of the ideas of the so-called "unconventional" (related to protest activities) type of political culture of participation, supporting the protest spirit of participants in the largest anti-government events in the history of the country in recent decades (Kappasova & Turanova, 2022). Agreeing with the analysis of Kazakh researchers, we can conclude that it was the pages on social networks of non-governmental persons, in the absence of official information, that became an instrument for the formation of an unconventional type of political culture of participation, i.e. having destabilizing potential and creating a certain level of social tension (Kappasova & Turanova, 2022). However, at present, this potential does not manifest itself in any way against the background of the lack of actual pluralism and political activity in the country. Transformational processes in the sphere of political culture are fragmentary, obviously affecting to a greater extent issues of internal perception of political processes, but without significant external manifestation.

Speaking about the Uzbek context, it should be noted that researchers of the political culture and public participation of this country tend to believe that although the country gravitates toward the democratic values of Western countries, the influence of culture and traditional views continues to play a significant role. The construction of a democratic society is considered inextricably linked with traditional ideas about solidarity and the priority of public opinion. At the same time, moral and spiritual values should prevail in political relations (Mamatkulov, 2022; Yusupalieva, 2020). Issues of forming political culture are declared at the political and legal level and, for example, about youth, are considered goals of state policy. Some studies note that citizens of the republic "demonstrate loyalty to the political system, lawabidingness, and respect for decisions made" (Yusupalieva, 2020). Although such statements seem somewhat politically motivated, the absence of any significant political processes in the

country as a whole explains this loyalty, which, as one can assume, is essentially a disinterest in political participation among the general public. The protest initiatives previously mentioned in the work are usually of a time-limited regional nature. Profile studies generally confirm this point of view, indirectly noting the lack of involvement in politics of both representatives of the older generation and young people. Several studies emphasize the need to involve youth in the political process (Ergashev & Abdullayev, 2022).

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It is noted that increasing the legal culture of the population, namely the younger generation (as the most inclined to use social media platforms), has social and political significance (Central Asia Barometer, 2023). At the same time, it would be advisable to hold more scientific and practical conferences, round tables with the participation of young people themselves, carry out advocacy activities among law students to explain the norms of legislation, as well as involve them in the legislative process, develop various media products to explain the adopted new laws. It is noted that young people largely remain unaware of the ongoing socio-economic and political transformations in the country (Ergashev & Abdullayev, 2022; Erniyazov, 2017). However, such opinions probably do not generally correctly interpret the concept of the political process, reducing it to a law-making process. At the same time, in some works, the role of social networks in political participation is also sometimes misinterpreted, and the concept of political participation is reduced to the interaction of a person and authorities through electronic communication means. Correlating the data of existing profile studies with this work, one can note the almost complete absence of references to the role of social media in the formation of public protest events as an element of political culture.

Speaking about the concept of the political culture of Kyrgyzstan in the general context, perhaps we should agree with the characteristics given to it by specialized researchers more than 15 years ago: as a relatively independent phenomenon, the political culture of the Kyrgyz people can be characterized as polarized and segmented (Torogeldieva, 2008). The political field of the republic is characterized by a diversity of political culture, an obvious discrepancy between the basic values and guidelines for the political activity of different groups of the Kyrgyz people, represented by various organizations, regarding the goals of social development, methods of reform, models of the future, the so-called split of horizontally located political subcultures (Torogeldieva, 2008). In principle, this definition has not lost its relevance today - the political process in the country remains largely sluggish, and political life remains inert. The phenomenon of the interrelation of such concepts as gender, class, clan, and regional ethnicity, which to this day is an invariable attribute of the political process, has historically been imprinted in the consciousness of the Kyrgyz people (Kanatbekov, 2021). At the same time, one can note the prevalence of academic views regarding the need to modernize the political system towards the reception of Western political mechanisms and ideas (Fedorov, 2020; Kerimkulov, 2017; Torogeldieva, 2008).

Ultimately, the aspect of mutual influence of political culture, as an element of political participation and social media in Kyrgyzstan, has several similarities with the neighboring countries previously discussed. These include the relative inertia of the political process and the relatively weak involvement of citizens in it, both through social media and in general. At the same time, it is especially worth noting the role of social media as a tool for mobilizing society for protest initiatives. A distinctive feature of Kyrgyzstan, compared to the first two countries, is the tendency towards a deterioration in the state of political culture, which is associated with the processes of inciting ethnic hatred through social media. In this case, it became, in a sense, a national problem, which attracted the attention of foreign donor organizations. Ultimately, the last aspect is perhaps a particularly important indicator since it comes from the definition of "political culture." We can say that the problems described are indicators of problems in the sphere of culture of political dialogue and the resolution of political contradictions at the grassroots level.

It is essential to include global trends while defining civic engagement. Transnational identity is another concept fundamental to international practice. Transnational identities and international civil society help shape distinct international settings like the World Social Forum, the World Economic Forum, and the anti-globalization movement. This forms a social environment in which a new global identity complements the national identity (Ernazarov, 2020). This creates a social environment where a new global identity complements the national one. The extent to which the civil societies of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan will participate in this process is uncertain, given the social and cultural-mental variables at play.

Politicians and public organizations should prioritize Internet communication in the media sector. Hence, while analyzing the situation in Kazakhstan, it can be seen that nearly all young Kazakhs (more than 99%) access the Internet and social media, with the vast majority being online every day (Sairambay, 2022). Other countries, such as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, are not far behind in using electronic media in local affairs. This can emphasize regional problems from a different angle, boosting the involvement of many social groups, notwithstanding the absence of active protest involvement. These findings, which are almost representative samples, allow researchers to concentrate solely on young people. Undoubtedly, young people will shape the agenda of future social and political movements; such movements have significantly affected reorganizing and replacing political regimes, for instance, in Eastern Europe. Therefore, even in the Central Asian area, the stable operation of youth organizations, NGOs, and initiative groups warrants strict scrutiny.

Conclusion

It can be noted that the mass media is one of the main means of influence of the current government on the formation of public opinion - a specific state of public consciousness, which contains the hidden or real attitude of various social communities to events, facts or processes of social reality, including political activity. Public opinion primarily captures the perception of reality through the prism of mass consciousness. It reflects both common and specific interests of classes, national, professional, and other communities, as a whole, subjects of the political process. Public opinion as a political institution participates in the exercise of power. This is an important mechanism for making political decisions at all levels. The dynamic processes taking place in the countries considered are reflected in the contradictory nature of the political and media systems' interactions.

Currently, the political processes in the countries under consideration persistently depend on established political frameworks, maintaining elements of Soviet authoritarianism with a trend towards centralization of power. Transformation processes in the sphere of political culture of these countries are fragmentary, obviously affecting issues of internal perception of political processes to a greater extent but without significant external manifestation.

At the same time, civil society supports the need for change. The media, which includes both traditional and Internet media, as well as social networks, is the efficient way for them to get their message out. The latter are the best places to hear people's views on pressing political and social issues and their economic well-being. Because there is more coverage in the media, the government is more agile about some parts of the policy. This helps meet the public's demand for socioeconomic solutions while making some political concessions. It is clear from the recent actions of both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan concerning their proclaimed reforms that the government can be receptive to openness on socially relevant matters so long as it does not pose an immediate threat to its very survival. At the same time, people do not trust institutions very much, as shown by data from election campaigns and the number of protests about changes in the economy, the environment, and society. It is obvious that the creation of a rule-of-law, democratic state in the presented countries is impossible without a transition from information

closure to an information system of an open society, which involves new forms of interaction between the state and citizens.

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Based on the experience of the three countries reviewed, from a qualitative assessment point of view, it was not possible to detect any decisive influence of the media (including social networks and media platforms) on the set of general views and normative judgments held by the population regarding their political system, called political culture. Despite the relative inertia of the political process and the relatively weak involvement of citizens in it, both through social media and in general, at the same time, it is worth separately noting the role of social media as a tool for mobilizing society for protest initiatives in all three countries. A notable characteristic of Kyrgyzstan, differing from the first two countries, is the inclination towards a decline in the state of political culture linked to the instigation of ethnic animosity through social media processes. At the same time, analyzing the opinions of theorists from three research countries, it can be assumed that sometimes the concept of political culture at the theoretical level is replaced by the concept of political awareness.

There are several places where the horizontal relationships between the diverse social groupings in the studied countries might split apart. Each time, these bifurcation points attempt to alter the existing order, steer the system in a new direction, and avoid the institution of a stable dependency on a small group of individuals. Pressure from outside, both from external financial contributors and governments with their own foreign policy goals, exacerbates institutional weakness and a relatively low degree of institutional confidence in the local and central institutions of the countries under study. Continued progress necessitates being able to accommodate varying circumstances. Changes can occur both internally, by increasing civil society's awareness (especially among young people), and externally, by drawing inspiration from typical cases of social activity that has been successful in countries with a long history of democratic rule, where multiple viewpoints are respected and unbiased information is freely available. Any substantial social changes might, in any event, impact all of the activities that the present political leadership views as strategically important. Furthermore, as digital information consumption increases and crisis events dominate the global news cycle, it is important to consider potential changes that might impact regional public outrage.

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