



## 2 The country context analysis of Kazakhstan

### Implications for e-government

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This chapter is dedicated to the country context analysis of the political and socioeconomic development of Kazakhstan in various areas from the perspective of its indirect impact on the promotion of e-government, for example, such as the implications of its geography and territorial division, history of the country, its political and social systems, public administration, economy, telecommunication industry, mass media, civil society and foreign policy in order to identify the challenges and promises of the country readiness to realize e-government in all its diversity.

#### The framework for the country context analysis

Taking into account the fact that e-government is a multidimensional political phenomenon whose development is indirectly affected by an extremely wide range of background factors and variables, it is important to develop a research framework for the country context analysis that helps to identify the key features of the e-government environments in various spheres and analyze how they affect the development of the ICT-driven public sector reforms – i.e. understand the motivations, key challenges and promises to harness the potential of the technology from these perspectives.

#### The multidimensional contexts of e-government

##### *The geography: being transcontinentally landlocked*

Looking at the global map, one can easily notice that geographically Kazakhstan is the largest landlocked country in the world, which is at the center of a huge continent called Eurasia – i.e. at the intersection of major transportation, telecommunication and trade routes that connect Asia and Europe. In terms of the area, Kazakhstan is the ninth largest country in the world, with vast but sparsely populated territories characterized by deserts and semi-desert steppes. This fact makes the task of e-government



realization logistically challenging, because the large area of the country also implies a higher cost of infrastructure creation, especially in building the telecommunication lines and networks in remote rural areas, which are necessary for successful implementation of various ICT-driven public sector reforms, and partly explains the interest of the nation in the development of satellite technologies (Warf, 2013), which could potentially decrease the price of telecommunication services.

Administratively, the territory of the country is subdivided into fourteen provinces or regions (*oblys* in Kazakh or *oblystar* in plural form) and two major cities, Almaty and Astana, both of which have special status as the largest megalopolis and the capital city, respectively. However, politically these regions do not enjoy autonomy from the center, since Kazakhstan is a unitary state with a strong structure of power relationships between the capital city and regional authorities. In this regard, hypothetically, the unique unitary nature of the administrative and territorial division of the country makes the task of e-government promotion much easier because the development of the projects is usually initiated and implemented mostly by the central government agencies while the regional projects in the sphere are regarded as merely administrative units of the single e-government project, which is realized at the national level. In this respect, e-government is also considered as a platform that allows citizens to receive almost all public e-services interactively from one venue regardless of their location. Taking into account that people have to travel long distances to receive one paper document from national and sometimes even from local authorities, the large territory of the country and lack of good roads and transportation provide a huge economic motivation to develop e-government that could presumably help to make people's lives much easier by providing the most popular public services in an electronic format. This is, probably, one of the most important implications of the country's geography on the development of the ICT-driven public sector reforms.

### *Key features of the geography*

- 1 Large territory of the country
- 2 Relatively small population
- 3 Unitary structure of the territorial division

### *Implications for e-government*

#### CHALLENGES

The large and sparsely populated territory of the country implies higher logistical costs for the infrastructure, especially in building and maintaining

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national telecommunication systems and networks, which is a basic requirement for the normal functioning of e-government projects.

### PROMISES

One of the paradoxical implications of the country's geography is that the unitary character of its administrative and territorial division into regions and counties (*audandar* in Kazakh), with a strong central position, theoretically allows the public decision makers to promote more effectively a single e-government policy.

### ***The national history: overcoming the gloomy moments of the past***

Kazakhstan has an ancient and rich history that dates back to the time of the Huns. For many centuries, its territory both politically and administratively has been regarded as one of the most important centers of the Turkic World and Golden Horde. Since its foundation in the fifteenth century as a monarchy and up to the middle of the nineteenth century, when it was finally conquered by the Russian Empire, the Kazakh Khanate had played an important role as a cultural and economic bridge between Europe and Asia. The twentieth century was, probably, one of the most tragic periods in the history of Kazakhstan. The forced collectivization (Olcott, 1981), initiated in early 1930s by the Soviet authorities, destroyed the traditional well-functioning nomadic way of life which led to unprecedented famine among Kazakhs that was responsible for millions of lives (Pianciola, 2001; Ohayon, 2013). The cruel policy of collectivization and concurrent relentless political repressions against its political, aristocratic and intellectual elite, aimed at eliminating any thought of national independence and creating a pandemic sense of fear of impending arrests and apprehension, not only severely decreased the population of the nation but also dramatically changed the public mindset of the people, leaving virtually no chance for the development of free thought, critical or democratic mentality crucial for the emergence of the civil society. The following political deportations and economic immigration of millions of people from other parts of the Soviet Union to Kazakhstan significantly changed the ethnic composition of the country, while the ill-conceived policy of industrialization led to catastrophic consequences for nature, creating multiple environmental issues across the country such as the radioactive pollution near the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Testing Site (Takada et al., 1999; Simon, Baverstock & Lindholm, 2003), the desiccation of the Aral Sea (Micklin, 2007), chemical pollution from the Baikonur space-launch complex (Carlsen et al., 2010; Abdrazak & Musa, 2015), etc.

Speaking about the implications of national history on the development of e-government, it is interesting to mention that the independence of Kazakhstan, declared after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, revived people's interest in their historical past (Diener, 2002), culture and language. In this regard, the emergence of various e-government projects such as the e-history (The e-history project, 2015) and e-culture projects (The e-culture project, 2015) as part of the e-government realization policy provides a unique opportunity to preserve and keep in historical archives for future generations (see figure 2.1).

The digitalization of stockpiles of once-classified documents and archival files from the country's tragic past could be one of the promising directions of the e-government policy, while various civic engagement projects that might be created around the open data-driven movements could help the national and local authorities to better solve the consequences of the ecological catastrophes together with the environmental NGOs and research centers. In fact, the renaissance in political activity of people in Kazakhstan in the late 1980s during the Perestroika times could be associated with the

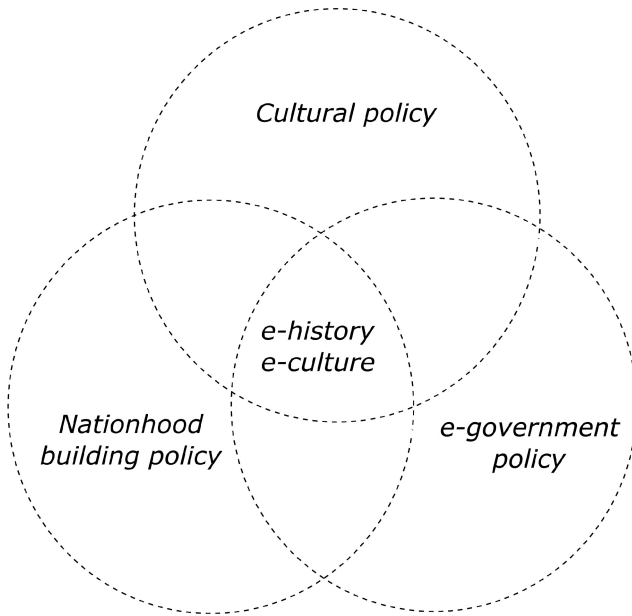


Figure 2.1 The intersections of the cultural, nationhood-building and e-government policies in Kazakhstan

Source: own illustration

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rise of various environmental movements at that time, some of which later transformed into political parties and organizations such as the Nevada-Semey Movement (Brown, 1990), Tabigat, etc.

### *Key features of the national history*

- 1 Ancient history and rich culture
- 2 Oppressive and tragic past
- 3 Consequences of environmental pollution

### *Implications for e-government*

#### CHALLENGES

The traditional public mindset based on the historical memory of the oppressive past and lack of democratic traditions in building a civil society could provide obstacles in developing the civic engagement component of e-government.

#### PROMISES

People are beginning to display an interest in the ancient and rich history of the country, which could be used in the development of various e-government projects and, generally, is conducive for the emergence of independent peer-to-peer e-participation platforms in the sphere.

### *The political system: a controversial paradox*

The political system of Kazakhstan has a somewhat two-fold and controversial character. On the one hand, it has all modern political institutions such as the separation of powers and declared multiparty system in the constitution, but on the other hand, the existence of many presumably democratic institutions is a mere formality since they do not reflect the hidden political processes in the system with their own sets of values, unwritten rules and key players. Officially, Kazakhstan is a strong presidential republic where the role of the head of state is crucial in many spheres since he determines the domestic and foreign policy of the country, as well as appoints the prime minister and de facto forms the cabinet. In this regard, it is the national government that is a focal point of all state-run projects and initiatives in public administration, including the e-government sphere, which makes the implementation of many projects in the sphere much easier than in countries with

more decentralized structures of government. In addition, institutionally, the political power belongs to a ruling Nur Otan party (Isaacs, 2011). Defined by Bader (2011) as “hegemonic” or a “super party” by Bowyer (2008), it has overwhelming partisan control at the lower houses of the national parliament – Mazhilis. Therefore, almost all members of the executive branch of power both at the national and local levels of government are members of this political organization.

In this regard, the structure of power relationships within the unitary government is usually characterized by a strong top-down mechanism of administrative control and organization, which, along with a single partisanship, is at first look conducive to the development of a single national e-government project (Kassen, 2015), since it is easier to politically pursue and organizationally implement the ICT-driven public sector reforms with an advantageous centralized mechanism of administrative control (Stier, 2015) and financing, relying juridically on a single legislation in the area and technologically using universal e-government platforms and databases whether it is at the national or local levels. However, it also creates an environment of ubiquitous servile flattery and traditions of straightforward and unquestioning fulfillment among members of the political and administrative systems due to a strict top-down machine of decision making, which dramatically increases the chances of mistakes and fallacies. The common sense says that some constructive criticism of the e-government politics and discretion in the decision-making processes might be beneficial for overall successful and sustainable future development.

#### *Key features of the political system*

- 1 Strong presidential system of government
- 2 Single partisanship in legislative and executive branches of power both at the national and local levels
- 3 Top-down decision-making mechanism

#### *Implications for e-government*

##### CHALLENGES

The strong top-down structure of power relationships existing in the political system discourages a wholesome atmosphere of self-criticism and discretion, which is crucial for the development of various e-government projects in the modern sense – e.g. in promoting e-participation, peer-to-peer and civic engagement platforms.

Paradoxically, the high level of political centralization and administrative hierarchy in the system could be extremely efficient in the short term for the promotion of the single e-government project because of speedier decision-making processes and direct political control and scrutiny from the center.

### ***The social system: challenges and promises of diversity***

Although the population of Kazakhstan is about 17 million people, which is relatively small taking into account the size of its territory, from the perspective of its social composition, it is one of the most socially and ethnically diverse societies in the world. Many years of deportations (Polian, 2004) and migrations of various ethnic (Kendirbaeva, 1997) and religious groups and even whole nations to Kazakhstan during the Soviet repressions from 1930 to the 1950s have resulted in the creation of a cosmopolitan society in this transcontinental country. One of the consequences of the policy is the existence of bilingual communities – Kazakh and Russian ones; all public documents such as laws and other legal acts as well as public information and content on governmental portals and systems are provided in those two languages. As a result, one of the important aspects in the development of the public e-government portals is the necessity to translate all documents to meet the requirements of the law which, in some cases, requires a staff of bilingual specialists or even professional translators in many government agencies due to a high volume of the government data sets and importance of the translated documents.

The baby boom phenomenon that Kazakhstan is experiencing today increases pressure on the available pool of kindergartens and schools and demand for new apartments for the growing number of young families and new citizens. The shortage of available and affordable housing in the market creates a huge pressure in the sphere and the issue is widely regarded as one of the most urgent social problems. In this regard, public e-services that address the challenge – for example, the national public housing project which helps people to save money and receive later mortgages on easy terms (Zhilstroysberbank project, 2015) – are in great demand and popular among citizens today. In order to ensure the increased transparency of government activity in the distribution of public housing, the portal that represents this project is closely synchronized with the work of the e-government system and operates on the same principle. For instance, by creating a special online account, citizens could submit and track their e-applications for the discounted public housing that is being built in various regions of the country. In this regard, the unprecedented growth of the capital city in the last two decades explains the fact that Astana, whose

population has increased fourfold due to the internal migration from other regions, is a notorious example of the shortages in housing in the country as a whole which, to some extent, explains the recent popularity of e-services related to the housing sphere (The e-government of Kazakhstan, 2015) and might be regarded as one of the implications of the demographics on the development of the concept in Kazakhstan. In this respect, civic engagement and increased e-participation that arguably becomes possible thanks to the launch of independent open data-driven and wiki-based projects might be promising, too.

### *Key features of the social system*

- 1 Ethnically and religiously diverse society
- 2 Bilingual communities
- 3 Growing population and domestic hyper migration

### *Implications for e-government*

#### CHALLENGES

The existence of the bilingual communities requires additional human and financial resources to provide all e-government services in two languages. The simultaneous translation of large volumes of documents and data sets requires bilingual professionals in the public administration systems, increasing the overall operational cost of the e-government projects.

#### PROMISES

The growing number of citizens because of the high birth rate and immigration creates a favorable environment for the development of related e-services, including those that are created by citizens themselves through civic engagement, that presumably could help address social issues such as a deficit of information on affordable public housing in the market and places in kindergartens, distribution of public housing and other social benefits among citizens.

### *The public administration system: how to reform bureaucracy?*

The public administration system of Kazakhstan is one of the sectors of the national economy that often undergoes various structural reorganizations officially aimed at making the civil service both professional and depoliticized, yet reaching modest results in either way (Emrich-Bakenova, 2009).



One of the primary reasons for the reforms was a number of administrative changes that the country had to go through since 1991 when it gained independence (Perlman & Gleason, 2007). In this regard, since many institutions of public administration inherited at that time from the Soviet past no longer functioned properly because of new political realities and the inability of the old bureaucratic machine to answer new challenges in the economy, the sphere became one of the first playgrounds to experiment with a number of public sector reforms with varying success. Perhaps, one of the fundamental changes has affected the structure of the public administration system, since all public servants are now divided into two different categories, each with its own regulations and rules of conduct and duties – the class of political public servants, which consists of about several hundred people and the class of so-called administrative public servants – i.e. the layer that consists of those who represent an army of government agents. According to Alikhan Baymenov, head of the Civil Service Agency of Kazakhstan, the government organization that supervises the development of the public administration system, in 2014 the number of civil servants was approximately 97,000 people, of which only 9,000 worked at central government agencies (The Center of Government Efficiency Evaluation, 2014). The two classes of public officials are strictly controlled by various government rules and represent a classic bureaucratic mechanism of public administration with a hierarchy at all levels of government. In this regard, the top-down machine of political and administrative decision making has become extremely strong and unambiguous, leaving almost no room for discretion or administrative autonomy at the lower levels of power.

One of the main challenges in the continuous attempts to transform public administration has been the efforts aimed at changing the behavioral aspects in the system – i.e. changing the traditional mindset of public servants working in the sphere to prepare them for new administrative functions where the reformation of the national economy after the collapse of the old command system became a number one priority. In this regard, the paradox of the reforms is that they have been carried out by those who had been educated by the old school of public administration since almost all important political posts have been occupied during the first years of independence by the former members of the Communist Party and graduates of the old political academy. For example, after the collapse of communism, many countries of in Eastern Europe fundamentally changed the structure of the old public administration system (Welsh, 1996), in most cases, simply by appointing new people to the posts. In Kazakhstan and many other post-Soviet nations, especially in Central Asia, the structure of the old bureaucratic systems had remained intact for many years after the moment they gained independence. Almost all structures of the central and local government have continued to

use the same methods of public administration and governance as before, whether it was related to the work of government agencies, police, educational or healthcare institutions. Therefore, the public servant's mindset has been one of the fundamental challenges to change in the reforms. In this regard, the e-government projects are facing the same fundamental impediment, especially when it comes to promoting projects such as open data-driven e-participation and peer-to-peer platforms that require some degree of collaboration and down-top cooperation, which has never been practiced before. In this respect, the traditional bureaucratic machine is much more effective when the political leadership requires the fulfillment of direct commands and issues clear top-down instructions on what is allowed.

### *Key features of public administration*

- 1 The public administration system of Kazakhstan is still under the process of reformation.
- 2 The administrative structure of government at all levels has a strict top-down system of decision-making with no room for discretion.
- 3 The traditions of the old bureaucratic mechanism and mentality are still strong.

### *Implications for e-government*

#### CHALLENGES

One of the key challenges in the implementation of the e-government projects, especially of those that require some degree of discretion, is that often public servants and administrators of e-government regard the program's creation as part of the numerous administrative reforms that they have to fulfill. The notorious formality often accompanies the realization of the projects where only direct administrative commands or political scrutiny become signals for activity in this direction. In this regard, such new aspects of the e-government development as collaboration with the third parties and public is misunderstood or ignored as unnecessary or too risky for the political status quo.

#### PROMISES

The promise of the new trends in reforming public administration in Kazakhstan, such as the division of the structure into two separate classes of public servants – political and administrative ones – and overall slowly increasing understanding of the importance of operating with e-government

as an additional instrument in measuring general qualifications of civil servants, could potentially provide new incentives for government agents to pay special attention to the realization of the projects in the sphere. In addition, political public servants who represent the small but influential layer of policy makers are beginning to see some political motivation to improve the work of the e-government systems under their control since the overall realization of the project is considered the most important part of public sector reforms.

### ***The economy of Kazakhstan: perils of the lopsided economy***

Kazakhstan can be described as a country whose economic prosperity at the moment depends on global prices for natural resources due to a high dependency on the extractive industry and the overall large share of the sector in the national economy. Despite efforts of the central government to wean the economy from the mineral industry – for example the launch of projects to promote the industrial revolution in Kazakhstan and facilitate the development of the ICT-driven clusters at the regions – its role in the national market is still important, if not crucial, making the national economy vulnerable to external economic factors such as rapid changes in oil prices (Kutan & Wyzan, 2005). Indeed, the aftereffects of recent fluctuations in the global commodity markets are clearly indicative of the unsustainable nature of the lopsided economy that overly relies on revenues from the export of natural resources. The recent downfall of prices for oil, gas and other raw materials such as ferrous and nonferrous metals, which the country is also rich with, has led to significant budget cuts and partly even rapid devaluation of the national currency – Kazakh tenge (KZT) – in February 2014 and August 2015.

In this respect, one of the challenges of the economic instability could be potential austerity measures in many spheres, including in the e-government. It is not a secret that many public ICT-driven projects in Kazakhstan are initiated and launched by the central government and the role of the budget money in a successful stance of the country in terms of e-government development, which progress has been reflected in various global e-government ratings recently, is crucial. Without public investments in the sphere, many projects will cease to exist.

On the other hand, the development of new e-government projects, especially those that promote cost-effective strategies of public spending and civic engagement, such as electronic public procurement and open data projects, might be regarded as additional ICT-driven public administration measures to battle corruption and advance knowledge of the economy with less public spending and a higher role of civil society and local communities

in the development of various sectors of the economy, making the sphere more sustainable and self-reliant.

Another aspect of the economic development that affects the promotion of e-government, especially in a technological sense, is the fact that Kazakhstan is geographically situated far away from the major transportation and trade routes that connect the world, which leads to a higher cost of for infrastructural projects (Raballand, 2003) and hinders the import of information and communication technologies, making many e-government projects extremely expensive and non-rentable in the conditions of the market economy.

### *Key features*

- 1 Lopsided raw material economy
- 2 High dependency on global prices for minerals
- 3 Austerity measures and budget cuts

### *Implications for e-government*

#### CHALLENGES

The recent development of e-government projects in Kazakhstan has been possible due to generous direct spending and assignments from the national budget. In this regard, possible budget cuts in the economy caused by a significant decrease in revenues coming from the export of various natural resources might lead to the closure of many projects in the sphere.

#### PROMISES

The possible cuts in public spending in the e-government sphere could paradoxically promote less government-focused and more cost-effective projects, such as civic engagement and collaborative wiki or open data-driven initiatives, that usually require less money from the budget funds.

### *The telecommunication industry: it is all about infrastructure*

The development of the information and communication technologies sphere in Kazakhstan is experiencing almost the same level of change as in any part of the developed world because the government pays special attention to the economy sector, recognizing the importance of the ICT-driven economy and the necessity for the promotion of high computer literacy among the population, especially among schoolchildren (Bhuiyan, 2010). For example,

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according the Kazakh Agency of Statistics, about two thirds of citizens have access to the Internet, while the level of computer literacy among adults reaches 71 percent (The Kazakh Agency of Statistics, 2015), making the country a regional leader in Central Asia in terms of the human factor readiness in the ICT sphere. One of the aspects of the ICT development in Kazakhstan is the popularity of mobile technologies and wireless broadband access to the Internet, such as the 3G and 4G connections. Free Wi-Fi zones in many public places such as cafes, libraries, universities, public buildings, airports, train stations, buses, etc., allow people to be connected and stay online almost twenty-four hours a day. These facts create a favorable environment for the successful promotion of e-government projects that usually by default require some computer literacy and widespread access to the ICT and Internet among the citizenry and are conducive for the development of an information society, potentially providing excellent opportunities for fundamental transformations in the economic, social and even political spheres.

One of the challenges in the overall development of ICT-related projects in Kazakhstan is the problem of the so-called digital divide (Bhuiyan, 2010; Janenova, 2010) existing between various social and age groups of citizens and the difference in the development of the local telecommunication infrastructure that could be found between various regions of the country. In general, as in any part of the world, there is an overall trend that the young citizens and those who live in urban areas have higher computer literacy than the older generation and people residing in the countryside. In addition, some regions are experiencing significant problems with building the modern ICT infrastructure since there is a lack of economic incentives for telecommunication companies to invest in the regions due to the small population and remoteness of the areas. As a result, the development of the e-government projects in some regions of the country are challenged because there is low e-participation from the local communities, which could experience problems with even basic access to the Internet.

### *Key features of the telecommunication industry*

- 1 General high level of computer literacy
- 2 High penetration of the Internet
- 3 Digital divide between citizens and regions

### *Implications for e-government*

#### CHALLENGES

The problems of the digital divide such as those that exist between younger and older generations or between urban areas and the countryside create

challenges for the development of various e-government projects that focus on e-participation and civic engagement.

#### PROMISES

The efforts of the central and local governments to promote special courses aimed at battling the computer illiteracy among the older generation, the overall policy to promote widespread access to the ICT due to low custom duties for imported telecommunication equipment and goods, and the simple fact that Kazakhstan has recently entered at last the WTO, which greatly simplifies the import of know-how create a favorable environment for the development of the e-government-related initiatives.

#### *The nongovernmental sector: engaging the civil society*

The development of the nongovernmental sector in Kazakhstan is probably one of the most controversial aspects in various political debates about the country's progress toward democracy and the topic is regarded as a sensitive one. For many years, the government has closely regulated the development of the NGOs in an attempt to negate foreign influence and funding. Moreover, the plans to promote indirect state financing through instruments such as grants and public procurement in the nongovernmental sector may result in a high dependency of the sphere on support from the national budget (The United Nations Radio, 2015).

Although there are many NGOs that do important work in helping the state to improve the lives of the local population in many aspects of social development (Diachenko, 2008), especially through consulting and charity activities, many of the registered organizations do not exist *de facto* or their activity is not relevant to the needs of the society in Kazakhstan (Luong & Weinthal, 1999).

In this respect, the development of the ICT sphere, especially of the open data concept, provides new opportunities for international, national and local NGOs to participate in the creation of various open data-driven initiatives aimed at advancing e-participation and civic engagement components of the e-government. Projects that would focus on helping local communities to battle corruption and poverty, mapping better transportation routes and crime areas, regulating lobbying activity and tracking safety standards in the commercial sector, etc., could potentially transform the traditional mechanism of e-government promotion, increasing the role of civil society and civic engagement, which, in turn, could facilitate the development of political culture and a new public mindset, letting behind the black box algorithm of the e-government building where the role of the public agencies was crucial – i.e. making it more user-driven and presumably more sustainable.

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### *Key features of the nongovernmental sector*

- 1 Overall development of the nongovernmental sphere controlled by government
- 2 Weak civil society and political culture due to the totalitarian past
- 3 High activity of NGOs in nonpolitical spheres

### *Implications for e-government*

#### CHALLENGES

One of the challenges one can anticipate in the development of the NGOs in the e-government sphere is a high level of government regulation and control over the activity of the sector in the political and social life of the country, especially in terms of foreign financing. Many organizations that promote e-government in the world are administered and funded by various global development and charity funds. In this regard, they may face huge administrative and bureaucratic challenges in registering officially in Kazakhstan.

#### PROMISES

The new trends in the development of e-government in the sphere, such as the increasing popularity of the open data-driven, e-participation and wiki projects, where the importance of government is gradually decreasing and minimized to only the role of information and data provider, create promising opportunities for the nongovernmental sector to be more proactive in launching third-party platforms and applications aimed at facilitating the development of civil society and civic engagement.

### *The mass media sphere: harnessing the potential of PR*

The media sphere is one of the most dynamically developing sectors of the local economy. The diversity of print and electronic mass media outlets, represented by national and international players in the area, allows citizens to be aware of domestic and global news and events. One of the notorious features of the local media market is strong regulation by government (Kenny & Gross, 2008) and high dependency of many media outlets on funding from the state budget through various grants and public procurement. Therefore, both national and local mass media, as well as government-owned and sometimes even commercial media structures, have to fulfill the contracts on propagating the government work in various spheres (Terry, 2005), including the e-government area. Mostly these channels of political communication play a double role, first, as an effective and useful instrument to inform the public about the e-government projects and, second, as an additional tool of the

domestic political PR aimed at improving the image of the central government and political leadership among constituents.

Taking into account that many media programs, especially in television and newspapers, are realized in accordance with the public procurement contracts in the sphere; public teaching and PR campaigns in the e-government area are provided on a regular and systematic basis, dramatically increasing public coverage of the project and overall propagating effect on audiences. The public media coverage of the e-government projects is regarded as part of the general policy to educate citizens on the basics of computer literacy and, therefore, such TV programs and shows are transmitted at the national and local levels both in Kazakh and Russian languages. Some of the programs are shown even in English on the Kazakh TV channel (The Kazakh TV channel, 2015). In addition, some regions of the nearby Russian Federation and China are covered by the TV signal from Kazakhstan, which helps to provide information to the widespread Kazakh diasporas in both countries. Moreover, such international media outlets as CNN, BBC and Euronews are used as an additional tool of the country's image making on a commercial basis, including in the ICT sphere, demonstrating on these television channels and websites the attractive image of the nation for international audience to catch the attention of foreign investors and tourists.

This *sui generis* global public relations policy in the sphere has both positive and negative effects on the development of e-government in Kazakhstan. On the one hand, the fact that the implementation of the e-government policy is regarded as a matter of national priority means that everything that is even indirectly connected with the sphere will catch the attention of central government authorities. On the other hand, the overplay with the relentless attempts to improve the e-government image of the country in various international ratings and expensive PR campaigns and strategies not only demands significant financial resources but often means that the policy makers and developers have to pay special attention to the aspects of the e-government development that are the most results-oriented in terms of boosting the ranking rather than improving the operation of e-government, ignoring the development of areas that require fundamental changes in public mindset and political efforts rather than just investments in technologies, such as promotion of civic engagement and e-participation.

#### *Key features of the mass media sphere*

- 1 Diversity of the media market in Kazakhstan
- 2 Overall development of the media sphere strictly controlled by government
- 3 Many national and commercial media outlets directly or indirectly funded by government



#### CHALLENGES

Probably, one of the key challenges with the development of e-government is that the e-government policy itself is regarded more as a domestic and even global tool of political PR rather than an instrument of public administration. Therefore, many efforts of the government in the sphere are aimed at improving the e-government image of the country in various ratings and any achievements in the sphere are often used in mass media as a reference of the successful political and administrative reforms in various political debates and discourse.

#### PROMISES

The key promise of the ICT-driven public sector reforms in Kazakhstan is a political motivation of the central government to improve some aspects of the e-government development, especially if they require only administrative help, technological support or direct funding could easily lead to measurable results and achievements. Therefore, many e-government projects in the public administration system have great potential to be successfully realized and implemented. In this regard, the readiness of the central government to support any media projects aimed at boosting public knowledge about e-government helps to improve the overall development of the concept and raise public awareness.

#### ***The foreign policy: national interests or global branding?***

It may seem that the foreign policy and international relations of the country have no connection to the e-government topic. However, in case of Kazakhstan, this factor of the e-government policy plays a crucial role in the overall development of the concept. The realization of the project is regarded by the national authorities as a matter of global image promotion, which the government authorities regard as one of the most important aspects of foreign policy and country image building in the international arena (Marat, 2009) in a manner described by Cummings (2003) as “pragmatic.” Since any achievements in the area are documented today by global e-government experts, particularly, from the United Nations and World Bank, and reflected in the annual or biennial rating lists related to the sphere, this direction of foreign policy is beginning to play an increasingly important role, too. Therefore, the central government pays special attention to the global PR in the sphere and, in general, this aspect of the e-government development might be regarded as one of the important external factors of the concept’s promotion in Kazakhstan. For many years, these ratings have played an

important role as a political incentive for the government to initiate and improve its stance in global e-government ratings. The realization of the concept, along with ambitious projects such as the World Expo 2017 and the chairmanship of the country in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in 2010 (Melvin, 2009) were all regarded as part of the global PR campaign of the government. In this regard, the principle of persuasion plays its role not only in domestic politics (Schatz, 2008) but also as an important instrument of propaganda in the international arena.

One of the implications of the international policy is that the government agencies that realize the various e-government projects in Kazakhstan often invite foreign experts and policy entrepreneurs from other countries with a double goal: on the one hand, to get acquainted with new knowledge and best methods and practices in e-government building, and on the other hand, to share and make new professional connections with global e-government policy makers. The combination of this PR strategy and foreign policy apparently proved to be effective. It was one of the reasons why Kazakhstan was honored to organize the Third Global e-Government Forum in September 2014 in the capital city of Astana, whose preparations offered a great motivation for the nation to promote the development of various projects in the e-government area. The preparations to the World Expo that being organized in Kazakhstan for 2017 provide additional incentives for the decision makers in the sphere to focus on technological advancement in this direction, too.

### *Key features of foreign policy*

- 1 The improvement of the global image of the country has been a crucial part of its foreign policy since the first years of independence.
- 2 The national government pays special attention to the global ranking of the country in various e-government rating lists.
- 3 Any achievements of the country in the international arena are used by the central government as an additional tool of persuasion in domestic politics.

### *Implications for e-government*

#### CHALLENGES

When developing various e-government projects, the policy makers try to pay more attention to the spheres that could potentially guarantee quick results and obvious achievements rather than to those that require greater efforts and time, but which are nevertheless important for further progress in this direction, especially taking into account the fact that many traditional

strategies and tactics of e-government building are not as effective as before and the experts from the international organizations who compile the global ratings began to pay special attention to the policies that require more attention to the realization of such co-factors in building e-government as e-participation and collaboration with civil society.

#### PROMISES

The promotion of the e-government policy is regarded as one of the priorities in the technological development of the country, the results of which the national authorities plan to exhibit during the World Expo in 2017, this direction of the public sector reforms will be part of the agenda both in domestic and foreign policy of the central government, providing opportunities for the development of new projects in the sphere.

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