

ANALYZING GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: THE CASE OF KAZAKHSTAN AFTER THE JANUARY PROTESTS IN 2022

Abstract

The paper investigates the narratives employed by the government of Kazakhstan during the January 2022 protests using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) analysis. Through an examination of textual data from Tokayev and government officials, the study aims to identify patterns of delegitimization of protesters and legitimization of government actions. The analysis reveals a narrative emphasizing legality, security, and national unity, often justifying government crackdowns on protests as necessary for maintaining public order and combating external threats. Despite initial acknowledgments of the right to peaceful assembly, the government's discourse shifted towards labeling protesters as "terrorists" and advocating for a "shoot to kill" policy as protests escalated. Post-intervention, themes of resilience and progress were promoted, masking deeper commitments to control over democratic principles.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, protests, authoritarianism, legitimacy

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Introduction

Like many post-Soviet countries, Kazakhstan has faced economic inequality, corruption, and political repression challenges since gaining independence. Despite its vast natural resources, the benefits of economic growth have only sometimes reached the average citizen, leading to simmering discontent among various segments of the population. As a result, the protests in Kazakhstan in January 2022 were a significant and unprecedented series of demonstrations in the country. Rising fuel prices sparked these protests but quickly became broader discontent with the government and its authoritarian rule. As the protests gained momentum, they expanded to encompass a range of grievances, including political repression, corruption, and a lack of political freedoms.¹ The protesters called for greater accountability, transparency, and a more participatory political system. There were reports of clashes between the protesters and security forces, resulting in casualties and arrests. President Tokayev, alleging connections between the violent rioters and foreign terrorist and criminal organizations, issued a directive to authorize the use of lethal force against protesters without warning.² These actions substantially cost Kazakhstan's reputation, significantly diminishing the regime's legitimacy in the eyes of domestic and international actors. Ultimately, the protests highlighted the deep-seated dissatisfaction among the population and the urgent need for reform to address the nation's systemic issues.³

Despite the efforts of Tokayev to actively engage in public activities, discontent with socio-economic well-being was persistent. He regularly addresses issues through social

¹Diana T. Kudaibergenova and Marlene Laruelle, "Making Sense of the January 2022 Protests in Kazakhstan: Failing Legitimacy, Culture of Protests, and Elite Readjustments," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 38, no. 6 (November 2, 2022): 441–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2022.2077060>.

²Shaun Walker, "Kazakhstan President Says He Gave Order to 'Open Fire with Lethal Force,'" *The Guardian*, January 7, 2022, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/07/kazakhstan-protests-thousands-detained-as-president-says-order-mostly-restored>.

³Kudaibergenova and Laruelle, "Making Sense of the January 2022 Protests in Kazakhstan"; Sanzhar Aitkulov, "WHAT LED KAZAKHSTAN TO THE JANUARY PROTESTS IN 2022? REAL CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS," 2022.

media and public channels, relying on public mood as a gauge for policymaking and governmental initiative.⁴ Nonetheless, in regards to protests and opposition, Tokayev has exhibited a firm stance, often emphasizing the importance of stability and order in the face of dissent. While he has occasionally acknowledged grievances and expressed willingness to address them within the confines of the existing political system, substantive reforms have been limited, and dissent has been met with swift and decisive action from the authorities.⁵ Tokayev's approach to dissent and protest reflects a commitment to maintaining the status quo and preserving the dominance of the ruling elite, even as he seeks to present himself as a more open and responsive leader than his predecessor. One example besides the 2022 January protests that illustrates Tokayev's approach to dissent and protest is the demonstrations that occurred in May 2019 following the presidential election, in which Tokayev was declared the winner. Despite claims of electoral fraud and calls for transparency, the government dismissed the protests as illegitimate and swiftly cracked down on demonstrators.⁶ Security forces used arrests to disperse the crowds, resulting in injuries and arrests of hundreds of protesters.⁷

In response to the protests, Tokayev reaffirmed his commitment to stability and order, condemning the demonstrations as attempts to destabilize the country. While he acknowledged the right to peaceful protest, he emphasized the need to maintain public order and warned against actions that could lead to violence or unrest.⁸ Despite promises of dialogue and reform, the government's response to the protests underscored its intolerance of dissent and its determination to maintain control at any cost. While Tokayev has occasionally

⁴Aslan Abilkairov, "Discursive Framing Manipulation through Social Media and Public Statements by the Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Kazakhstan," 2022.

⁵Morena Skalamera Groce, "Political Transition on the Great Steppe: The Case of Kazakhstan," in *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy (February-March 2020): Deterring North Korea* (Routledge, 2020); Sofia Tipaldou, "Kazakhstan 2.0: Change and Continuity?," in *Political Regimes and Neopatrimonialism in Central Asia: A Sociology of Power Perspective*, ed. Ferran Izquierdo-Brichs and Francesc Serra-Massansalvador (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 249–93, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-9093-1_7.

⁶Jean-François Caron and Viktoriya Malikova, "Understanding Anti-Regime Activists' Failures During the 2019 Kazakhstan Presidential Election," in *Understanding Kazakhstan's 2019 Political Transition*, ed. Jean-François Caron (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 79–100, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-4308-5_5.

⁷Human Rights Watch, "Kazakhstan: Events of 2019," in *World Report 2020*, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/kazakhstan>.

⁸Reid Standish, "Kazakhstan's Second-Ever President Can't Tolerate Protest," *Foreign Policy* (blog), May 16, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/10/kazakhstans-second-ever-president-cant-tolerate-protest/>.

made gestures towards political liberalization, such as initiating discussions on constitutional reforms and releasing some political prisoners, these efforts have failed to address the underlying grievances driving public discontent.⁹

Likewise, the post-protests period of the January protests was marked with different governmental narratives of “attempted coup within the government”, “twenty thousand terrorists during protests in Almaty”, and the participation of oligarchs and foreign forces. One of the most notorious examples was the arrest of Vikram Ruzahunov, a Kyrgyzstani citizen who was accused of intentional participation in riots. Pro-government media and officials tried to showcase him as an example of foreign influence as he confessed on the video about receiving ninety thousand tenge for rioting. However, it was later revealed that he was tortured and confessed under the pressure of physical violence. There are many more instances where the process of delegitimization of the protests and legitimization of government actions can be traced in terms of discourse and narrative formulation.

The protests in Kazakhstan in January 2022 showcased a clash between the government's narratives and the demands of protestors, highlighting a significant issue of legitimacy and representation. This research offers several novel contributions to the academic literature on authoritarianism and protest management, particularly in the context of Kazakhstan. Firstly, it provides a focused analysis of the Kazakhstani government's narrative strategies during the January 2022 protests, a topic that has received limited scholarly attention compared to similar events in other regions. While the use of narratives to delegitimize protests and justify government actions is a well-established topic, most existing research predominantly examines cases from more widely studied regions such as Eastern Europe, the Middle East, or Latin America. The Central Asian context, particularly Kazakhstan, presents a unique case due to its distinct historical, cultural, and political background, influenced by its Soviet legacy and post-independence developments.

Secondly, the study addresses the broader implications of these findings for the dynamics of power and resistance in Kazakhstan. It situates the Kazakhstani experience within the larger theoretical framework of framing theory, contributing to the scholarly debates on

⁹Dušan N. Proroković, “Constitutional Reforms in Kazakhstan: The Transformation of the Political System under the Leadership of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev,” *The Review of International Affairs* LXXIV, no. 1189 (2023): 57–78.

authoritarian governance narratives. This research thus fills a critical gap by offering a detailed case study that enriches the understanding of how similar strategies might be employed in other under-researched authoritarian contexts, and how these strategies evolve over time in response to both internal pressures and external scrutiny. Even though the topic of authoritarian framing is not a novelty, academic literature lacks analysis of the Central Asian region and delegitimization of the protests through a narrative perspective. Therefore, the aim of the research is two-fold. Firstly, it aims to contribute to the common academic literature about the framing used by authoritarian regimes in managing dissent and maintaining control. Secondly, it intends to provide perspectives on the dynamics of power and resistance in Kazakhstan, contributing to scholarly debates on the authoritarian governance narratives and their resemblance in the region. Therefore, there are two main research questions:

Research Question: What narratives have been used by the government of Kazakhstan to delegitimize riots and legitimize government actions during the protests in January 2022?

The study analyzes textual data from the President, government officials, and pro-government media from the beginning of the protests to nowadays. The underlying premise of the research is to identify specific patterns and frequencies of delegitimization of the protesters and legitimization of violence by the government during and after the riots in 2022.

To answer the research questions the paper analyzes narratives used by Tokaev and government officials following structure. The text, first, discusses the evolution of the authoritarian context of Kazakhstan and how incumbents previously dealt with narrating opposition and protest activity. Secondly, to facilitate the broader picture of the authoritarian context, the research analyzes framing theory and how scholars have analyzed protestors' delegitimization and the legitimization of violence in different countries. Applying the theoretical framework analyzed previously, the paper, then, provides a detailed explanation of the data collection and analysis process of Latent Dirichlet Allocation(LDA). Lastly, the results of the analysis are presented and related points of further discussion and limitations of the paper are considered.

1. Literature review

1.1 30 years of independence in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan's trajectory since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 has been marked by a consolidation of authoritarian rule under President Nursultan Nazarbayev. In the early years of independence, Nazarbayev tried to position himself as a strong leader committed to economic development and stability in the face of political and economic uncertainty.¹⁰ However, over time, his regime grew increasingly centralized and autocratic, with power concentrated in the hands of a small elite centered around the ruling Nur Otan party. These include the suppression of political opposition through legal and extralegal means, restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, and the co-optation of key societal actors such as the media and judiciary.¹¹ The regime's ability to manipulate electoral processes and co-opt opposition parties has further cemented its hold on power.¹²

The Kazakh government exerts strict control over the media, limiting the space for independent journalism and critical reporting. State-owned media outlets dominate the media landscape, disseminating pro-government narratives and marginalizing dissenting voices. Independent journalists and media organizations face harassment, intimidation, and censorship, further restricting freedom of expression.¹³ At the same time, political opposition

¹⁰Rico Isaacs, "'Papa'– Nursultan Nazarbayev and the Discourse of Charismatic Leadership and Nation-Building in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 10, no. 3 (2010): 435–52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9469.2011.01089.x>.

¹¹Pamela Blackmon, "After Karimov and Nazarbayev: Change in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan?," *Central Asian Survey* 40, no. 2 (April 3, 2021): 179–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2020.1837073>.

¹²Shu Yang, "Nazarbayev: The Road to Power and Success," *China International Strategy Review* 2, no. 1 (June 1, 2020): 120–37, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-020-00046-8>.

¹³Edward Schatz, "The Soft Authoritarian Tool Kit: Agenda-Setting Power in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan," *Comparative Politics* 41, no. 2 (January 1, 2009): 203–22, <https://doi.org/10.5129/001041509X12911362972034>; David Lewis, "Blogging Zhanaozen: Hegemonic

and civil society activists are routinely targeted for harassment, intimidation, and imprisonment. The regime employs a range of repressive tactics, including arbitrary arrests, politically motivated prosecutions, and physical violence, to silence dissent and suppress opposition.¹⁴ Human rights organizations have documented numerous cases of torture, arbitrary detention, and forced disappearances perpetrated by Kazakh security forces.¹⁵

Official narratives portray the regime as a guarantor of stability and prosperity while dissenting voices are demonized as unpatriotic or foreign-backed. The regime also employs strategic communications and disinformation campaigns to discredit opposition figures and undermine their credibility.¹⁶

Following Nursultan Nazarbayev's resignation in March 2019 after nearly three decades of authoritarian rule, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev assumed the presidency of Kazakhstan. While the transition was presented as a constitutional succession, it was widely viewed as orchestrated by Nazarbayev to ensure continuity and stability under a loyal successor.¹⁷ Tokayev, a long-time diplomat and former Prime Minister, quickly consolidated power and sought to assert his authority over the political landscape. Despite initial hopes for reform and liberalization, Tokayev has largely maintained the status quo established by his predecessor, prioritizing stability and continuity over meaningful political change. His presidency has been characterized by a cautious approach to reform, with limited steps taken to address systemic issues such as corruption and political repression.¹⁸

Discourse and Authoritarian Resilience in Kazakhstan,” *Central Asian Survey* 35, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 421–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2016.1161902>; Edward Schatz, “Transnational Image Making and Soft Authoritarian Kazakhstan,” *Slavic Review* 67, no. 1 (April 2008): 50–62, <https://doi.org/10.2307/27652766>.

¹⁴Rico Isaacs, *Political Opposition in Authoritarianism: Exit, Voice and Loyalty in Kazakhstan* (Springer Nature, 2022).

¹⁵Human Rights Watch, “Kazakhstan: Events of 2021,” in *World Report 2022*, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/kazakhstan>.

¹⁶Isaacs, *Political Opposition in Authoritarianism*.

¹⁷Blackmon, “After Karimov and Nazarbayev.”

¹⁸Annette Bohr et al., “Kazakhstan: Tested by Transition,” n.d.; Groce, “Political Transition on the Great Steppe”; Richard Pomfret, “What Did Those Who Were ‘Present at the Transition’ Miss? The Creation of Powerful Presidential Families in Central Asia,” *Comparative Economic Studies* 65, no. 3 (September 1, 2023): 442–60, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41294-023-00208-8>.

1.2 Why Do Governments Choose Delegitimization as a Strategy?

In general, many authoritarian regimes have responded to mass protests through repression. Chenoweth and Stephan highlight that regimes often employ violence, arrests, and intimidation to suppress dissent and maintain control.¹⁹ Delegitimization of protesters makes them easier targets of violence, expressing their behavior as socially unacceptable (Bandura 1996). In that sense, the regression of acts of people to inhuman in protest activities can take two forms: animalistic and mechanistic.²⁰ Animalistic dehumanization portrays the target as akin to animals, devoid of distinct human traits such as rationality, civility, or domestication. On the other hand, mechanistic dehumanization involves perceiving someone as possessing diminished human qualities, resembling an automaton or an inanimate object, lacking in emotion, and closed-off in mentality.²¹ Studies indicate that criminals are often subjected to animalistic dehumanization, whereas police officers are commonly viewed in a mechanistic fashion, particularly in high-security threat scenarios.²²

At the same time, some authoritarian governments adopt co-optation strategies to weaken the impact of protests. Strategic concessions are used to defuse protests while maintaining overall control and might include economic reforms, changes in leadership, or promises of political liberalization.²³ However, Keremoglu et al. argue that repression can be understood by examining both the legitimization tactics employed by regimes and the issues raised by protesters: if protesters openly challenge these justifications and thus cast doubt on the underlying principles of governmental rule, repression is more likely to occur.²⁴

The legitimation or delegitimation during protest activity is aimed at decreasing riots, but what is the purpose after the events? Gilley argues that authoritarian leaders try to earn a

¹⁹Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

²⁰Nick Haslam, "Dehumanization: An Integrative Review," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10, no. 3 (August 1, 2006): 252–64, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr1003_4.

²¹Haslam.

²²Rebecca C. Hetey and Jennifer L. Eberhardt, "Racial Disparities in Incarceration Increase Acceptance of Punitive Policies," *Psychological Science* 25, no. 10 (October 1, 2014): 1949–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614540307>.

²³Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*.

²⁴Eda Keremoglu, Sebastian Hellmeier, and Nils B. Weidmann, "Thin-Skinned Leaders: Regime Legitimation, Protest Issues, and Repression in Autocracies," *Political Science Research and Methods* 10, no. 1 (January 2022): 136–52, <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2021.19>.

positive image in front of an audience to exercise their power in the future.²⁵ For dictators, wielding legitimate power alongside coercion not only reduces the expense of governance but also minimizes the frequency of challenges to their rule.²⁶ Consequently, legitimacy becomes an enticing complementary tool for dictators aiming to prolong their stay in office.²⁷

1.3 How Do Governments Delegitimize?

Current literature suggests that the delegitimization of opposing actions or the legitimization of repressions usually revolves around framing participants of the protests as lawbreakers with a distinct intent to contest the stability of the country.²⁸

Gerschewski provides a theoretical framework explaining that pillars of influence, legitimation, co-optation, and repressions reinforce each other.²⁹ To understand the interaction of legitimation strategies, ‘frames’ are used to categorize specific topics. Frames are a part of framing theory that investigates how individuals and groups construct and convey messages to shape the perception of events, issues, or topics. At its core, framing theory posits that the way information is presented, or “framed,” significantly influences how it is understood and interpreted.³⁰ At the heart of framing theory are “frames,” individuals employ mental structures to organize their understanding of the world. These cognitive frameworks guide the perception, interpretation, and evaluation of information. Frames are not neutral; they are active constructs that influence how individuals make sense of the complex reality around

²⁵Bruce Gilley, *The Right to Rule: How States Win and Lose Legitimacy* (Columbia University Press, 2009).

²⁶David Beetham, “Max Weber and the Legitimacy of the Modern State,” *Analyse & Kritik* 13, no. 1 (May 1, 1991): 34–45, <https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-1991-0102>.

²⁷Johannes Gerschewski, “Legitimacy in Autocracies: Oxymoron or Essential Feature?,” *Perspectives on Politics* 16, no. 3 (September 2018): 652–65, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592717002183>.

²⁸Maria Josua, “The Legitimation of Repression in Autocracies,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1988>.

²⁹Johannes Gerschewski, “The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-Optation in Autocratic Regimes,” in *Comparing Autocracies in the Early Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2014).

³⁰Robert Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of A Fractured Paradigm,” *The Journal of Communication* 43 (December 1, 1993): 51–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>.

them.³¹ Frame building is a deliberate process where communicators select specific aspects of an issue or event and emphasize them in their communication. This strategic act influences how individuals perceive and interpret information. Frame setting, on the other hand, involves defining the context and establishing parameters within which an issue is discussed. It is a crucial aspect of framing, as it shapes the discussion to favor a particular interpretation or perspective.³²

Frame adoption occurs when individuals accept and internalize a specific frame, often through repeated exposure to reinforcing messages. In political communication, framing shapes political discourse, influencing public opinion and policy decisions. Strategic framing underscores that the framing process is not neutral; rather, it involves intentional decisions by communicators to influence public understanding and opinion. Political actors, media outlets, and other influential figures leverage framing strategically to advance their goals, garner support, or shape the narrative surrounding specific issues.³³ In regards to the specific events, Scheufele and Tewksbury suggest that the interpretation of actions and topics can have a significant impact on the public discourse of the event. Legitimation is a discursive strategy used to reshape the portrayal of a single event to benefit a news network. This involves endorsing one viewpoint while simultaneously, either implicitly or explicitly, discrediting the opposing viewpoint. By doing so, the network sets the perspectives against each other, influencing readers to side with the endorsed perspective.³⁴ Given that during the January protests, there has been an Internet shutdown since day 2 of the protests, and sources of information were limited, this argument has more validity.

Dukalskis also finds that in China(1989), Myanmar(2007), and Iran(2009-2010) protesters were blamed for having an affiliation with foreigners, showing a lack of loyalty to the country. The Chinese government framed the protesters as counter-revolutionaries and a threat to social stability, employing state media to propagate this narrative. The regime justified the crackdown by portraying the protests as driven by foreign elements and a

³¹Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience (Cambridge, MA, US: Harvard University Press, 1974).

³²Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (University of California Press, 2003).

³³Entman, "Framing."

³⁴Jan Chovanec, "Chapter 4. Legitimation through Differentiation," 2010, 61–82, <https://doi.org/10.1075/dapsac.36.07cho>.

challenge to the state's authority. The military junta depicted the Buddhist monks and civilians participating in the protests as agitators disrupting national peace. The regime used propaganda to suggest that the protests were incited by external forces aiming to destabilize the country. The Iranian government labeled the protesters as "seditionists" and accused them of being puppets of Western powers. The state media broadcast images and stories that framed the protests as violent and orchestrated by foreign enemies to undermine the Islamic Republic.³⁵ The securitization approach suggests that based on the intentions of security, legitimization can be focused on specific audiences. For instance, they can concentrate on traditional values of national belonging, loyalty, and the rule of law.³⁶ Edel and Hosua adopt the concept of "harmful behavior", created by Snow and Benford, to create their classifications based on endangered value and frame described through harmful behavior that can be seen in Table 1.³⁷

Endangered value	Frame: harmful behavior (by the target of repression)
National unity	Division of society
History, tradition; sovereignty	Foreign influence
Legality	Criminal behaviour
Security of state and society	Terrorism; violence; attacking, intimidating state (representatives & institutions), person & property
Public order, everyday life	Disruption of traffic, activities, production

³⁵Alexander Dukalskis, *The Authoritarian Public Sphere: Legitimation and Autocratic Power in North Korea, Burma, and China* (London: Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315455532>.

³⁶Scott D. Watson, "'Framing' the Copenhagen School: Integrating the Literature on Threat Construction," *Millennium* 40, no. 2 (January 1, 2012): 279–301, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829811425889>.

³⁷Mirjam Edel and Maria Josua, "How Authoritarian Rulers Seek to Legitimize Repression: Framing Mass Killings in Egypt and Uzbekistan," *Democratization*, July 4, 2018, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13510347.2018.1439021>; David Snow and Robert Benford, "Master Frames and Cycles of Protest," *Master Frames and Cycles of Protest*, January 1, 1992.

Stability	Unrest
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Table 1. Model of “harmful behavior” and “Endangered value” by Edel and Hosea.

Another target of messaging is the international community. However, even before specific messaging, autocracies try to avoid external scrutiny by limiting access to information. Censorship and shutdown of main communication channels create information bubbles that are used to manipulate narratives and decrease protest activity as protesters oftentimes use social media as a navigation. In terms of narratives, then, contemporary discourses of human rights and the war on terror are used to justify repressions or present protesting activities in a certain manner.³⁸ Despite the availability of some research on the governmental framing of protests, the theoretical basis is still understudied.

Authoritarian regimes often tighten control over information channels to manage narratives, limit the spread of dissent, and delegitimize and undermine dissent.³⁹ Stanley highlighted that language, carefully crafted by authoritarian regimes shapes public perceptions as a strategic use of communication to control narratives, consolidate power, and fortify the legitimacy of authoritarian rule.⁴⁰ In that sense, the framing of the protests during and after the mass protests plays a key role in decreasing protest activity by creating an image of the “enemy” and defusing consequential damages. The operationalization of justification of repressions in autocracies is usually delivered through mainstream media and censorship and public statements of incumbents straight to the public to legitimize governmental actions and delegitimize opposing movements.⁴¹

1.4 Delegitimization and Legitimization in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan has an authoritarian context intolerant of dissent, but the 2022 protests' scale was unprecedented. Past delegitimization narratives have targeted opposition and critical

³⁸Edel and Josua, “How Authoritarian Rulers Seek to Legitimize Repression.”

³⁹Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave?: Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴⁰Jason Stanley, ed., “How Propaganda Works, Precis,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 96, no. 2 (2018): 470–74.

⁴¹Watson, “‘Framing’ the Copenhagen School.”

situations. Schatz and Maltseva identified the Kazakhstani government's adeptness in steering the agenda across participation in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the global financial crisis, and Rakhatgate.⁴² Their research illustrates the elites' proficiency in manipulating information flows to transform criticism into favorable narratives. An additional example is the presidential campaign in Kazakhstan in 2005 when the government not only proved capable of destroying the opposition but also skillfully handled criticism that was expected from the West.⁴³

Nonetheless, limited scholarly focus exists on applying frameworks to Kazakhstan and analyzing the government's shifting delegitimization messaging. The existing analysis mostly studied either the effect of those manipulations or the impact of the Soviet legacy on interpretations of different narratives.⁴⁴ Regarding the January 2022 protests specifically, the literature mostly focuses on the reasons for those protests rather than justifications for repressions.⁴⁵

1.5 Soviet Legacy

Another area of research is the comparison with other Central Asian states where the government blamed radicals and foreign influence in response to protests. Horsman explains this attitude through the Soviet legacy and the contradistinction of the state against “dangerous” actors.⁴⁶ The post-Soviet states inherited a legacy of centralized authority and a suspicion of perceived threats to state security, a legacy inherited by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent turmoil in the region. The contradistinction between the state and

⁴²Edward Schatz and Elena Maltseva, “Kazakhstan’s Authoritarian ‘Persuasion,’” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 28, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 45–65, <https://doi.org/10.2747/1060-586X.28.1.45>.

⁴³Schatz, “The Soft Authoritarian Tool Kit.”

⁴⁴Timur Dadabaev, “Manipulating Post-Soviet Nostalgia: Contrasting Political Narratives and Public Recollections in Central Asia,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 18, no. 1 (January 2021): 61–81, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479591420000443>.

⁴⁵Kudaibergenova and Laruelle, “Making Sense of the January 2022 Protests in Kazakhstan”; Aitkulov, “WHAT LED KAZAKHSTAN TO THE JANUARY PROTESTS IN 2022? REAL CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS.”

⁴⁶Stuart Horsman, “Themes in Official Discourses on Terrorism in Central Asia,” in *Terrorism and the Politics of Naming* (Routledge, 2008).

perceived threats is deeply rooted in the Soviet legacy, where any form of dissent was seen as a challenge to the hegemony of the Communist Party and the stability of the state. Under Soviet rule, any form of dissent or opposition to the Communist Party was viewed as a direct challenge to the legitimacy and stability of the state.⁴⁷ The Communist Party portrayed itself as the sole representative of the interests of the working class and the vanguard of the socialist revolution. As such, any individuals or groups perceived as threatening the Party's authority or ideological purity were labeled as enemies of the state and subjected to harsh reprisals.⁴⁸ This attitude towards dissent was deeply ingrained in Soviet political culture and was reflected in the legal system, which criminalized anti-Soviet activities and imposed severe penalties on dissidents. The Soviet regime utilized state-controlled media and propaganda to disseminate narratives that demonized dissenters and portrayed them as agents of foreign imperialism or counter-revolutionary forces. This legacy of authoritarianism and suspicion has persisted in post-Soviet countries, where ruling elites continue to view opposition movements and civil society activists with suspicion and hostility. An illustration of this legacy can be seen in several legislations.⁴⁹ In several post-Soviet countries, including Russia and Kyrgyzstan, the implementation of "Foreign Agent laws" has become a significant aspect of government efforts to control civil society and political dissent. These laws typically require NGOs and other non-profit organizations that receive foreign funding and engage in political activities to register as "foreign agents." The term "foreign agent" carries negative connotations and is often associated with espionage or subversion, thereby stigmatizing the organizations labeled as such.⁵⁰ While Kazakhstan does not officially possess any legal regulations regarding this law, in September 2023 the Kazakhstani government published "the register of persons receiving money and property from abroad" that possesses same direction of regulations as in Russia.⁵¹

⁴⁷Luke March, "Power and Opposition in the Former Soviet Union: The Communist Parties of Moldova and Russia," *Party Politics* 12, no. 3 (May 1, 2006): 341–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068806063085>.

⁴⁸Lix Krawatzek, "Remembering a Contentious Past: Resistance and Collaboration in the Former Soviet Union," *East European Politics and Societies* 36, no. 01 (2022): 298–327. [remem](https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688221100000000000000000000)

⁴⁹Yuliy Nisnevich and Andrey Ryabov, "Post-Soviet Authoritarianism," *Russian Social Science Review* 61, no. 6 (November 1, 2020): 538–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611428.2020.1852042>.

⁵⁰Erica Marat, "Kyrgyzstan," *Nations in Transit*, 2015; Maria Tysiachniouk, Svetlana Tulaeva, and Laura A. Henry, "Civil Society under the Law 'On Foreign Agents': NGO Strategies and Network Transformation," *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 4 (April 21, 2018): 615–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1463512>.

⁵¹"Kazakhstan's 'Foreign Agent' List Threatens NGOs - Analytical Internet-journal Vlast," <https://vlast.kz/english/57869-kazakhstans-foreign-agent-list-threatens-ngos.html>.

2. Research design

2.1 Hypotheses

The analysis of the research is built upon LDA analysis and network methods from the collected textual data of Tokaev, public officials, and pro-government media. Topic modeling is widely used in political science. When there are multiple streams of textual data for a single event, techniques such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) are particularly effective. These topic modeling methods work well at the document level, allowing for the analysis of word collections to identify underlying themes and patterns across various texts.

The literature on authoritarian regimes highlights how governments portray protesters as lawbreakers and threats to national stability to justify repression. Based on the model of Edel and Hosea, framing includes portraying dissent as criminal behavior, terrorism, or violence that threatens public order and national security. Therefore, the paper tests this hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The Kazakhstani government employs narratives framing protesters' actions as harmful behavior to delegitimize dissent and justify repressive measures.

Additionally, the post-Soviet states, including Kazakhstan, have inherited a legacy of centralized authority and a suspicion of dissent, seeing it as a challenge to state stability. However, there is little literature on whether current government specifically utilize Soviet strategies of secularization in post-Soviet countries. As a result, to assess the impact of the Soviet legacy, the following hypothesis is provided:

Hypothesis 2: The framing of protests and dissent in Kazakhstan is influenced by the Soviet legacy of viewing opposition as a threat to state security and stability.

2.2 Data collection

Given that the research aims to identify narratives used by the government of Kazakhstan to delegitimize protesters and legitimize the violence, the data collection process involved collecting all the possible textual data from the start of the protests on January 2 to nowadays. Therefore, the initial step involved data collection through the Web Scrapping application on akorda.kz and other government websites, official social media accounts, and textual and audio interviews using libraries such as Requests and BeautifulSoup. BeautifulSoup, a Python library for parsing HTML and XML documents, was employed to parse the HTML content retrieved by Requests.⁵² By navigating through the HTML tree structure, the library enabled the extraction of relevant information such as text, publication dates, and sources. The process involved sending HTTP GET requests to official URLs, parsing the HTML content to create a parse tree, and extracting specific elements containing the text, publication date, and source information. Additionally, the collection process included a search through keywords, such as January protests, Bloody January, protests, etc., to identify relevant articles. In sum, the collected data was compiled and contained the text itself, the source of the text, and the time of publication. In case the source of the information involved third-party or non-government media that contained direct quotes or any form of textual data, only this information was taken into account.

2.3 Data preprocessing

In the data preprocessing process, the original document is first accessed (step 0). Then, utilizing Python's Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) library, the text is converted to lowercase (step 1) to ensure consistency in word matching across the document. This step helps to avoid discrepancies in word comparison due to differences in capitalization. Next, special characters such as punctuation marks and symbols are meticulously removed using regular expressions, along with the NLTK library (step 2). This step is crucial for eliminating noise and irrelevant information from the text, allowing for a cleaner dataset for analysis. Following the removal of special characters, common stopwords of Russian and Kazakh languages are identified and removed utilizing NLTK's stopwords corpus (step 3). Stopwords are frequently occurring words in a language that do not carry significant meaning for

⁵²V. Yevsieiev, S. Maksymova, and Ahmad Alkhalaileh, "A Program for Analyzing the Structure of a Web Site Development Using the Parsing Method Based on the Python," 2024, <https://openarchive.nure.ua/handle/document/26245>.

analysis purposes and can introduce bias if not removed. By eliminating stopwords, the focus is shifted to more meaningful content within the text. Subsequently, NLTK's Porter Stemmer algorithm is employed (step 4) to reduce words to their root form. This process, known as stemming, involves stripping suffixes from words to obtain their base or root form. Stemming helps to standardize words with similar meanings but different forms, enabling more accurate analysis by treating variations of words as the same entity. Finally, a term-document matrix is constructed utilizing libraries such as NumPy and SciPy (step 5). In this matrix, rows represent terms (words) extracted from the preprocessed text, while columns represent documents. Each cell in the matrix contains the frequency of occurrence of a term in a document, providing a structured representation of the text data suitable for further analysis. This matrix serves as the foundation for various text mining techniques, including clustering, classification, and information retrieval.

2.4 Narrative Analysis

With the preprocessed textual data at hand, the analysis focused on topic modeling using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) is a generative probabilistic model designed for topic modeling in natural language processing. It was developed by David M. Blei, Andrew Y. Ng, and Michael I. Jordan, and introduced in their seminal paper published in the Journal of Machine Learning Research in 2003. The development of LDA was influenced by earlier models such as Latent Semantic Analysis (LSA) and Probabilistic Latent Semantic Analysis (pLSA). LSA, introduced in the late 1980s, used singular value decomposition to identify patterns in the relationships between terms and documents. pLSA, developed in the late 1990s, extended this by introducing a probabilistic model, allowing for a more statistically grounded approach. However, pLSA had limitations, particularly in its scalability and the difficulty in handling new documents that were not part of the training set. To address these issues, Blei, Ng, and Jordan developed LDA. LDA introduced a three-level hierarchical Bayesian model, which allows for the efficient modeling of large corpora. Each document is modeled as a mixture of various topics, where each topic is a distribution over words. This approach not only provides a more flexible and scalable model but also allows for better generalization to new documents.

The core idea of LDA is that documents are represented as random mixtures over latent topics, where each topic is characterized by a distribution over words. The model assumes a generative process for the documents in a corpus:

1. For each document, a distribution over topics is sampled from a Dirichlet distribution.
2. For each word in the document, a topic is chosen from this distribution.
3. The word is then sampled from the corresponding topic's word distribution.

This generative process is mathematically modeled using Dirichlet priors, which enforce sparsity in the topic distributions, making the topics interpretable as they represent coherent themes within the documents. This statistical technique, implemented through the Gensim library in Python, allows the discovery of latent topics embedded within the corpus. The process commenced with the creation of a dictionary mapping words to their respective integer identifiers, followed by the transformation of the preprocessed speeches into a bag-of-words corpus. Subsequently, an LDA model was trained on the corpus, with parameters specifying the desired number of topics and the number of iterations (passes) through the corpus. This iterative process facilitated the extraction of topics, each represented as a collection of top words associated with it. Through LDA modeling, the underlying idea is to unveil the latent thematic undercurrents permeating discourse, identifying prominent narratives used by the Kazakhstani leadership.

Determining the optimal number of topics is a challenge and is often addressed through trial and error. Researchers iteratively run the LDA algorithm with different values of K and evaluate the coherence and interpretability of the resulting topics to select the most appropriate number. Many studies, such as those by Blei (2003), Blei et al. (2010, 2012), and Kaplan and Vakili (2015), employ a trial-and-error method to determine the number of topics. This involves running the LDA algorithm with various values of K and then qualitatively assessing the resulting topics to see which configuration yields the most meaningful and coherent topics. LDA operates in an unsupervised manner, meaning it does not use labeled data to learn from. Consequently, the topics extracted by LDA do not come with predefined labels, necessitating human interpretation to understand and label them. After running LDA, researchers examine the list of words associated with each topic to interpret and assign meaningful labels. This process involves evaluating the coherence and semantic meaning of the words to ensure that the topics make sense in the context of the data. Human judgment is crucial as it provides the contextual and domain-specific understanding that the algorithm

lacks. Using the model of Edel and Hosea, those topics of narrative are then embedded into the “harmful behavior” concept. The framework of harmful behavior encompasses various frames, each associated with specific endangered values and corresponding manifestations of detrimental conduct. By applying this model to the extracted LDA topics, the aim is to discern how the discourse articulated by the government of Kazakhstan aligns with the identified frames of harmful behavior.

1. National Unity vs. Division of Society:

LDA topics exhibiting themes of national unity, patriotism, and societal cohesion are scrutinized to assess their alignment with the frame of national unity. Conversely, topics highlighting divisions within society, ethnic tensions, or social discord are analyzed within the context of the frame of division of society.

2. History, Tradition, Sovereignty vs. Foreign Influence:

The thematic content of LDA topics related to historical narratives, cultural heritage, and assertions of sovereignty is examined to determine their correspondence with the frame of history, tradition, and sovereignty. Conversely, topics addressing foreign interventions, influence, or challenges to national sovereignty are assessed within the framework of foreign influence.

3. Legality vs. Criminal Behavior:

LDA topics emphasizing adherence to legal norms, institutional legitimacy, and the rule of law are evaluated in light of the frame of legality. Conversely, topics discussing criminal activities, lawlessness, or breaches of the legal order are analyzed within the context of the frame of criminal behavior.

4. Security of State and Society vs. Terrorism, Violence:

The thematic content of LDA topics focusing on the protection of national security, public safety, and the rule of law is scrutinized to assess their alignment with the frame of security of state and society. Conversely, topics discussing acts of terrorism, violence, or threats to public safety are examined within the framework of terrorism, and violence.

5. Public Order, Everyday Life vs. Disruption of Traffic, Activities:

LDA topics emphasizing the maintenance of public order, the smooth functioning of society, and the preservation of everyday life are evaluated in relation to the frame of public order, and everyday life. Conversely, topics addressing disruptions to daily activities, protests, or civil unrest are assessed within the context of the frame of disruption of traffic, activities.

6. Stability vs. Unrest: The thematic content of LDA topics emphasizing stability, economic prosperity, and social harmony is examined to determine their correspondence with the frame of stability. Conversely, topics discussing social unrest, protests, or challenges to political stability are analyzed within the framework of unrest.

Lastly, to understand the thematic evolution regarding the January 2022 protests, an analysis is conducted to evaluate the probability of topics over time. Through visual examination of the aggregated topic probabilities, distinct temporal trends and patterns emerge. Peaks in the probability of certain topics may coincide with significant events or policy announcements, indicating heightened attention or emphasis on specific issues during those periods. Conversely, declines in topic probabilities may reflect shifts in policy priorities, changes in public discourse, or responses to emerging challenges.

The outcomes of the topic modeling are presented in Tables 1 and 2. These tables list the top ten words with the highest probabilities (most frequent) from the posterior distribution β_k for each topic k (where $k = 1, \dots, K$). Figures 3 and 4 visually display the frequency of each token within the corresponding Topic ID. Following the extraction of topics using LDA, the author validated and labeled these topics, which are shown in Table 3.

Topic ID	Top Words
0	сотрудник, полиц, президент, власт, действ, подозрева, акт, сво, силов, 5
1	беспорядок, преступлен, автомат, закон, соверш, услов, арман, государственн, департамент, огнестрельн
2	здан, январск, час, преступник, погром, поджог, мирн, событ, трагическ,

3	сотрудник, эт, преступник, четк, услов, норм, полиц, государст, управлен, соержан
4	захват, здан, цел, соверш, организац, стран, действ, власт, насильстен, направлен
5	государств, сво, амнист, люд, выступлен, наход, врем, президент, акц, применя
6	алмат, друг, пыта, обществ, январ, люд, военнослужа, установл, беспорядок, использова
7	орган, люд, оруж перв, отношен, организова, массов, лиц, здан, правоохранительн
8	государств, полиц, преступн, усто, обществ, мер, граждан, задач, ворот, протаран
9	област, сотрудник, вопрос, жамбылск, алматинск, беспорядок, уголовн, кызылординск, свобод, лиц

Table 1. LDA distribution by public officials

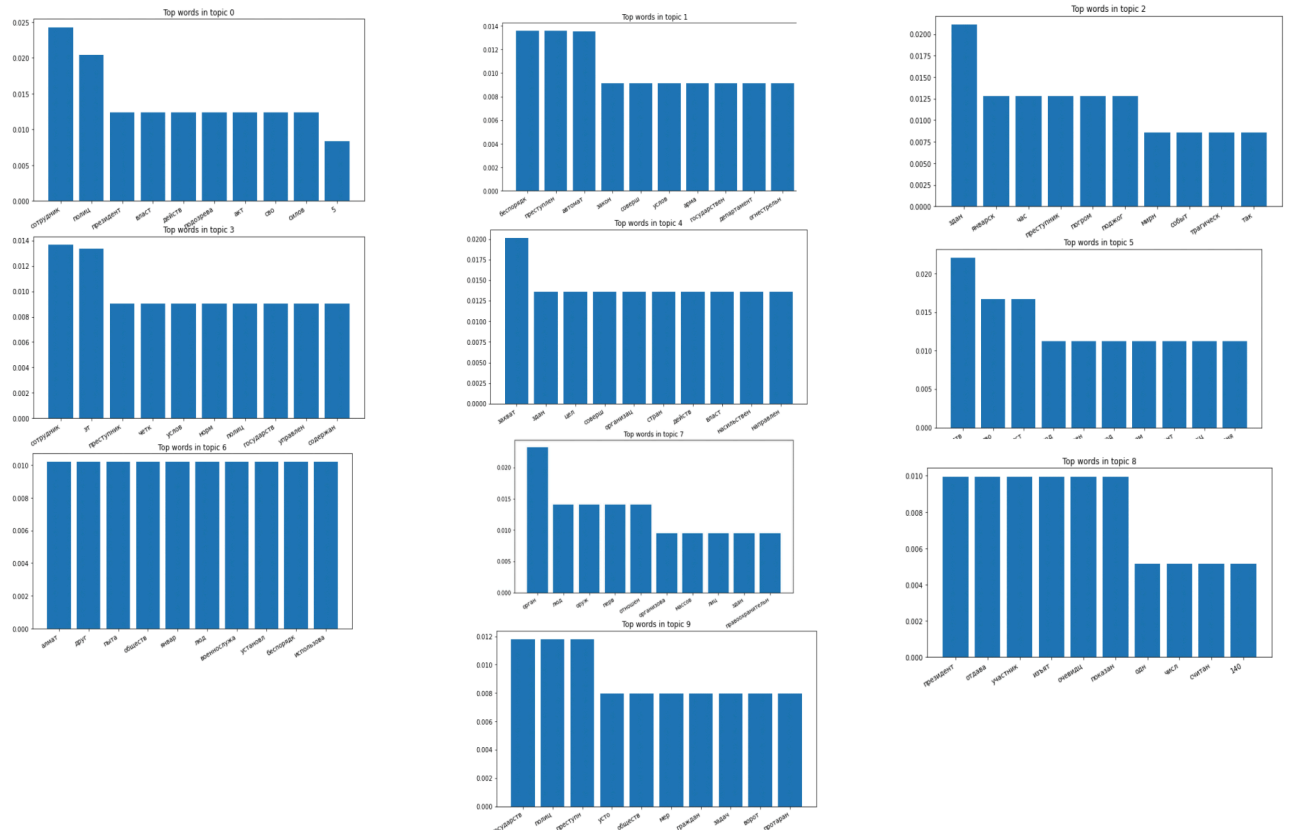


Figure 1. Frequency of top words in topics by public officials

Topic ID	Top Words
0	друг, след, правительств, алмат, казахста, государствен, миротворческ, здан, контингент, врем
1	наш, государств, нов, казахста, работ, стран, регион, стабильн, рынок, беспорядок
2	государств, правительств, поруча, обществ, возможн, наш, структур, стран, одн, отдельн
3	регион, националь, ситуац, госдарств, прояв, госаппарат, реформ, безопасн, правительств, групп
4	стран, сво, террорист, наш,вопрос, должн, нужн, мен, атак, террористическ

	наш, время, задач, конкретн, государствен, стран, событ, сил,мирн, закон
5	безопасн, стран, орган, гражда, одкб, наш, власт, правоохранительн, сут, событ
6	наш, время, задач, конкретн, государствен, стран, событ, сил,мирн, закон
7	наш, обществен, государствен, должн, граждан, случа, защит, мер, социальн, доход
8	операц, решен, власт, люд, стран, оруж, компан, граждан, работ, специальн
9	казахста, президент, народ, рост, действ, план, решен, стран, совет, год

Table 2. LDA distribution by Tokaev

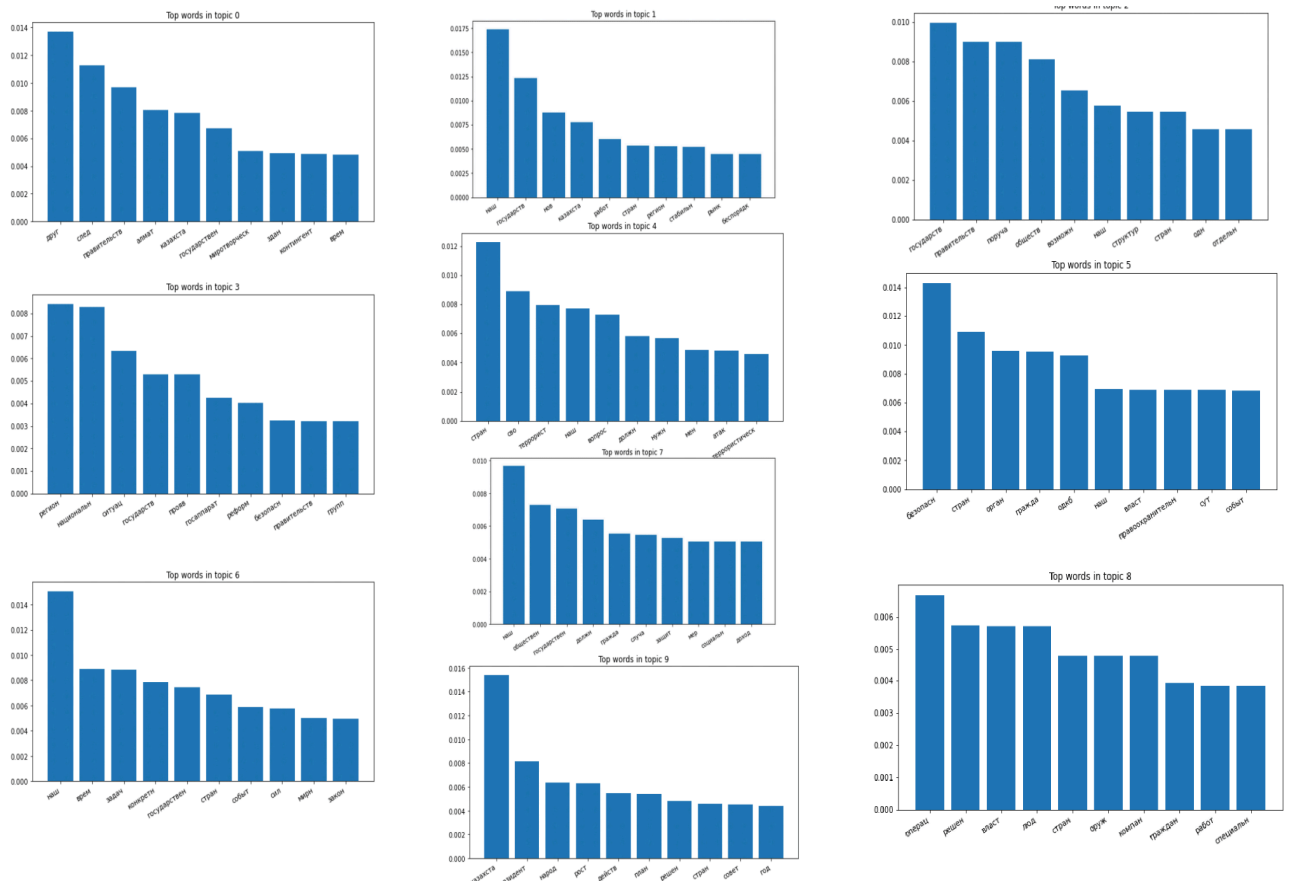


Figure 2. Frequency of top words in topics by Tokaev

3. Results

3.1 Frames

To test the hypotheses, we analyze and interpret how similar top words and their connection in networks connect to the concept of “harmful behavior” of Edel and Hosea and the Soviet legacy. Based on the tokens and their patterns of similarity, the topic labels were assigned. The frame of "Government Actions and Presidential Initiatives" encapsulates discussions related to the steps taken by the government and initiatives spearheaded by the President to address socio-economic challenges and promote national development. These discussions highlight the proactive role of the government in driving progress and addressing the needs of the population. Conversely, the frame of "National Development" centers on initiatives and policies aimed at fostering economic growth, improving infrastructure, and advancing overall development within the nation. This frame underscores the government's commitment to long-term economic prosperity and social advancement. In tandem with national development efforts, discussions on "National Identity and Economic Stability" emphasize the importance of preserving cultural heritage while ensuring economic stability. This frame reflects the government's efforts to balance economic progress with the preservation of national identity and cultural heritage. Shifting the focus to security and law enforcement, the frame of "Incidents and Law Enforcement Response" focuses on specific incidents such as public disorder and criminal activities, alongside responses from law enforcement agencies to maintain law and order. These discussions highlight the challenges faced by authorities in addressing security threats and maintaining public safety. Complementing discussions on incidents and responses, the frame of "Law Enforcement" centers on the activities and initiatives of law enforcement agencies to uphold the rule of law and ensure public safety. This frame underscores the crucial role of law enforcement in maintaining social order and enforcing regulations.

Moreover, discussions specific to regional law enforcement efforts and responses to public disorder are encapsulated within the frame of "Regional Law Enforcement and Public Disorder." This frame highlights the localized nature of law enforcement challenges and responses within specific regions. Addressing broader security concerns, the frame of "Counterterrorism Measures" delves into government actions and policies aimed at

countering terrorism and ensuring the security of the state and society. These discussions underscore the importance of proactive measures to combat security threats and safeguard national interests.

Closely related, the frame of "Government response" encompasses discussions related to efforts aimed at safeguarding national security and protecting public safety from internal and external threats. This frame underscores the government's commitment to ensuring stability and security within the nation.

Endangered value	Frame/Topic label	Tokens
National unity	Government Actions and Presidential Initiatives	государств, сво, амнист, люд, выступлен, наход, врем, президент, акц, применя
	National Development	казахста, президент, народ, рост, действ, план, решен, стран, совет, год
History, tradition; sovereignty	National Identity and Economic Stability	наш, государств, нов, казахста, работ, стран, регион, стабильн, рынок, беспорядок
	Soverign Security and governance	безопасн, стран, орган, гражда, одкб, наш, власт, правоохранительн, сут, событ
Legality	Incidents and Law Enforcement Response	здан, январск, час, преступник, погром, поджог, мирн, событ, трагическ,
	Government response to violence	захват, здан, цел, соверш, организац, стран, действ, власт, насильстен, направлен
	Law Enforcement and Civil Unrest	орган, люд, оруж перв, отношен, организова, массов, лиц, здан, правоохранительн
	Law Enforcement	государств, полиц, преступн, усто, обществ, мер, граждан, задач, ворот, протаран
	Regional Law Enforcement and Public Disorder	област, сотрудник, вопрос, жамбылск, алматинск, беспорядок, уголовн, кызылординск, свобод, лиц
	Counterterrorism Measures	стран, сво, террорист,

		наш,вопрос, должн, нужн, мен, атак, террористическ
Security of state and society	Government Authority and Law Enforcement Actions	сотрудник, полиц, президент, власт, действ, подозрева, акт, сво, силов, 5
	Criminal Activity	беспорядок, преступлен, автомат, закон, соверш, услов, арман, государствен, департамент, огнестрельн
	Government Response	регион, националь, ситуац, госдарств, прояв, госаппарат, реформ, безопасн, правительств, групп
	Government Operations and Public Safety	операц, решен, власт, люд, стран, оруж, компан, граждан, работ, специальн
	National Security and Governance Reforms	регион, националь, ситуац, госдарств, прояв, госаппарат, реформ, безопасн, правительств, групп
	National Security and Counterterrorism Measures	стран, сво, террорист, наш,вопрос, должн, нужн, мен, атак, террористическ
	National Security and Governmental Authorities	безопасн, стран, орган, гражда, одкб, наш, власт, правоохранительн, сут, событ
	Governmental Action for Public Safety	операц, решен, власт, люд, стран, оруж, компан, граждан, работ, специальн
	Civil Unrest and Military Response	алмат, друг, пыта, обществ, январ, люд, военнослужа, установл, беспорядок, использова
Public order, everyday life	Governmental Responsibilities	наш, время, задач, конкретн, государствен, стран, событ, сил,мирн, закон
Stability	National Development and Stability	наш, государств, нов, казахста, работ, стран, регион, стабилн, рынок, беспорядок

Table 3.

Based on the model, Tokaev and public officials put a strong emphasis on the Legality and Security of the state and society. One notable trend is the prevalence of topics related to

Legality, which encompasses a wide range of tokens associated with law enforcement, criminal activities, and legal norms. This thematic category comprises multiple integrated topics, reflecting the government's emphasis on upholding the rule of law, combating crime, and ensuring public safety. Tokens such as "опран" (organ), "правоохранительн" (law enforcement), and "преступн" (criminal) feature prominently in this category, indicating a significant focus on legal and law enforcement matters. Another trend is the prominence of topics related to the Security of State and Society, which underscores the government's efforts to address security challenges and protect public safety. Tokens such as "террорист" (terrorist) and "наш" (our) are indicative of discussions surrounding security threats and the government's responses to mitigate risks. This thematic category reflects the ongoing efforts to counter external threats, safeguard national security, and maintain social order. In contrast, themes related to National Unity and Stability also feature prominently in the table, highlighting the government's focus on fostering unity among the populace and maintaining stability within the country. Tokens such as "государств" (state), "президент" (president), and "акц" (action) underscore the importance of cohesion and stability in governance discourse. Topics related to History, Tradition, and Sovereignty reflect discussions on preserving national identity and cultural heritage, emphasizing historical narratives and assertions of sovereignty. Tokens such as "казахста" (Kazakhstan) and "совет" (council) indicate the significance of historical continuity and sovereignty in governance discourse. The thematic categories of Public Order and Everyday Life and Stabilit show discussions on maintaining public order, preserving everyday life, and promoting economic stability. Tokens such as "беспорядок" (disorder), "пыта" (attempt), "стабильн" (stable), and "рынк" (market) underscore the government's efforts in these areas.

In general, the government discourse emphasized themes of security, law enforcement, national unity, and stability, reflecting a continuation of Soviet-era practices where opposition was seen as a threat to state security and stability. Terms related to terrorism, law enforcement, and public order dominated the narrative, mirroring the Soviet approach of conflating dissent with subversive threats to justify repressive measures. This framing strategy underscores the portrayal of protests as disruptions to social order and economic progress, further emphasizing the importance of stability and cohesion, which are central to the state's legitimacy. Thus, the government's response to the protests aligns with historical Soviet tactics of maintaining tight control and legitimizing authority through a narrative of stability and security.

3.2 Co-occurrence network

To further test the connection between the topics the co-occurrence network was built. A co-occurrence network connects words that are frequently associated together. Figure 3 and Figure 4 demonstrate the connections in public officials and Tokaev, respectively.

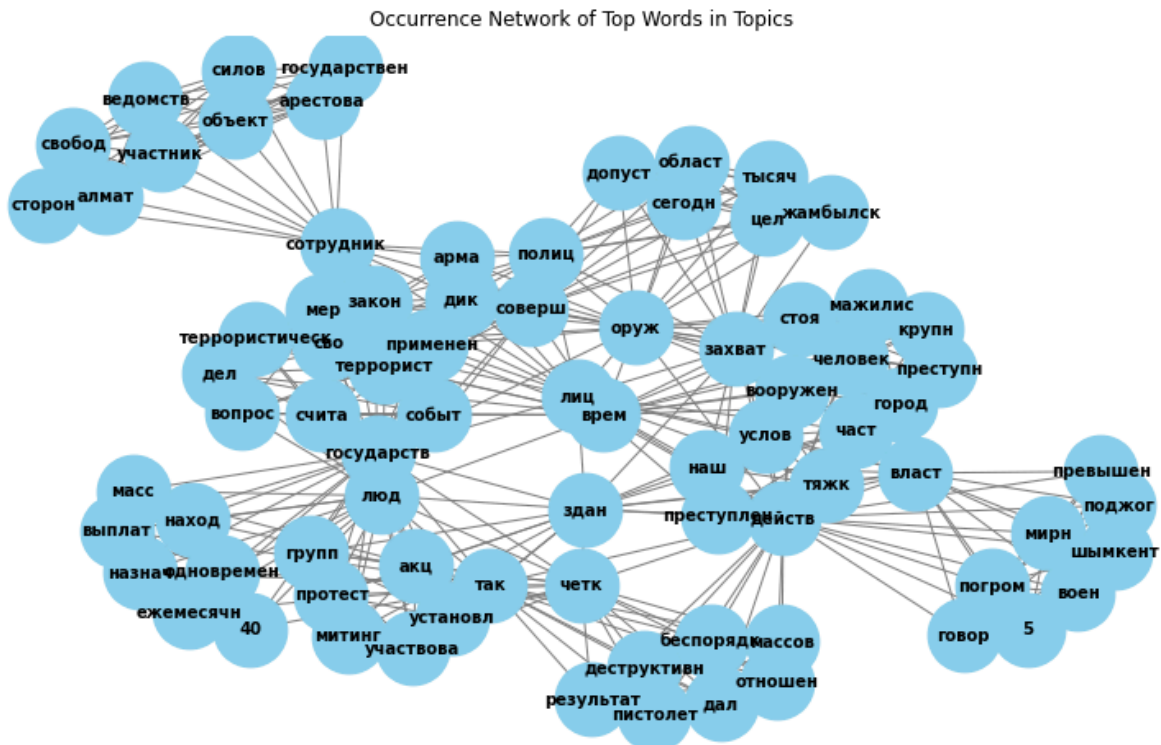


Figure 3. Co-occurrence network of public officials

The co-occurrence network of public officials suggests the following connections:

Оруж(weapon) - захват(seizure) - вооружен(armed)

Действ(act) - массов(massive) - беспорядок(disorder)

Государств(state) - счита(count) - террорист(terrorist)

The network for Tokaev suggests these links:

Государст(state) - национальн(national)

ОДКБ(CSTO) - правоохранителън(law enforcement) - орган(authority)

Стран(country) - беспорядок(disorder) - поруча()

Стран(country) - событ(event) - наш(our)

Обществ(society) - безопасность(security) - наш(our)

In general, the co-occurrence networks of public officials and Tokaev reveal distinct patterns in their messaging and priorities during the protests and their aftermath. Public officials appeared to prioritize the delegitimization of protesters and the portrayal of government workers as distinct from terrorists, as evidenced by the connections between terms like "сотрудник - арестова" and "власт - погром." Their language often emphasized the need for decisive action to restore order and security in the face of perceived threats to stability. In contrast, Tokaev's network suggests a focus on themes of national unity and security, with connections between terms like "государст - национальн" and "обществ - безопасность - наш." His messaging appeared to center around building a sense of collective identity and cohesion among citizens, framing the government's actions as necessary for safeguarding the nation's interests and ensuring the safety of its people.

3.3 Contextualization

The chronology of the unveiling narratives provides more context to the specific “harmful behavior” used by Tokaev and public officials. On 3 January, the second day of the protests in Zhanaozen, the initial city of public unrest, Tokaev published his first tweet and a public speech regarding the protests stating “Gave instructions to the government to urgently consider the situation in Zhanaozen, taking into account economic feasibility, in the legal field. Demonstrators should not violate public order. Citizens have the right to publicly express their demands to local and central authorities, but should do so in accordance with the law, in particular the law on peaceful assembly”.⁵³ As the protest started to gain momentum across the whole country, the tone of national unity started to shift to legality as Tokaev said “I appeal to you to be reasonable and not to give in to provocations from inside and outside, to the euphoria of rallies and permissiveness. Calls to attack the offices of civil and military agencies are absolutely illegal. This is a crime, which will be followed by punishment”. On the 4th day of the protests, Tokaev was already actively claiming protesters as “terrorists” and gave an order for the “shoot to kill” policy stating that “Terrorists continue to cause damage to state and private property and property. They use weapons against citizens, law enforcement agencies, and the army, but there is also an order to open fire without warning. There are calls from abroad for the parties to negotiate a peaceful solution to the problems

⁵³Tengrinews.kz, “President Tokayev reacts to the situation in Zhanaozen,” Kazakhstan's Top News - Tengrinews.kz, January 3, 2022, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/prezident-tokaev-otreagiroval-na-situatsiyu-v-janaoze-458122/.

What nonsense, what kind of negotiations can there be with criminals and murderers? We have had to deal with armed and trained bandits, both local and foreign, exactly with bandits and terrorists, so they must be destroyed and this will be done in the near future by law enforcement forces”.⁵⁴ Specifically after this day, the narrative of “ideologically and physically prepared group” has been actively used by Tokaev himself and public officials in the future. Appealing to informational awareness and preparedness was explained as one of the reasons to limit the access to the internet for citizens. After the assistance by CSTO members and a decrease in criminal activity on the streets, the delegitimization of the protesters continued, but now with more emphasis on the future “I believe that the unity of the people, sincere belief in the ideas of sovereign development and Independence of Kazakhstan are a powerful foundation for the consolidation of society and the progress of our country. Together we will overcome all difficulties. Together we will build a Zhana Kazakhstan!”.⁵⁵ “Zhana Kazakhstan”, then, became a widely used term by the government to describe the upcoming changes and a new vector in the history of Kazakhstan which carries various democratic reforms. In the aftermath of the protests, public officials played a crucial role in promoting the government's narrative of resilience, unity, and progress. Through their statements and actions, they sought to reassure the public, restore confidence in the government.

4. Discussion

The prominence of topics related to legality reflects the government's focus on upholding the rule of law, combating criminal activities, and ensuring public safety during the protests. This emphasis aligns with existing literature on authoritarian regimes, which often prioritize law and order as a means of maintaining control and legitimacy.⁵⁶ By framing the protests as a matter of legality and law enforcement, the government sought to delegitimize dissent and

⁵⁴Tengrinews.kz, “‘I intend to act as tough as possible’. President Tokayev said about conspirators,” Main News of Kazakhstan - Tengrinews.kz, January 6, 2022, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/nameren-deystvovat-maksimalno-jestko-prezident-to-kaev-458289/.

⁵⁵Tengrinews.kz, “We could have lost the country - President Tokayev,” Kazakhstan's Top News - Tengrinews.kz, January 11, 2022, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/myi-mogli-poteryat-stranu-prezident-tokaev-458783/.

⁵⁶Gerschewski, “Legitimacy in Autocracies.”

justify its actions to suppress the demonstrations.⁵⁷ Similarly, the prevalence of topics related to the security of state and society highlights the government's efforts to address security challenges and protect public safety in the face of perceived threats. This aligns with the framing literature, which emphasizes the role of governments in framing issues as security threats to justify extraordinary measures. By portraying the protesters as terrorists and emphasizing the need for decisive action to maintain security, the government sought to rally public support and justify its crackdown on dissent.

While the government may justify its actions in terms of upholding the rule of law and ensuring public safety, the reality is often more nuanced. Authoritarian regimes frequently use legalistic justifications and securitization strategies to suppress dissent and maintain power.⁵⁸ In the case of Kazakhstan, the government's response to the protests reflects a broader pattern of authoritarian governance characterized by the prioritization of stability and control over democratic principles and human rights even to the international community. Despite the fact that Tokaev's foreign policy involved prioritizing direction toward democratic reforms, he strongly focused on framing protesters as "terrorists" and suppressing rights to eliminate them. In terms of adopting international strategies, In the same way, as Dukalskis found that protesters were blamed for having an affiliation with foreigners, Kazakhstan's government blamed multiple protesters as "foreign agents". The explicit premise was that it was a prepared attack, similar to the narrative that has been used in Uzbekistan according to Edel and Hosea. Based on the model, the government's use of legality as a central theme highlights a calculated strategy to present itself as a protector of the rule of law and public order. Terms such as "law enforcement," "criminal activities," and "legal norms" were prevalent in the discourse, painting the protests as violations of public order rather than legitimate expressions of dissent. This framing allowed the government to justify repressive measures under the guise of legal action, a tactic commonly employed by authoritarian regimes to suppress opposition. By emphasizing the legal aspects of their actions, the government aimed to portray itself as acting within the bounds of the law, thereby attempting to maintain domestic and international legitimacy. In addition to legality, the government's discourse prominently featured themes related to the security of the state and society. The portrayal of the protests as security threats allowed the government to frame its response as necessary for protecting public safety and national stability. This approach aligns

⁵⁷Dukalskis, *The Authoritarian Public Sphere*.

⁵⁸Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability."

with securitization theory, which posits that governments frame issues as security threats to justify extraordinary measures. By labeling protesters as "terrorists" and emphasizing the need for decisive action, the government sought to rally public support and legitimize its crackdown on dissent. The use of securitization strategies is evident in the government's narrative that depicted the protests as a well-organized attack by foreign-backed militants. This framing was not only used to justify the use of force, including a "shoot to kill" policy but also supported measures such as internet restrictions to counter the perceived threat. This narrative mirrors tactics used by other authoritarian states, where dissent is often conflated with subversion and foreign interference to legitimize repressive actions (Dukalskis, Edel & Hosea). The discourse also emphasized national unity and stability, with references to the "state," "president," and the importance of "action." This narrative aimed to project strength and cohesion, fostering a sense of collective identity and deflecting criticism. The government's portrayal of its actions as necessary for safeguarding the nation sought to create a binary distinction between loyal citizens and disruptive protesters, further justifying its repressive measures. While the government justified its actions in terms of upholding the rule of law and ensuring public safety, the reality is more nuanced. The response to the protests reflects broader patterns of authoritarian governance characterized by the prioritization of stability and control over democratic principles and human rights. The government's framing strategies, which emphasized legality and security, served to mask a deeper commitment to maintaining power and suppressing dissent.

Kazakhstan's government, similar to tactics observed in Uzbekistan, blamed multiple protesters as "foreign agents," suggesting a prepared attack. This narrative strategy serves to delegitimize domestic dissent by linking it to external enemies, thereby justifying harsh crackdowns. Such framing is not only aimed at domestic audiences but also serves to present a justified front to the international community, where concerns about national security can sometimes overshadow issues of human rights and democratic governance.

Nonetheless, one point of narrative that was not highly represented in the LDA analysis and co-occurrence network is the framing of "betrayal" within the government. Tokayev depicted certain government officials who "betrayed" him during the protests in highly negative terms, accusing them of treachery and conspiracy. For instance, Karim Masimov, the former head of the National Security Committee (KNB), was accused of orchestrating a coup attempt and arrested on charges of treason. Masimov and other high-ranking officials, including KNB

deputies, were accused of being involved in actions that undermined national stability and contributed to the unrest.⁵⁹ Another notable example is Samat Abish, the former first deputy chairman of the KNB and a relative of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Abish was implicated in failing to prevent the unrest and was subsequently removed from his position.⁶⁰ This move was part of Tokayev's broader effort to distance himself from Nazarbayev's legacy and assert his authority. Additionally, Azamat Abdymomunov, the Deputy Secretary of the Security Council, was dismissed for alleged incompetence and failure to manage the security situation during the protests. It was suggested that Abdymomunov's actions, or lack thereof, contributed to the escalation of violence and chaos.⁶¹ Tokayev also targeted local officials, such as the mayor of Almaty, Bakytzhan Sagintayev, who was dismissed from his post. The government criticized Sagintayev for inadequate measures in controlling the protests in Almaty, which saw some of the most violent clashes.⁶² These actions were framed as necessary to protect national security and restore order, portraying Tokayev as a decisive leader capable of safeguarding Kazakhstan's future. By purging disloyal elements and replacing them with loyalists, Tokayev aimed to consolidate his power and project an image of strong, yet reform-oriented leadership.

This dual narrative—of promoting progressive reforms while cracking down on disloyal officials—served to reassure the public and the international community of Tokayev's commitment to positive change. Simultaneously, it demonstrated his resolve in dealing with threats to his authority, aligning with authoritarian tactics where scapegoating and purging perceived enemies are used to solidify power and eliminate opposition.⁶³ By focusing on both reforms and security, Tokayev sought to maintain tight control over the state apparatus while projecting a vision of stability and progress.

⁵⁹Tatyana Gurzhiy, "Karim Masimov Sentenced to 18 Years," Kursiv Media Kazakhstan, April 25, 2023, <https://kz.kursiv.media/en/2023-04-25/karim-masimov-to-bear-18-year-sentence/>.

⁶⁰"Kazakhstan: Light Punishment for Ex-President's Nephew Sparks Anger | Eurasianet," <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-light-punishment-for-ex-presidents-nephew-sparks-anger>.

⁶¹"Kazakhstan President Claims Coup Attempt | Eurasianet," accessed May 16, 2024, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-president-claims-coup-attempt>.

⁶²AFP, "Mayor of Largest Kazakh City Dismissed After Bloody Unrest," The Moscow Times, January 31, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/01/31/mayor-of-largest-kazakh-city-dismissed-after-bloody-unrest-a76209>.

⁶³Dukalskis, *The Authoritarian Public Sphere*; Edel and Josua, "How Authoritarian Rulers Seek to Legitimize Repression."

Limitations

Despite its methodology, this study is not without limitations. Firstly, the reliance on textual data sourced primarily from government websites, official social media accounts, and pro-government media outlets may introduce bias in the dataset. The lack of data from independent or opposition sources may result in an incomplete understanding of the discourse surrounding the January 2022 protests in Kazakhstan. Additionally, the use of web scraping techniques to collect textual data may overlook important contextual information or nuances present in audiovisual content, interviews, or offline sources. Furthermore, the analysis is constrained by the availability of computational resources and the computational complexity of topic modeling algorithms such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). The determination of the number of topics in LDA and the interpretation of topic content requires human judgment and intervention, which may introduce subjectivity and variability into the analysis. Moreover, while efforts have been made to validate and label topics based on established frameworks, the subjective nature of topic interpretation may affect the reliability and consistency of results. Finally, the study's focus on narratives used by the government to delegitimize protests and legitimize violence may overlook alternative perspectives or voices within Kazakhstani society, limiting the breadth and depth of the analysis. Overall, these limitations highlight the need for caution when interpreting the findings of this study and underscore the importance of further research to address these challenges and enhance the robustness of future analyses.

Conclusion

Following the eruption of protests in Kazakhstan in January 2022, the government's response drew significant international scrutiny. This analysis delves into the discourse employed by President Tokayev and public officials, revealing a narrative focused on legality, security, and national unity while aiming to delegitimize dissent. Examining the language used by the government unveils a clear emphasis on upholding the rule of law. Terms like "law enforcement," "criminal activities," and "legal norms" frequently appear, painting the protests as a violation of public order. This aligns with how authoritarian regimes often utilize legal justifications to suppress dissent and maintain control. Another prominent theme revolves

around security threats. Words like "terrorist" and references to protecting "our" nation highlight the government's attempt to frame the protests as a security crisis. National unity emerges as another key theme. References to the "state," "president," and the importance of "action" underscore the government's desire to project strength and cohesion. This narrative seeks to foster a sense of collective identity and deflect criticism by portraying government actions as necessary for safeguarding the nation. The co-occurrence networks constructed further illuminate the underlying connections between terms used by Tokayev and public officials. Tokayev's network displays a strong association between "state" and "national," highlighting the focus on national unity. Additionally, the connection between "security" and "our" reinforces the narrative of protecting the nation's security as a collective effort. Analyzing the chronology of Tokayev's pronouncements reveals a shift in the narrative employed. Initially, he emphasized legality and the right to peaceful assembly. However, as protests escalated, the discourse turned harsher, with Tokayev labeling protesters as "terrorists" and justifying a "shoot to kill" policy. This shift aligns with the government's narrative of the protests as a well-organized attack by foreign-backed militants. The emphasis on "ideologically and physically prepared groups" further bolsters this narrative, justifying internet restrictions as a measure to counter their planning. Following the intervention by the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the decline in violence, the government shifted to promoting resilience, unity, and progress. Terms like "Zhana Kazakhstan" (New Kazakhstan) emerged, signifying a new era of reforms. Public officials played a crucial role in promoting this narrative, aiming to reassure the public and restore trust in the government. The prominence of legality serves as a facade to legitimize the government's crackdown on dissent. Authoritarian regimes often employ legalistic justifications to suppress opposition and maintain power. The portrayal of protesters as terrorists aligns with tactics used by other authoritarian states to silence dissenters by branding them as foreign agents or threats to national security. The government's messaging highlighted the importance of security, law enforcement, national unity, and stability, echoing practices from the Soviet era where opposition posed a perceived threat to the state's security and stability. Key terms related to terrorism, law enforcement, and maintaining public order were prevalent, reminiscent of Soviet tactics that associated dissent with subversive elements, justifying harsh measures. This framing depicted the protests as disturbances to societal harmony and economic advancement, underscoring the essential role of stability and unity in bolstering the government's legitimacy.

This study has limitations. The reliance on government sources introduces potential bias. Independent or oppositional voices are absent, potentially distorting the complete picture. Additionally, the analysis excludes visual and audio data, which might offer valuable context. The subjective nature of topic interpretation and the constraints of computational analysis necessitate caution when interpreting the findings. Further research incorporating diverse sources and methodologies is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding.

The Kazakh government's response to the January 2022 protests reveals a calculated strategy of delegitimizing dissent through legalistic justifications and portraying protesters as security threats. While the narrative emphasizes national unity and progress, it masks a deeper commitment to control over democratic principles and human rights. This analysis highlights the importance of critical discourse analysis to deconstruct narratives and understand the complex dynamics at play in government responses to protests.

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