

## The Kazakhstani Youth's Engagement in Politics

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### Abstract

Current research on the Kazakhstani youth's political participation has usually been informed by a rather traditional understanding of the concept of political participation, without considering the impact of social media and other non-traditional forms of political engagement. This article advocates for a more nuanced understanding of political participation in the country, and particularly among the younger generation, who – it will be shown, display a wide interest in the political developments of the country and are possibly encouraged by a wider access to information and social media through the internet. By pushing the boundaries of political participation, we suggest that young Kazakhs are more active in political debates than usually considered by a number of previous studies.

**Key words:** political participation, latent participation, activism, youth, interest in politics, Kazakhstan.

### Introduction

A large body of scholarship focusing on political participation has been discussing a number of formal aspects ranging from voting turnout to citizens' participation in electoral activities or membership of political organisations, such as trade unions and political parties. In contrast, recent works produced in the last decade have challenged this approach by concentrating on alternative modes of political participation, especially by young people (O'Toole, Lister, & Marsch, 2003; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Soler-i-Martí, 2015; Ó Beacháin & Polese 2010; 2010b). This emerging body of scholarship has been concentrating on alternative forms of participation such as boycotting, political consumption, digital and networked participation, involvement in social movements and forums (Norris, 2004; Zukin, Keeter, Jenkins, & al., 2006; Dalton, 2011; Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2014; Polese et al 2017). Although useful, these approaches have puzzled a number of scholars because they seemed to illustrate some decline of youth participation in formal, institutionalised politics (Patterson, 2002; Rossi, 2009) and thus classify young people as uninterested or apathetic (Rossi, 2009, p. 467), although accepted as a result of contemporary changes and considered alternative to institutionalized forms of political participation.

Kazakhstan is no exception in this respect. Often politics has not been considered beyond formal representation and the majority of works still employ a conventional framework for the concept of political participation. For one thing, the perception of youth political participation within the limits of institutional politics can be traced back to the National Report 'The Youth of Kazakhstan-2013' (Bukanova, Karimova, Ily'asova, Masatova, et al, 2013, p. 147), where four types of participation of the Kazakhstani youth are highlighted: 1) in state executive and representative bodies; 2) in political parties; 3) in public organisations and other formal associations; 3) in the implementation of their active and passive electoral right. The reasons for the conservative approach to citizens' political participation and ignorance of new channels of engagement in Kazakhstan, firstly, lies in the fact that other forms of political participation, apart from traditional forms, are unknown and not investigated yet. Due to this research tendency in Kazakhstan, young people have been recognised

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by researchers as indifferent to their nation's political situation (Kalashnikova, 2008; Beisembayev, 2009; Bukanova, Karimova, Ily'asova, Masatova, et al, 2013, p. 151; Chebotarev, 2014; Umbetaliyeva, 2015), and concerns have appeared regarding the potential vulnerability and legitimacy of the present political system and civil society as a consequence of their disinterest. Among others, Kalashnikova (2008, p. 119) comes to the conclusion that the Kazakhstani youth demonstrate a low degree of involvement in the development of society, considering the inactiveness of the younger people in the prescheduled elections to Maslikhat in 2007 (a local representative body in the Republic of Kazakhstan). Although voting was considered the primary form for the people to affect the political system in the past, nowadays people have more options to influence political outcomes and protect their rights. We are inspired by this approach to suggest that an assessment of the level of political activity should go beyond voter turnout or other formal expression of political participation to look at the informal way participation in politics is produced and developed by a variety of actors that are not necessarily visible at a first glance (Isaacs and Polese 2016, Morris and Polese 2015, Pawlusz and Polese 2017). Scholars have given full attention to elections as an indicator of democratic developments or of the desire to participate in the production of the political (Ó Beacháin and Kevlihan 2015, Ó Beacháin 2012). This article is an effort to widen the understanding of political participation by looking, in addition to that, at alternative ways to engage with politics at the local and national level.

Studies in Kazakhstan about political participation and the role of youth in the political process, although useful to provide a picture of formal participation, do not sufficiently acknowledge political participation of Kazakhstanis in non-formal processes, although a number of authors have emphasised the need for an increased formal-informal mixed approach (Isaacs 2011; 2015; Polese, 2015). In line with this, the main point of this article is to suggest a re-focusing of scholarly debates on forms of political participation in Kazakhstan. We suggest that young people of Kazakhstan contribute to the development of the political in their country in a variety of ways that are not always taken into account, such as the internet and social networks.

As a result, besides what can be seen as more traditional ways of engaging in politics, this article widens the sphere of action of potentially political actors and provides an extra focus on what we call the *latent* political participation of Kazakhstani youth. We suggest that young people might be taking an observing position, that is they might be getting ready to be more involved in political processes. This will be shown by highlighting the role of the internet in the formation of online political activism and everyday political discussions of the Kazakhstani youth. To do this, we observe multiple forms of political participation among the youth of Kazakhstan based on the typology proposed by Ekman and Amná (2012, p. 287): *latent* political participation (which manifests itself in social inclusion and civic engagement) and *manifest* political participation (expressed in terms of participation in formal politics and extra-parliamentary activity). We base our observation on the results of two surveys: Centre for Social and Political Studies 'Strategy' (Beisembayev, 2013) and the Research Institute 'Public Opinion' in cooperation with Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Umbetaliyeva, Rakisheva, & Teschendorf, 2016).

## Methodology

A number of studies have already highlighted the growing number of digital and networked political activity, political consumerism, as well as protests, in which the prominent role is played by the younger generation. This growing activity among young people in non-institutional forms of political participation has caused heated debate among scientists. Young people distancing themselves from traditional politics and its institutions are often seen as a part of the rapid transformation of the political landscape. As a result, traditional forms of 'mandatory' participation of citizens, such as voting and membership in political parties might be replaced by more personalised politics of self-realisation. The youth of today spend less time on participating in political parties, but they try new social movements and are active on the internet, as well as in transnational political networks instead (Ribeiro, Malafaia, Neves, & Menezes, 2015; Ó Beacháin & Polese, 2010).

The emergence of various forms of political participation among the new generation of young people can be explained by a change regarding the concept of politics itself. The new view of politics is different from the more conventional approaches (Soler-i-Martí, 2015, p. 400). For instance, Putnam (2000) and Worcester & Pirie (1998) interpreted the growing disengagement of young people from institutional politics as discontentment of young people with the governmental institutions and a general lack of interest in politics. However, Henn et al. (2007) and O'Toole et al. (2003) did not agree with the fact that young people lack interest in politics. However, they confirmed that young people's dissociation from formal politics was a result of scepticism of the system's functionality. Our approach in determining the political activity of the Kazakhstani youth follows Henn et al. (2007) and O'Toole et al. (2003), because we believe that young people do not distance themselves from politics, but rather from its institutional forms. Young people choose to operate 'horizontally' with their peers, rather than to work within a hierarchical structure, as their social circle is their source of information and support (Soler-i-Martí, 2015, p. 82). Inglehart (1990) thinks that protest is a form of non-institutional political participation that allows for richer forms of individual self-expression than voting or mere membership in political parties.

Several studies argue that younger generations are more focused on an individualist and consumerist lifestyle compared to previous generations, showing their passive interest in political events and processes (Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter, & Zukin, 2002; Perliger, Canetti-Nisim, & Pedahzur, 2006; Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005). The reasons for the changes in the political behaviour of younger people might, in fact, be due to such factors as the emergence of new attractive forms of political participation, as well as a rising distrust regarding the authorities and their inability to influence political events, i.e. political efficacy.

For this study and in line with the official definition of the country, people ranging from 14 to 29 years old are considered to be young people (Nazarbayev, 2015) that make up 27% of the whole country's population. We survey their attitudes by using two sets of data. First, the results of the sociological surveys made by the Public Fund Centre for Social and Political Studies 'Strategy' (Beisembayev, 2013) and, second, the Research Institute 'Public Opinion' together with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Umbetaliyeva, Rakisheva, & Teschendorf, 2016). The Centre for Social and Political Studies 'Strategy' conducted a study in 2010 and 2013 in 14 regions (oblasts) of Kazakhstan, as well as in the cities Almaty and Astana. The total number of respondents was 453, aged from 18 to 29. The selection of the respondents was carried out through a random route technique and quota sampling.

The Research Institute 'Public Opinion' and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation conducted a study on Kazakhstani youth, similar to the famous Shell Youth Study, carried out regularly with an interval of 3-4 years in Germany. The total number of respondents was 1000, aged from 14 to 29 years in the 14 regions of Kazakhstan, as well as in the cities Astana and Almaty. The selection of respondents was also carried out using a random route technique and quota sampling. The survey was carried out in the period from December 27, 2014, to January 15, 2015. The socio-demographic composition of respondents corresponds to the general structure of the youth: 49.9% were females and 50.1% males; 63.7% said that they belong to the Kazakh identity, 30.8% to the Russian identity. Regardless of age, the respondents are evenly distributed: the representatives of each age category were 5% or more. The division of the younger people consist of three category groups: 35.4% aged 14 to 19; 31.6% aged 20 to 24 and 33% aged 25 to 29 years old. The survey covers both the urban and the rural population and was conducted through face-to-face interviews.

There are some methodological shortcomings in both surveys. The Centre for Social and Political Studies 'Strategy' and the Research Institute 'Public Opinion' with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation use a small sample size of youth (453 and 1000 young people) for researching a big country. However, the size of the sample is one of the largest so far in a country-based research study, it provides a good balance between urban and rural areas and also contributes toward making us appreciate the differences between cities and regions in the country.

## Demography and political participation

Geography matters, it is possible that political views of Almaty's youth are different from Astana's youth because working youth in Astana are mostly represented in the structures of the government. Astana's young people are mostly involved in institutional politics, while the youth in Almaty is working in different international organisations, companies, and NGOs. They are more likely to have non-institutional political orientations. Astana youth, comprising 199 294 people from 14 to 28 years old (Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan Committee on Statistics), including high school pupils, students and working youth, have the opportunity to be actively involved in different celebratory flash mobs, and volunteer in republican events since their celebrations mostly take place in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. The majority of Almaty's youth participated as volunteers in Aziada 2011, OSCE forum, Universiade 2017, and other volunteering programs.

445 986 people from 14 to 28 years old represent Almaty youth (Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan Committee on Statistics). Almaty is the most attractive city for students in Kazakhstan, since there are 38 higher educational institutions and around 200,000 students in the city (Zakon.kz, 2014). Also, for the last five years Almaty has taken the leading place in the Unified National Testing (Graduate assessment system in Kazakhstan). Students with top scores from the Unified National Testing come from all regions of Kazakhstan to study in Almaty because of a wide range of higher educational institutions (and a large number of grants and scholarships). Students come to Astana for the recently established international Nazarbayev University. Students who did not obtain grants still choose to pursue higher studies in Almaty or Astana, if their parents are able to afford education and living expenses. The majority of university graduates do not return home but prefer to stay in Almaty to pursue further career goals. Almaty is an attractive option for them due to its mild climate, developed infrastructure and social life scene. By contrast, Astana is attractive due to career opportunities in government structures.

Compared to youth from other oblasts, young people from the Atyrau, Mangystau and Kyzyl-Orda oblasts stand out by having the highest civic activity and desire to engage in politics (Analytical group 'Kipr', 2015). According to Umbetaliyeva (2017), this is due to the specific social and political atmosphere in these regions, where people demonstrated their opposition since the mid-1990s. This environment and socio-political sentiments influence young people who grow up in these regions. Thus, they show ideas and views similar to their parents.

The Ministry of National Economy reports that in 2013 the number of Kazakhstani youth was 4 656 500 people; 2 574 100 of them lived in urban areas, and 2 082 400 young people in rural areas (Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan Committee on Statistics). The class and gender difference of Kazakhstani youth is innate to the urban/rural dichotomy. In cities, youth enjoy a higher social status and women are more active. Young people who grew up in Almaty or Astana have better social opportunities compared to youth from other regions or rural places. In rural areas – an environment dominated by traditions – youth come from lower social and economic strata and women are largely less active. Generally, youth who live in the rural places have a lower level of political activity compared to youth in cities. Problems such as unemployment, low salaries, undeveloped healthcare, and inadequate educational facilities in addition to flawed informational services in rural places force young people to move to cities to search for better conditions and a higher income. Internal migration from rural places to cities more likely leads to an increase of poverty-stricken people in a city than to the fulfilment of migrants' aspirations. Thus, in cities, specifically in Almaty, there is a large number of socially disadvantaged marginalised youth. A lower level of academic and professional attainment among rural youth results in lower income, unstable employment and earnings outside of the official labour market (or joblessness) in contrast with urban youth. The frustration caused by these factors/life chances and social stratification results in greater social cleavages between urban and rural citizens, as well as to a growth of social tension and an increased rate of reported crime. Nonetheless, typically young people in Kazakhstan are united by their problems of unemployment, low salaries and a lack of housing. Still, socio-economic reasons have not pushed young Kazakhstanis to demand better social conditions from the government. There are some measures of government support: youth

employment centres; the project 'Zhilstroisberbank' (that provides mortgage for housing); the program 'S diplomom - v selo!' – 'To the village with a diploma!' (the provision of social benefits for young specialists working in villages), and many others.

Given these socio-economic factors, the authors analyse the political participation of Kazakhstani youth in two ways: traditional forms of political participation and new ones. In traditional participation, the paper gives an evaluation of youth activities in *manifest political participation*: formal and extra-parliamentary. Under new forms of political participation, the paper examines youth latent and online-based engagement among the youth.

## Manifest Political Participation

Manifest political behaviour is actual political participation, i.e. all actions of citizens, aiming to influence the governmental decisions and political outcomes in a society. These actions are obvious, observable and can be measured straightforwardly (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). In the category of 'manifest political participation', Ekman and Amnå (2012, p 289) differentiated between *formal* and *extra-parliamentary* political participation. To the formal political participation, they grouped activities such as *electoral participation; contacting public officials; membership* in political parties, organisations, and trade unions. The extra-parliamentary forms of political participation are divided into legal (demonstrations, strikes, protests, etc.) and illegal types (violent activities and protests).

To understand the Kazakhstani citizens' manifest political participation, we will briefly describe the political system of Kazakhstan. The Republic of Kazakhstan is a unitary presidential republic. The executive power is exercised by the government (Pravitel'stvo). The Parliament has two chambers. The Lower House is Majilis, which has 107 seats (98 seats are from party lists, 9 from the Assembly of People). All members of Parliament are elected for a five-year term. The Upper House Senate has 47 members, 40 of them are elected for a six-year term in double-seat constituencies by the local assemblies, half are up for re-election every two years, and there are 7 presidential nominees. According to the Constitution of Kazakhstan, a citizen who has reached the age of 25 can become a Deputy of the Majilis. A citizen who has reached 30 can become a Senate Deputy. A Deputy of Maslikhat, a local representative body, can be a citizen of the Republic of Kazakhstan who has reached 20 years of age (The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2016). Despite the lower age requirement for a candidacy in Maslikhat and Majilis, the representation of Kazakhstani youth in governance is low. "At the local level in Maslikhat the representation of the youth (under 30 years of age) is only 3.9%, while representation in the legislative branch called Majilis is at 0%" (Dukeyev, 2015). The opportunities to be engaged in governance and in decision-making processes for the Kazakhstani youth are strained by a political culture that is built by a hierarchical structure in formal organisations that function on a principle of seniority and value experience. It is considered that youth need to go through a period of time in order to have an opportunity to be engaged in governance and in the decision-making process, or in other words the age qualification. The youth's lack of work/life experience and connections are the main reasons why youth representation in governance is low.

The national report 'The Youth of Kazakhstan - 2014' (Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015) showed in numbers the quantity of young governmental workers. In 2014, there were 22,306 young civil servants under 30 years of age in Kazakhstan; 22,304 of them were administrative workers and only 2 of them were political employees. The representation of youth in the Parliament was 13,104 people. However, 13,103 of them were administrative workers and only 1 of them was a political employee (Bukanova, Karimova, Amreeva, & Zainiyeva, 2014, p. 155). As it can be seen from these data, the numbers of young people working in the government of Kazakhstan are high; however, all of them are involved in administrative work, not political. Consequently, youth are almost excluded from the processes of real participation in the government.

## Voter turnout

The most popular and common form of political participation in Kazakhstan is *voting in elections*. The lowest voting turnout in the elections of Kazakhstan is observed in Maslikhats; an average voting turnout is observed in the elections to the Majilis, and the highest voting turnout takes place in the presidential elections (Ileuova, 2014).

The Research Public Foundation ‘Strategy’ demonstrates that the adult population is more active in voter turnout than the young generation (see Figure 4) (Beisembayev, 2013). Citizens aged 30-45 and 46-60 years old display similar figures with 84% compared to 85% electoral activity. The most active voter turnout is observed among Kazakhstani pensioners – 91%. Compared to other age groups in Kazakhstan, the youth, aged 18-29 years old, exhibit an electoral activity of 69% (see Table 1), making them the least active age group. Nevertheless, all age groups represent high levels of electoral participation. Table 1 shows that other traditional forms of political participation are unpopular among Kazakhstanis: 7% of the population as a whole appeal to the representatives of authorities and only 3% work in a political party or for a deputy candidate to partake in the pre-election process, while in contrast 80% of the population participates in voting. However, citizens’ turnout in the elections is not indicative of their political activity or overall support for the traditional forms of political participation, rather it is a sense of civic duty to the state that has been instilled in local culture since the days of the Soviet Union. “In fact, citizens have no personal interest in the candidate selection process and do not believe that their vote matter” (Ileuova, 2014).

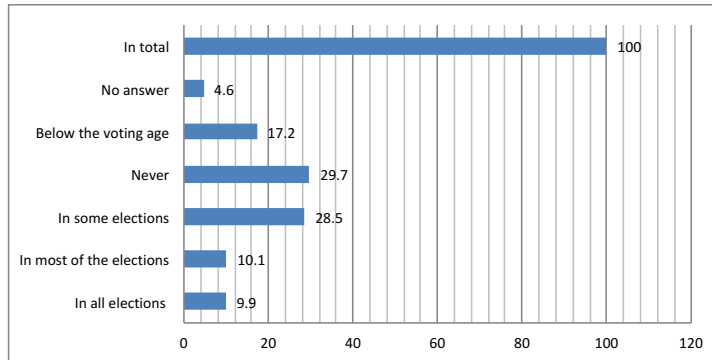
**Table 1.** Answer to the question ‘In which of the listed activities have you ever personally participated?’ (2013)

	18-29 y.o.	30-45 y.o.	46-60 y.o.	61 y.o. and over	The population as a whole
Voting in elections	69%	84%	85%	91%	80%
Appealing to the representatives of government bodies	6%	5%	8%	10%	7%
Working in a political party or for a deputy candidate	3%	4%	4%	1%	3%

Source: Centre for Social and Political Studies ‘Strategy’ (2013)

Detailed information about the different degree of intensity in electoral participation among youth is available in another sociological poll (Umbetaliyeva, Rakisheva, & Teschendorf, 2016, p. 151), which shows that 48.50% of the youth, aged from 14 to 29 years old, had the experience of participating in the elections (see Figure 1), clarifying that 9.9% of them participate in every possible election; 10.10% of young people participate in most of the elections. Consequently, 20% of the Kazakhstani youth demonstrates a high level of electoral activity. A slightly larger number - 28.5% of the Kazakhstani youth vote only *occasionally*. Those who did not vote, because they had not reached the age of 18 (the age at which youth are allowed to vote in Kazakhstan) made up 17.20%. Almost one third of the younger people (29.70%), who had reached 18, the age for being allowed to participate in the elections, did not take part in voting.

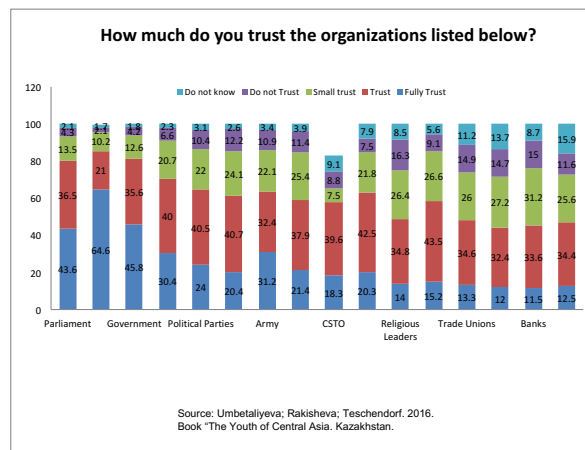
**Figure 1:** Answer to the question 'How often have you voted since you are legally allowed to?'



Source: Research Institute 'Public Opinion' and Friedrich Ebert Foundation (2016)

Why do a third of Kazakhstani youth not participate in the elections, and why do 28.5% of another group of youth vote only *occasionally*? Kaletayev (2003, p. 83) explained this trend of declining interest among citizens regarding the elections of representative bodies by a low trust level concerning the voting system among the population. According to Umbetaliyeva et.al (2016, p. 61), the greatest trust of young people, aged 14 to 29 years old, is in the President of Kazakhstan N.Nazarbayev (64.60%). 43.60% of the youth fully trust the Parliament; 45.8% trust the Pravitel'stvo (Ministers), and 30.4% trust local authorities/the akim (mayor). The Kazakhstani youth demonstrate a low level of trust in the political parties, the police, the courts and others showed in the table below (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** Answer to the question 'How much do you trust the organizations listed below?'



Source: Research Institute 'Public Opinion' and Friedrich Ebert Foundation (2016)

Most other frequent reasons are explained by the lack of efficacy – the youth do not believe that their voice will be heard (Beisembayev, 2014), as well as the fact that many young people are not familiar with candidates and their electoral campaign. Another common reason for not voting is the lack of a *propiska*, i.e. legal registration of residency, which makes it impossible to vote. This

mainly affects migrant workers and students in the major cities, who frequently rent their living accommodations, instead of owning their own housing. Moreover, not voting could be viewed according to Ekman and Amnå (2012, p. 287) as a protest act, considering the deliberate act of not voting as political participation.

## Participation in Political Parties

As it was mentioned above, compared to the electoral participation, the younger generation of Kazakhstan shows little interest and activity in political parties same as adult population. Only 5.80% of young people from the entire youth population in Kazakhstan are members of political parties (Bukanova & Masatova, 2014). According to the Centre for Social and Political Studies 'Strategy', just 3% of the youth work in a political party or for a deputy candidate to partake in the pre-election process (see Table 1). However, according to the poll (see Figure 3), 23.1% of the youth will choose to participate in the activities of political parties as a way to influence authorities (Beisembayev, 2013).

The most popular party in Kazakhstan is the president-led party Nur Otan. Its youth wing the Zhas Otan alone has more than 200,000 members (Bukanova, Karimova, Ily'asova, Masatova, et al 2013, p. 149). The other eight officially registered parties of Kazakhstan do not have data on the number of younger members, though the National Social Democratic Party (OSDP) and Communist People's Party of Kazakhstan (KNPK) also have youth wings (Satpayev, et al., 2014).

The younger people's low interest in political parties has been explained in many ways by several experts on Kazakhstan. One of the reasons is that the activities of political parties do not comply with the new political reality. Political parties are not able to respond to different requirements and needs of the population ( Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015, p. 114). Zhunusova (2013) believes that the youth branches of political parties are empty since the younger generation has no desire to be involved in the party because of the limitations in the process of political decision-making. "Low interest among youth in the activities of political parties is caused by the fact that parties in Kazakhstan have not been active in the ongoing work, only being active during participation in various election campaigns" (Satpayev, et al., 2014, p. 180).

## Participation in Youth Organisations

In 2014, there were 1081 youth organisations in the republic of Kazakhstan ( Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015, p. 114). The majority of Kazakhstani youth do not participate in the activities of these youth organisations; young people are even rarely familiar with their names (Beisembayev, 2009).

Data from the research centre 'Molodezh' ( Bukanova, Karimova, Amreeva, , & Zainiyeva, 2013, p. 12) showed the most popular youth organisations and their figures are as follows: 74.90% of young people in Kazakhstan are familiar with Association of Bolashak, 64.90% with Zhas Otan, 59.30% with Zhasyl El, 57.60% with Zhas Ulan, and 47.60% with Youth Congress of Kazakhstan. Other youth organisations such as Zhas Kyran, National Volunteer Network, Student construction labour groups, Rural Youth Unions, Young Deputies Association, and Working Youth Union, etc., are unknown to most young people.

The reasons why the Kazakhstani youth avoid activities in youth organisations are explained by several political scientists and researchers. First of all, 'youth organizations weakly interact with both the young people themselves, and with the state' (Eshpanova, Narbekova, & Biyekenova, 2014, p. 41). Secondly, youth movements and associations do not have the resources for large-scale deployment of their activities because of a lack of financial resources and administrative tools (Kaletayev, 2003, p. 74). Several Kazakhstani experts (Satpayev, et al., 2014, p. 113) claim that youth organisations are not able to efficiently hand over political socialisation.



## Contact activities

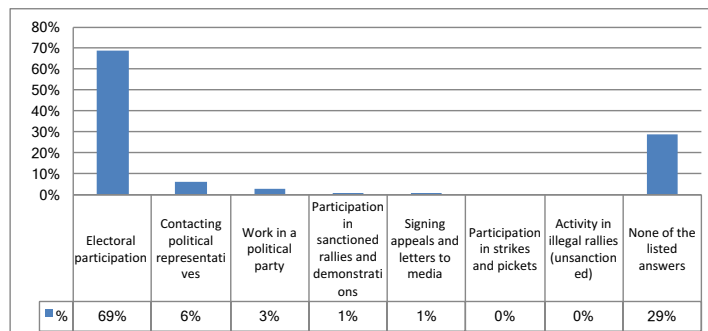
In order to be heard by the authorities or to protect their own rights, Kazakhstani citizens contact political representatives or civil servants. According to data, only 6% of youth appealed to their political representatives (see Table 1, Figure 5). However, 38.1% of youth consider that appealing to the media is the most effective way to influence power, and 8.2% prefer use personal contacts (see Figure 3) (Beisembayev, 2013). Also, lately it is common that Kazakhstani people use Facebook and other social networks for appealing to the people with their problems.

## Extra-parliamentary participation

To begin with, the political environment and laws of Kazakhstan restrict the participation of their citizens in rallies and demonstrations. According to special Rapporteur M. Kiai, who undertook an official mission to the Republic of Kazakhstan (in January 19-27, 2015), ‘the possibility of appropriately exercising the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association in Kazakhstan is not provided to everyone’ (United Nations Special Rapporteur, 2015). Also, the Human Rights Watch reported that law enforcement officers forcefully suppressed peaceful protests in Kazakhstan (Gearry, 2016). According to certain experts, the fact that dissent is not tolerated, and there are suppressions and punishments for peaceful demonstrations in Kazakhstan, is evidence of the fact that elements of ‘sovietness’ (sovetskost’) in political regime still prevail (Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2015; BBC News, 2016). These limitations in allowing outlets for peaceful dissent and political pluralism (Adilet.kz, 2015) are partially transferred from the old Soviet regime. For 70 years the people were under the control of Soviet authorities and it was forbidden to engage in politics. Those who showed dissent became enemies of the people (‘vrag naroda’). The memory of Soviet repressions is still fresh, so the fear of being punished, which leads to self-censorship, still persists in the minds of adults (who grew up in Soviet times) and the younger generation.

Concerning the data on how many Kazakhstani youth (as well as adults) participate in extra-parliamentary political participation (2013), the researchers of the Public Fund ‘Strategy’ revealed a very low level of participation (see Figure 3). They distinguished several types of extra-parliamentary engagement: *sanctioned (legal) rallies and demonstrations; signing appeals; strikes, pickets; unsanctioned (illegal) rallies* (Beisembayev, 2013).

**Figure 3:** *The forms of youth political participation in Kazakhstan*

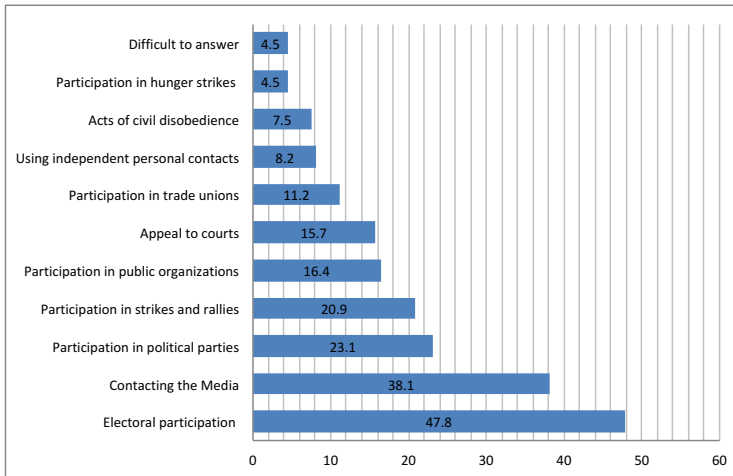


Source: Centre for Social and Political Studies ‘Strategy’ (2013)

62.3% of Kazakhstani youth believe that they are not able to influence political power, i.e. have a low level of political efficacy (see Figure 4) (Beisembayev, 2013). Those young people who believe that they can influence political decisions make up 27.8%, and they prefer the following

mechanisms of influence: electoral participation (47.8%), contacting media (38.1%), participation in political parties (23.1%), participation in strikes and rallies (20.9%), participation in public organisations (16.4%), applying to courts (15.7%), participation in trade unions (11.2%), using independent personal contacts (8.2%), acts of civil disobedience (7.5%), participation in hunger strikes (4.5%) (see Figure 4).

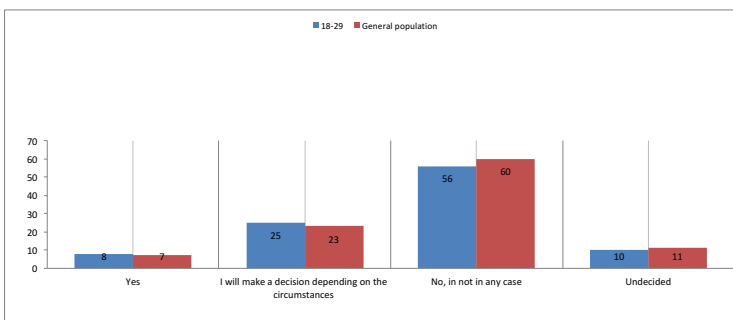
**Figure 4:** Answer to the question "What do you consider the most effective way to influence power?"



Source: Centre for Social and Political Studies 'Strategy' (2013)

Despite the fact that a considerable number of young people choose the extra-parliamentary way of influencing the authorities (20.9% of youth suggest the most effective way to influence the government is to participate in strikes and demonstrations, 7.5% in acts of civil disobedience and 4.5% in hunger strikes) (see Figure 4), it is notable that only 1% of youth had been involved in a real situation with sanctioned rallies and another 1% of youth participated in the signing of petitions (see Figure 3) (Beisembayev, 2013). None of the respondents, according to their statements, took part in unsanctioned strikes, pickets, or illegal rallies (see Figure 3). Nonetheless, 8% of young people are ready to participate in a mass acts of protest, and 25% will make a decision depending on the circumstances (see Figure 5) (Umbetaliyeva, Rakisheva, & Teschendorf, 2016). According to Nassimova (2012, p. 104), there are no political forces in Kazakhstan that facilitate the consolidation of the youth protest movements. Thus, the level of youth protest activity in Kazakhstan is not high, but the potential exists.

**Figure 5:** Answer to the question "If mass protests occur in the near future, will you partake?"



Source: Research Institute 'Public Opinion' and Friedrich Ebert Foundation (2016)

The top three possible reasons for mass protests in Kazakhstan, forecast by youth in a 2013 social poll, were problems of economic nature: high prices for food, goods, and utilities (29%), low incomes, wages, and pensions (26%), unemployment (23%), etc. (see Table 2).

**Table 2:** The list of problems that may cause protest performances of young citizens

	Youth aged 18-29 year old
Low incomes, wages, pensions, etc.	26%
High prices for food products, utility services	23%
Unemployment, the inability to find a good job	29%
Corruption in the government	15%
Land and housing issues (housing demolition, shared construction, etc.)	10%
The high cost of housing (purchase, lease)	11%
Ecological problems	8%
Closing of the employer (enterprise, market, etc.)	10%
Discrimination based on ethnic, linguistic grounds	11%
Violation of human rights and freedoms, the lack of democracy	6%
Education and health problems	8%
Irresponsibility and efficiency of local authorities	5%
Failures in the implementation of government social programs	2%
Irremovability of the supreme power in the country	4%
Difficulties of doing business, economic problems	3%
The loss of sovereignty as a result of integration through the establishment of the Customs Union	1%
Others	1%
None of the problems	13%
Difficult to answer	20%

Source: Centre for Social and Political Studies 'Strategy' (2013)

Indeed, over the past quarter century, Kazakhstani citizens, unlike people of other post-Soviet republics (Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Georgia) have avoided mass public protests. Kazakhstan has a reputation of relative staidness (Casey, 2016). Nevertheless, there were some locally occurring protests as a result of growing discontent among the population because of social inequality, declining living standards, etc. For instance, in December 2011 there were local protests in Zhanaozen (Western Kazakhstan), where oil workers demanded better pay (Putz, 2011). In February, 2014, there was an anti-devaluation youth protest in Almaty (Lillis, 2014). In April – May, 2016, protests over proposed land reforms spread across the country in several cities such as Atyrau, Aktobe, Aktau, Zhanaozen, Semey, Kyzyl Orda, and Almaty, etc., which is unprecedented in Kazakhstan. The reason – the people disagreed with the changes in the law that allows foreigners to rent agricultural land in Kazakhstan for 25 years (BBC News, 2016).

Despite the fact that rallies and demonstrations are perceived by the law as unconventional and unsanctioned (not officially permitted) (RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty, 2016; Reuters, 2016), they do happen and are the last resort for citizens to show their disagreement and resentment. Therefore, the authors correlated the rallies and protests in Kazakhstan not with unconventional, but rather with extra-parliamentary activities because they are an alternative to institutionalised forms of political participation and occurred numerous times in the history of the Kazakhs. For example, the liberation struggle of the Kazakh people against foreign conquerors; uprisings against policies of the Russian Empire; etc.; December 1986 mass youth protests against communist authority; local protests in Zhanaozen (Western Kazakhstan) and April-May 2016 protests over proposed land reforms and the fear of loss of sovereignty. The last one demonstrated that there was a possibility for mass mobilisation and social movements in Kazakhstan. In order to mitigate the protest temper of the population, the authorities were forced to place a moratorium on land reform and create a special committee on this issue (Toktomushev, 2016). Thus, political participation such as mass protests have a positive influence (for the people) on the government's decisions.

## Latent political participation

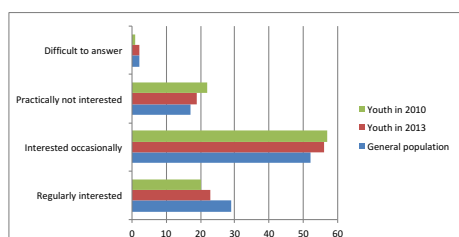
Research on political participation has focused primarily on manifested and observable actions or activities of citizens that in some way are directed toward influencing political outcomes in society. Ekman and Amnå (2012, p. 288) introduced a wider concept of political participation by adding *latent* political participation. According to them “latent political participation is the kind of engagement that may be regarded ‘pre-political’ or on ‘stand-by’. This notion of latency is based on the simple observation that citizens actually do a lot of things that may not be directly or unequivocally classified as ‘political participation’, but at the same time could be of great significance for future political activities of a more conventional type...” (ibid.)

People of all ages engage socially in a number of ways that may have political consequences. Hence, behind their actions there is a certain amount of latent political participation. Ekman and Amnå (2012) define latent political participation as including the following characteristics: interest in and attention to politics; the perception of politics as something important; reading and watching the news; discussing political issues with family and friends; belonging to a group or team, specialising in politics. Moreover, civic engagement has traces of latent political participation. Volunteering for social or community-based organisations, charities and the like may be a precursor of future political activity.

Let us investigate, whether the Kazakhstani youth have components of latent political participation.

According to the questionnaire survey conducted by the Public Fund ‘Strategy’ (2013), the number of young people who are interested in politics is cautiously, yet indisputably growing. In 2010, 77% of the people asked responded that they were interested in politics (constantly and occasionally). In 2013, the number increased to 79% (see Figure 6). 20% of the Kazakhstani youth responded that they are interested in politics on a *regular basis* (2010), and 57% of young people are interested in politics *from time to time*. These numbers have changed slightly in 2013: regular interest in politics has increased by 3%, and those who are interested in politics from time to time have decreased by 1%. The youth who are indifferent to the political events were 22% in 2010 and 19% in 2013.

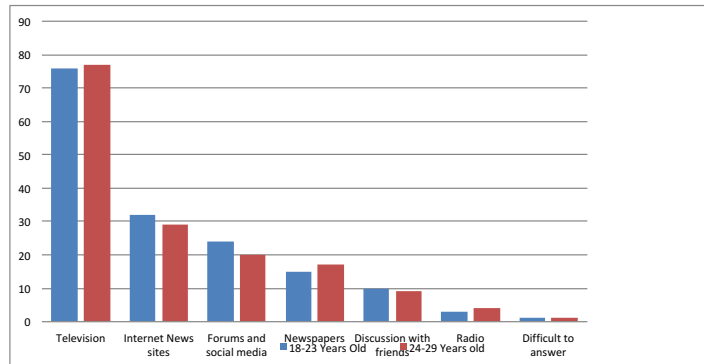
**Figure 6:** Answer to the question ‘Are You Interested in the Political Events of Kazakhstan?’



Source: Centre for Social and Political Studies ‘Strategy’ (2013)

As we have seen, 79% of the Kazakhstani youth is interested in politics habitually and occasionally. 'Viewing and reading the news' means information consumed through television, streaming or browsing the news on the internet, social networking websites, message boards, blogs, radio broadcasting, newspapers and magazines. Discussions with relatives and friends also occur, but they are not particularly commonplace among the younger people (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7:** Answer to the question 'What is your main source for information regarding political news?'



Source: Centre for Social and Political Studies 'Strategy' (2013)

36.40% of Kazakhstani youth believe that it is important to engage in politics. Another 44.10% of young people support the view that civic engagement is important (Umbetaliyeva, Rakisheva, & Teschendorf, 2016, p. 145). 9.30% of the young people do volunteer work. The main reason for volunteering according to a half of the respondents is a desire to *be involved in society*. 60% of the Kazakhstani youth wish to participate in the development of the country (ibid).

Therefore, we can see that a certain part of the Kazakhstani youth is involved in latent forms of participation, namely: interest in politics, political discussions with family and friends, following political news; presence of the feeling that politics is something important; volunteering in different sporting events (Aziada-2011, Universiade-2017), as well as in the form of assistance and support for vulnerable and disadvantaged people, in cleaning public places and planting in green spaces, etc. (see Table 2).

**Table 3.** Characteristics of latent political participation

The young people's interest and attention regarding politics	79% of young people, aged 18-29 years old (23% of them are interested in politics regularly; 56% occasionally)
Youth is of the opinion that politics is important	36.40% of the younger population aged 14-29 years old.
Reads and watches the news	79% of the younger population aged 14-29 years old.
Discusses political issues with family and friends	9.50% of the younger population, aged 18-29.
Civic participation (volunteering, charity, etc.)	9.30% of the younger population, aged 14-29.

Source: Centre for Social and Political Studies 'Strategy' (2013) & Research Institute 'Public Opinion' and Friedrich Ebert Foundation (2016)

## Youth online participation in Kazakhstan

The modern youth spend less of their political energy on participating in institutional politics, but more on trying out new forms of political participation, mainly through the use of the internet (Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2014). The Kazakh online community is growing very fast. According to World statistics on the internet, in December 2014 there were 9 966 444 internet users registered in Kazakhstan, accounting for a 54.3% of the total population (Internet World Stats, 2016). By comparison, in 2005 there were 400 000 internet users, that is 2.7% of the total population. 3.3 million people are actively using social networks every day. The most popular social network in Kazakhstan with 1 000 954 users (the vast majority are young people up to 18 years) is V Kontakte. Instagram is the second most popular social network, with more than 1 000 136 of users. Facebook is actively used by 125,800 Kazakhstani people, whereas 20% of them are youth, aged 18-24, and 45.4% are aged 26-34 (TengriNews, 2016).

The use of social media by young people for the purpose of political participation is a growing area of research around the world. Research has shown that social networks are a tool for group organisation, and platforms for the exchange of alternative political ideas among the youth. By using social media, youth are following public and political news, promoting or 'liking' (which also means 'agree' with the opinion), and writing arguments (in comments and posts) with respect to some socio-political problems. Thus, in virtue of the internet in Kazakhstan, social networks represent an opportunity for everyday conversation and discussion of socio-political problems. Therefore, it is no longer a necessity to officially join a traditional political organisation, which limits personal self-expression. Moreover, the Kazakhstani youth, who refrain from engagement in conventional adult-oriented politics because of its hierarchical, paternalistic and seniority-based system, choose to be active 'horizontally' with their peers, have their own 'rules' and richer opportunities for self-realisation. Such behaviour among the youth might be explained by the spread of an individualist and consumerist lifestyle and the tools that new technologies can suggest.

Kazakhstani youth actively monitor the posts of famous politicians, political scientists, experts and public figures on Facebook and Instagram. For instance, a popular political expert Dosym Satpayev has more than 20 000 followers on Facebook. However, Facebook and other social media outlets do not substitute meetings and events for groups of people, so many Kazakhstani people use Facebook to get information about offline meetings such as the content of the event, the location, time and approximate number of visitors. It should be noted that many organisations and newspapers also adapt their approaches to the circulation of information, recruitment and mobilisation in the digital age. However, the lack of security mechanisms on the internet can lead to many threats, such as the involvement of youth in radical extremist and suicide-oriented organisations, being deceived by fraudsters, etc.

Kazakhstani youth do not want to take part in institutional politics because dissent is not welcome there, so the alternative is social networks, which serve as a kind of channel for expressing their disagreement and resentment. On social networks, the youth are exposed to the posts of experts who do not support the policy of the state and who criticise the government. Moreover, Kazakhstani youth, unlike the adult population, are more advanced in English and are able to read English language mass media, which offers an alternative view on political issues. Through the expression of opinion, discussion of politics and interaction with like-minded people in creating initiatives via social networks, online political participation and latent participation can transform to active manifest political participation. The majority of youth, as well as the adult population, used the internet as their main source of information (international media, YouTube, social networks such as Facebook and communication applications such as WhatsApp) during the protest in May 2016, and continue using it nowadays.

In January 2017, Kazakhstan's President N. Nazarbayev during a special televised address to the nation proposed a number of amendments to the Constitution, which were submitted to nationwide discussions. Widespread disputes arose around the first paragraph of Article 26 which states, 'Citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan may privately own any legally acquired property' (Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1995). In turn, the drafters of the bill propose to replace

the words 'citizens of Kazakhstan' with the word 'everyone'. This caused a negative reaction among the people, who expressed their disagreement mostly on social networks such as Facebook. The government was under pressure to agree with the opinion of its citizens to not to alter Article 26 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Thus, online political participation of the Kazakhstani people has had an overall positive effect on the political system: the government started to react, interact and take into account the people's opinion.

## Conclusion

This article does not aim to encourage young people of Kazakhstan to participate in non-institutionalised and illegal forms of political participation. Instead, the authors emphasise the fact that in Kazakhstan political participation is not recognised beyond formal representation and highlight the need for closer scrutiny of all forms of political participation, especially among the youth, since they are common users of digital technologies and the internet. Ignoring online youth engagement and other non-institutionalised forms of participation may cause negative and destructive consequences for the government and society. Moreover, there is a need to reveal the latent political participation among the youth and cease regarding them as an apathetic group, but rather as potentially active members of the political process.

In the analysis of different types of youth political participation in Kazakhstan, the authors conclude that the Kazakhstani youth is alienated from institutionalised politics in general. They are just not comfortable with mandatory adult-oriented policy, where political culture is built according to a hierarchy and the principle of seniority. A lack of political efficacy in institutionalised politics, as well as a dislike of mandatory and hierarchical politics, led the Kazakhstani youth to refrain from more active participation in traditional political processes. Voting remains the most popular form of traditional political participation among citizens of Kazakhstan but it is not meaningful, as it is not real participation due to its mandatory and disciplinary character. By contrast, online activism of young people in Kazakhstan represents an interesting platform for information, communication, exchange of opinions, and event involvement not only for personal purposes but also for socio-political talks. The authors highlight the role of the internet and social networks in the formation of youth political participation in Kazakhstan. Consequently, in Kazakhstan online activism and extra-parliamentary participation are alternatives to institutionalised political participation; however, the latter can lead to problems with the law.

A lack of knowledge about non-traditional forms of youth political participation in Kazakhstan may result in underestimating youth abilities and a mistaken belief that they are apolitical. Moreover, if youth research in Kazakhstan will continue to be primarily restricted to formal political participation, their inexplicable behaviour will be difficult to explain. The younger generation of Kazakhstan is not uninterested or uninformed about socio-political issues in the country. They stay interested and observe from afar; they do not alienate themselves from politics, but rather from its institutional forms.

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