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## State response to social protests: exploring the dynamics of civil society and state dialogue

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**Abstract.** Protests frequently emerge as a manifestation of societal grievances, shedding light on various challenges faced by the population. In response, governments can adopt diverse strategies to address these issues. These include engaging in dialogue with protest organizers to negotiate solutions and implement policy changes, or employing repressive measures such as deploying security forces, imposing curfews, or restricting assembly rights.

This study examines the state's response to the social protests that erupted following the 2019 presidential election in Kazakhstan. While previous research has explored triggers, key actors, and barriers to social mobilization in Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan, this study adopts a novel approach. Utilizing content analysis of presidential speeches and video analysis of protests, it assesses the state's reaction. The findings reveal that the immediate response to the protests was marked by legal restrictions and suppression. In contrast, the state's long-term strategy involved attempts to address the socio-economic demands of the protesters through dialogue and accommodation.

The study illustrates a complex and evolving interaction between the state and civil society in Kazakhstan. The state's response combined both conciliatory and repressive measures, tailored to the specific circumstances and perceived threat levels of the protests. This dual approach enabled the state to maintain control while demonstrating a readiness to engage with societal concerns through negotiation.

**Keywords:** contentious politics, civil society, mass media, political culture, public trust, political dynamics, video analysis, content analysis

## **Introduction**

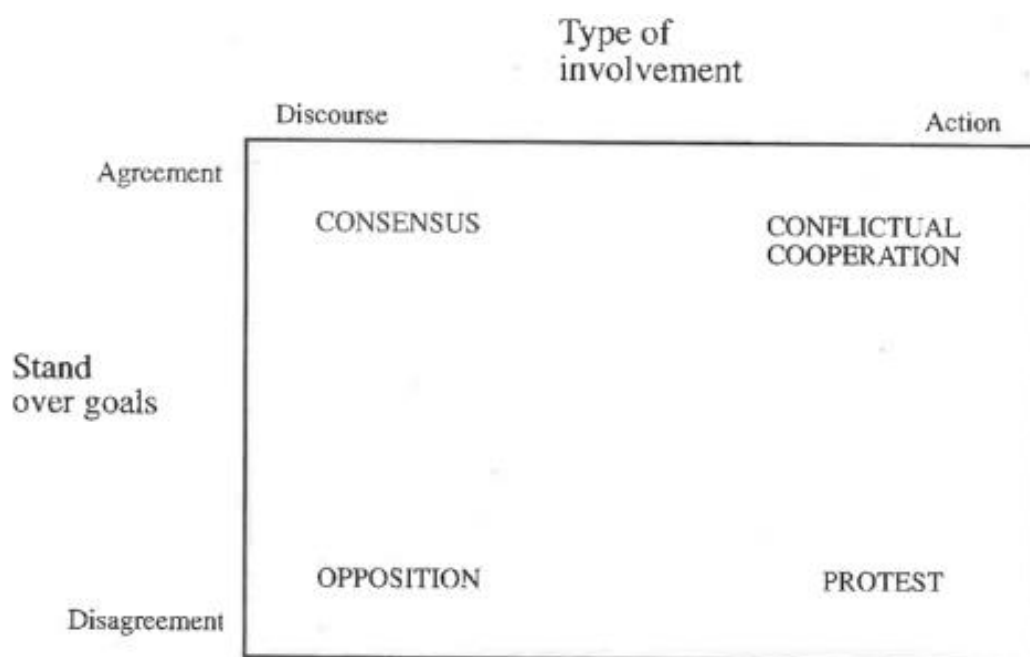
Citizen participation in contentious politics (e.g., signing petitions, wearing stickers, and protests) was a rare case in the 1990s in Kazakhstan, however, the colored revolutions of 2003-2005 in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan and the Arab spring had an impact on the political activism of Kazakhstani citizens. Since 2010, there has been a growing number of protests on the streets. The most evocative protests are the anti-Chinese protests in 2010, Zhanaozen riots in 2011, the land reform protests in 2016, the protests of mothers of many children and the protests against the results of the presidential election in 2019.

According to the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights (KIBHR), most of the protests are impulsive; in other words, they respond to some changes in the political system or decisions, reforms. Nasimova et al. argue that protests since 2010 have undergone a process of depoliticization, with social issues taking precedence (Nasimova, Buzurtanova, and Saitova, 2019). For instance, in 2017, only 5.5% of protests focused on political matters, whereas a significant majority, approximately 78%, centered around social issues (Nasimova et al, 2019). Another characteristic of protests in Kazakhstan relates to their episodic and local nature. Wolters argues that this is due to the vast territory with huge distances between oblasts and dramatic regional differences that hinder the network protests (Schmitz and Wolters, 2012). According to Worldwide Governance Indicators, Voice and Accountability has been worsening since 2006. Similarly, Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index ranks Kazakhstan as a hard-line autocracy and highlights its repressive environment where alternative voice is curtailed and viewed as unwelcome (Bertelsmann, 2016). However, McGlinchey argues that the Kazakh government tends to elicit accommodationist responses compared to its counterparts in Central Asia (McGlinchey, 2009).

This study seeks to investigate the protests that occurred immediately following the 2019 presidential election in Kazakhstan, with the primary research question being: What is the state's response to political protests? The paper is structured as follows: the authors begin with a literature review and theoretical framework that contextualizes protests in post-Soviet countries. The methodology section outlines the data collection process, which involved content analysis and videography. The findings section presents a triangulation of all findings and tests the main hypothesis, while the study concludes with a brief discussion and conclusion.

## **Literature review**

Any social movement reflects existing social conflict and represents a series of challenges for power holders. Those challenges become especially critical and hinder the stability of existing regimes when incumbents experience legitimacy and trust crises. According to Giugni and Passy, social movement activities can be classified based on their stance on goal, ranging from agreement to disagreement with current policies, and the type of involvement, ranging from discourse to action (Giugni and Passy, 1998). According to this classification, protest actions are proposed as a typical means "that movements have at their disposal to reach their goals". And represents an "extreme" case when consensus on the political decision is not achievable and discursive and communicative measures are not effective.



Picture 1. A typology of social movement activities (Heath, 1997)

Protests are also recognized as an indicator of the incumbent's popularity and according to Hafner-Burton et al. forceful supersession or use of coercive measures against election-related protests is an incumbent's effort to fend off threats to their power (Hafner-Burto, Hyde, and Jablonski, 2014). And "government-sponsored" forceful suppression of protests initiated by opposition or potential voters, recognized as a common process. Empirical evidence from studies exhibits that election-related protests become increasingly successful in contributing to the cancellation of an election or the resignation of the incumbent. However, "successful" achievement of the protest's goal is highly dependent on institutional constraints and legal limitations on the incumbent's ability to exploit a monopoly over violence.

In authoritarian countries, participation in protests is a risky matter, therefore, drivers in authoritarian countries differ compared to now advanced countries. Income and education levels are highly positively correlated in participation in contentious politics in advanced industrial countries and the middle class played a significant role in regime change (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Dalton, Van Sickle and Weldon, 2010). However, in authoritarian countries, citizens with higher education are reluctant to participate in protests because they are the main beneficiaries and their income depends on the existing regime. There is a high opportunity cost for the middle class and this is the reason for free riding on participation of economically disadvantaged groups (Campante and Chor, 2014; Achilov, 2017).

Many scholars argue that the reasons for protests in authoritarian countries stem from the following issues: authoritarian rule, corruption, self-enriching elite, grave socio-economic problems, nepotism and raising inequality (Kubicek 2011; Nasimova et al., 2019; Schmitz & Wolters, 2012). The expansion of telecommunication technologies has transformed the political culture of citizens in Kazakhstan. The frequent usage of the internet, mobile phones and social

media such as Facebook, V Kontakte, and Twitter are the main drivers of social mobilization. Achilov's quantitative analysis illustrates a strong correlation between the frequent use of social media by Kazakh respondents with intentions to participate in protests (Achilov, 2017).

Ruijgrok's quantitative study employed country-year data from 1990 to 2013, and it displays a positive correlation between internet usage and an increase in the number of protests (Ruijgrok, 2017). In authoritarian countries, information through the internet facilitates the process of mobilization and decreases the transaction cost for oppositional movements. Results of protests vary in authoritarian countries. Vladislavjević examines protests of communist Poland and Yugoslavia (1980) and post-Communist Ukraine and Serbia (2000, 2004, 2014). According to the scholar, protests themselves are insufficient to bring regime changes, only when protests are augmented with other factors such as structural conditions (i.e., financial or economic crisis), elite conflicts and international factors (i.e. international aid for democratic opposition, breakdown of the USSR), substantial political change is possible.

Hale's research examines the colored revolution in post-Soviet space and explains the reason of why colored revolutions shaped Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan (Hale, 2005). He relates it to the lame-duck syndrome, where the incumbent is unpopular and is expected to leave his office, and the elite are aware of this, can orchestrate collective mobilization. This was the case in Kyrgyzstan, where local elites were more independent vis-à-vis central power; therefore, the elite could challenge the power and, with the help of huge masses, oust the incumbent. In contrast, Radnitz provides an alternative view on why protests resulted in revolutions and toppled regimes in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan (Radnitz, 2010). In Radnitz's view, this relates to early economic reforms where privatization, economic liberalization established new capitalist elites whose interests put them at odds with the existing regime (2010). Therefore, business elites played a crucial role in financing and mobilizing mass protests. This created a stronger opposition and facilitated regime change in the above countries.

The presence of a collective action problem suggests that individuals often have conflicting interests over common-pool resources and therefore fail to cooperate (Radnitz, 2010). Social mobilization is still in its infancy in Kazakhstan, a huge territory, and the distance between regions also hinders the mobilization. Growing inequality also impedes collective action as the economically disadvantaged part of the society is more willing to protest, whilst financially secure middle-class individuals fear losing their jobs, social positions, and this makes mobilization a hard task to accomplish (Achilov, 2017).

A theory of modular diffusion by Beissinger can explain the contentious politics in Central Asian states (Beissinger, 2007). Modular diffusion states that previous social mobilizations in similar contexts may have an impact on other states in the same region, that is to say, the model of mobilization may emerge in one country and expand to other states through the impact of ideas, behaviors, and models. The Tulip Revolution in the Kyrgyz Republic and its transformation of the political system are a lesson for neighboring states that share similar characteristics.

Resource mobilization is another approach that attempts to elucidate the dynamics of protests in the post-Soviet countries. Resource mobilization theory stresses the availability of resources to groups and participants' positions in the social network. Recent research has shown that the availability of resources such as education, usage of the internet, and membership in networks

have a strong correlation with contentious politics (Achilov, 2017). Subversive clientelism is the approach that highlights the role of elites in protests. Political protests are not a mere interaction between the state and citizens, however, there is a third actor that contributes to the evolution of relations in contentious politics – independent elites. According to Hale, McFaul, and Radnitz, elites play a significant role in the processes of protests; whether the elite is loyal to the incumbent or in favor of alternative forces that challenge the incumbent determines the balance of power (2005; 2002; 2010).

### **Data collection and methodology**

To answer the research questions, the content analysis of two speeches of President Tokayev was subjected to NVivo analysis.

a) President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's State of the Nation Address, September 2, 2019.

b) Speech by the Head of State K. Tokayev at the Second National Council of Public Trust, November 20, 2019.

The rationale behind the selection of these speeches relates to the topic and the venue of the speech; the former speech's topic states "Constructive dialogue – the basis of stability," which was delivered a couple of months after the election and protests. Whilst the latter one was delivered to the National Council of Public Trust. Thus, these Speeches are perceived as both a reaction to political protests following the election and a novel avenue for state-society dialogue.

Moreover, responses of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the General Prosecutor's office, and the Ministry of Information were subject to content analysis. The study employs a data-driven inductive-coding approach.

Since the protests were already held, access for firsthand observational data is not available; therefore, an alternative way of observation - video reports of these events were chosen as a main data source. Since the protests were attracting the attention of official opposition-related mass media as well as active contributors of social media, there was an abundance of video materials reporting from the scene. Video and other digital audiovisual materials are widely recognized by scholars as an important form of research data, and video technology offers expanded possibilities for looking at interaction and communication in various 'natural' settings (Knoblauch and Schnettler, 2012). Since the use of video has important consequences for the focusing process in ethnographic studies, Knoblauch and Tuma perceive videography as a specific form of focused ethnography (2020). Interpretive video analysis in this study is based on the basic phenomenological and methodological assumptions of interpretive social science, implying that any action is guided by meanings, therefore, they cannot merely be observed. According to Schutz, meanings can be distinguished between the ones that actors themselves link with their actions, that is 'constructs of the first order', and the meanings that outside observers conceive, these are 'constructs of the second order' (Schutz, 1962). Therefore, while interpreting the 'object', we also simultaneously involve the observer's knowledge. And according to Heath, to identify the visible action that constitutes the situation, hermeneutic activity involves not only describing and explaining action itself, but also determining the knowledge that is needed to understand the situation and actions (1997). Objectivity of the method is ensured

by relying on interpretations of only observable actions and excluding theoretical assumptions, or actors' invisible factors like motives, subconscious desires, or attitudes. Thus, the rationale for employing the methodology of videography in this study is to expand the data collection methods to improve the internal validity of the study and ensure the consistency and reliability of research findings.

Audio-visual data for videography was selected based on the convenient judgmental sampling strategies. Trustworthiness of the data, especially validity, objectivity, and reliability designated as a basic eligibility criterion for sampling. To ensure correspondence of data to predefined trustworthiness "standard", the following sub-criterion were identified for sample selection: video materials should be published on official media channels, the venue and time of the event should be identifiable, and video data should not contain subjective interpretation of the recorded events. The guiding principle for achieving an adequate sample size was a point of "data saturation", when it is observed that adding more video data does not result in additional perspectives or information. In conformity with the abovementioned criterion, 4 videos reporting 4 hours and 27 minutes of pre-election protests, and 3 videos reporting 2 hours and 35 minutes of post-election protests were selected. Access to videos is given in the appendices.

## **Findings and analysis**

### ***Content analysis***

Results of the content analysis exhibits that the most frequent words in the analyzed President's speeches were "the government" (40 times), citizens (*население, граждане* 31 times), to provide (16 times), development (33 times), business (15 times), increase (13 times), social (14), responsibility (10 times) and Elbasy (10 times).

Similar findings emerged from the coding frequencies conducted in NVivo, highlighting that speeches by K. Tokayev predominantly address themes related to **reforms and social initiatives**. These themes can be categorized into six broad categories: reforms, social policy (support of multi-child family, increase the salary, education, medical services), interaction between the state and society (the public, public protests, alternative view, the National Council of trust, accountability), non-state actors (small-medium enterprise, the quasi-state sector, researchers and scientists), state actors (First President Elbasy, Ministries, the government, regions: urban policy), political initiatives has a lower references (encouraging women in politics, Parliament opposition, registration of new parties). Quantification of frequent words and coding illustrates that the President views the demands of the protestors through economic reforms and social changes. The speech acknowledges the responsibility of the state and at the same time, there is a clear message that the policy of the First President Elbasy will remain. Therefore, political reforms are not an urgent agenda and are expected to be fulfilled in a gradual phase. This is apparent from the coding (attached), where political initiatives have fewer references in the speech.

### ***Video-analysis***

The findings from videography demonstrate limited forceful responses on the part of state bodies. However, it's noteworthy that the forceful state reaction is not uniformly distributed across all protests, and the state's response strategies to protests exhibit heterogeneity.

An analysis of the communicative interactions between protestors and the state, observed in their natural context, reveals that during the initial stages of protests, coercive measures and suppression were the primary communication strategies employed by the state. These protests were a response to announcements regarding the upcoming presidential elections and commenced on May 1st. The analysis indicates a lagged correlation between the scale of protests and the level of the state's forceful response. Protests exhibited an accumulative nature, reaching their peak participation between June 9th and 12th, while subsequent "unscheduled" protests after the election, starting from July 6th, showed declining participation trends. The state's use of coercive measures mirrored the accumulative nature of protests with a lag. During the pre-election protests on May 1st, the state made attempts to initiate constructive dialogues, that was initiated by the representatives of local law enforcement, internal affairs departments, and the akim of the Medeu region in Almaty acting as the main mediators.

However, protestors displayed resistance, coupled with skepticism and distrust towards the dialogue and attempts by state representatives. Analysis of recorded protests indicates that the primary aim of the call for dialogue was not genuine communication but rather the peaceful suppression of protests. Despite this, the central message of the protestors remained focused on the demand for freedom of choice, and any efforts by state representatives to initiate dialogue were met with chants from the protestors: *"We have a choice"* (*"У нас есть выбор"*) and *"Disgrace"* (*"Позор"*). However, as the protests continued, the discourse became increasingly fuzzy, diverse, and unsystematic. Protestors began addressing a wide range of issues, including socio-economic concerns, inequality, unemployment, economic decline, accountability, corruption, and political reforms.

It's worth noting that the state's forceful reaction varied among different protests. During the first pre-election protests, participants were detained by the police only after two hours of demonstration. Initially, state representatives attempted to suppress the protests using physical barriers and threats of arrest due to the illegality of unpermitted protests. However, the "ineffectiveness" of these measures led to actual suppression and detention. Interestingly, in Astana, representatives of the city's law enforcement departments even attempted to negotiate with protestors. They offered to release detained protestors if others agreed to end the protest.

Furthermore, video analysis revealed that during the early pre-election protests, participants appeared as a homogeneous group with a common interest in claiming political and civil rights. However, as time progressed, the homogeneity of protestors diminished, leading to the emergence of scattered and highly segmented groups. These included "Oyan, Qazaqstan," advocating for political reforms and freedom for political prisoners; "Zheltoqsan," emphasizing socio-economic issues, accountability, and vindication of movement participants; "Nur Otan" (now *"Amanat"*) supporters calling for peaceful development and sustainability, as well as various other unorganized groups.

It should be noted that these findings are not a perfect reflection of reality because the employed methodology has its limitations that require consideration and proper response by researchers. Especially, the realities portrayed in video records of the protests can be manipulated by the person who filmed the protests and contain prejudice, and might reflect nothing more than scenes chosen from a larger reality. Therefore, deep and adequate knowledge of the political

environment, socio-economic issues on the ground, and a holistic view of the context are crucial for objective analysis. This paper endeavors to provide insights by reflecting on available data and video material, social and political context.

## **Conclusion**

The state's response to social protests can vary widely depending on political, social, and economic factors, as well as the prevailing political culture and governance structures within a country. However, prioritizing dialogue, inclusivity, and proactive policy measures is often key to effectively addressing the underlying issues fueling protests and promoting social cohesion and stability.

Findings obtained by the study exhibit low mobilization of citizens, scattered and segmented interests of protestors, and an impulsive, episodic, and local nature of protests. According to video data, the authors observe an immediate state reaction to protests and legal restrictions imposed upon participants of protests. Physical suppression of protests emerged as the primary strategy available to incumbents to stabilize the political situation in the short term, leading to a decrease in the scale of protests. Overall, in the long run, the state demonstrates responsiveness to societal needs and actively works to accommodate protesters' requirements and dissatisfaction. It allowed for defusing immediate tensions and also laid the foundation for long-term stability, inclusive governance, and social progress. The content analysis of the President's speeches showed that the state holds an accommodating position toward the protesters' requirements and is willing to introduce a wide range of socio-economic reforms in Kazakhstan. When the state is responsive to societal needs and endeavors to accommodate protesters' grievances and dissatisfaction, it often signals a commitment to addressing underlying issues and fostering social cohesion.

In conclusion, the analysis of the state's response to the social protests following the 2019 presidential election in Kazakhstan reveals a nuanced interplay between repression and conciliation. This study demonstrates that while the state's immediate reaction to protests is often characterized by legal restrictions and suppression, there is also a concurrent effort to engage in dialogue and address socio-economic grievances over the longer term. This dual approach aligns with the findings of Giugni and Passy on contentious politics in complex societies, which suggest that in environments marked by diverse social and political dynamics, the strategies of both state and non-state actors are shaped by the intricate interactions between various societal factors (Giugni and Passy, 1998). Political conflict must be understood within its broader socio-political context. The case of Kazakhstan illustrates how state responses are tailored not only to manage dissent but also to navigate the complex fabric of societal needs and demands. Thus, understanding the state's strategy requires an appreciation of this balance between control and accommodation, reflecting the broader patterns of contentious politics in complex and evolving societies.

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### Authors' contribution

In the article, each of the three authors made significant contributions to its development. The first author, the corresponding author, provided a comprehensive theoretical framework, establishing the foundational concepts and guiding the overall direction of the research. Their expertise in qualitative research was crucial for shaping the article's approach and ensuring its scholarly rigor. The second author, **Bodaukhan K.**, focused on synthesizing the findings and contextualizing them within the broader literature, and also played a pivotal role in the empirical analysis, utilizing analytical techniques to generate and interpret the results. Their contributions brought a practical dimension to the theoretical framework and provided valuable insights into video analysis.

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### **Мемлекеттің әлеуметтік наразылықтарға реакциясы: азаматтық қоғам мен мемлекет арасындағы диалог динамикасын зерттеу**

**Аңдатпа.** Қарсылық көбінесе қоғамдағы наразылық пен қиындықтарды көрсетеді, азаматтар тап болған қоғамдағы мәселелер мен қиындықтарды айқындайды. Бұл наразылықтарға жауап ретінде билік бірнеше жолды таңдауы мүмкін. Олар наразылық ұйымдастырушыларымен және наразылық білдіруші топтардың өкілдерімен диалогқа кірісуі мүмкін. Бұл олардың мәселелерін тыңдау, мүмкін шешімдер бойынша келіссөздер жүргізу және наразылықтардың түпкі себептерін шешуге арналған саясаттық өзгерістер енгізуді қамтиды. Сонымен қатар, билік өкілдері қарсылықты басу үшін репрессивті шараларға жүгінуі мүмкін, мысалы, қауіпсіздік күштерін жұмылдырып, демонстранттарды тарату, коменданттық сағат енгізу немесе жиналу еркіндігін шектеу сияқты.

Бұл зерттеу 2019 жылғы президенттік сайлаудан кейінгі Қазақстандағы әлеуметтік қарсылыққа биліктің жауабын талдауға арналған. Орталық Азиядағы, әсіресе Қазақстандағы қарсылықтарға арналған бұрынғы зерттеулер көбінесе наразылық себептеріне, негізгі

акторларға және әлеуметтік мобилизацияға кедергі келтіретін мәселелерге назар аударған болса, бұл зерттеу өзгеше тәсілді қолданады. Президенттің сөйлеген сөздеріне контент-анализ және қарсылықтардың бейнеанализін пайдаланып, мемлекеттің қарсылыққа реакциясын түсінуге арналған. Зерттеу нәтижелері мемлекеттің қарсылыққа бағытталған алғашқы щұғыл жауабы құқықтық шектеулермен, басу шараларымен сипатталатынын көрсетеді. Ал ұзақ мерзімді перспективада мемлекет наразылық жасаушылардың әлеуметтік-экономикалық талаптарын қанағаттандыру үшін диалог орнатуға және оларды есепке алуға тырысады.

Зерттеу Қазақстандағы мемлекет пен азаматтық қоғам арасындағы күрделі және дамып келе жатқан қарым-қатынасты көрсетеді. Талданған наразылық шараларына мемлекеттің жауабы жағдайдың нақты сипатына және қарсылық жасаушылар тудыратын қауіп деңгейіне байланысты бейімделген және репрессивті шараларды қамтиды. Бұл тәсіл мемлекетке жағдайды бақылауда ұстап, қоғамның мәселелерін шешу үшін диалог пен келіссөздер жүргізуге дайын екендігін көрсетуге мүмкіндік берді.

**Негізгі ұғымдар:** құрылымдық саясат, азаматтық қоғам, масс-медиа, саяси мәдениет, қоғамдық сенім, саяси динамика, видео анализ, контент-анализ

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### **Реакция государства на социальные протесты: изучение динамики диалога гражданского общества и государства**

**Аннотация.** Протесты часто возникают как проявление общественных недовольств, выявляя различные проблемы, с которыми сталкивается население. В ответ на эти проблемы правительство может применять различные стратегии. Это может включать диалог с организаторами протестов для поиска решений и реализации политических изменений или применение репрессивных мер, таких, как развертывание сил безопасности, введение комендантского часа или ограничение права на собрания.

В данном исследовании анализируется реакция государства на социальные протесты, вспыхнувшие после президентских выборов 2019 года в Казахстане. В то время как предыдущие исследования сосредоточились на триггерах, ключевых акторах и барьерах социальной мобилизации в Центральной Азии, особенно в Казахстане, это исследование принимает иной подход. Используя контент-анализ президентских речей и видеоанализ протестов, оно оценивает реакцию государства. Результаты показывают, что немедленная реакция государства на протесты характеризовалась правовыми ограничениями и подавлением. В долгосрочной перспективе государство стремилось удовлетворить социоэкономические требования протестующих через диалог и попытки учесть их интересы.

Исследование демонстрирует сложное и развивающееся взаимодействие между государством и гражданским обществом в Казахстане. Реакция государства на протесты сочетала как

примирительные, так и репрессивные меры, в зависимости от конкретных обстоятельств и уровня perceived угрозы. Этот двойной подход позволил государству сохранить контроль над ситуацией, одновременно демонстрируя готовность к диалогу и переговорам по вопросам общественных проблем.

**Ключевые слова:** состязательная политика, гражданское общество, масс-медиа, политическая культура, общественное доверие, политическая динамика, видеоанализ, контент-анализ.

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