

#Hashtag Activism: Youth, Social Media and Politics in Kazakhstan

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Compared to their parents, who were born and socialized during the Soviet Union, Kazakh millennials and post-millennials have had greater opportunities to study, travel, and express themselves on social media through art, fiction, or music. Although the state and elites continue to exert strong power over many economic sectors, both cohorts have wider options than their predecessors in terms of employment, social mobility, private business, and cultural activities. Likewise, while the government’s restrictions on media, religion, and public expression are growing, the younger generations are being raised in a comparatively free country. The high level of Internet penetration, availability

of inexpensive smartphones and PCs, and wide variety of social media platforms present vast opportunities to consume global content and interact with locals and foreigners alike.

Even if young citizens of Kazakhstan have lived their entire lives under a single leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the presidential succession to come could become a critical moment for consolidating generational consciousness, significantly affecting millennials’ and particularly post-millennials’ survival strategies. While many things will depend on power dynamics within the establishment, post-Nazarbayev-era state managers may seek public support to legitimize their new rule. Since the youth comprise one-fifth of

the country’s population, government policies in such crucial areas as education, housing, and employment will need to address the challenges millennials and post-millennials face. Strategies for communicating these policies will also require significant modification, as the vast majority of young citizens are currently unaware of government initiatives and projects.

The aim of this study is not to speculate on the forthcoming succession in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, using this “known unknown” historical event to problematize state-youth relations in today’s fragile post-financial crisis and pre-transition context is an urgent task, due in particular to generational differences between the ruling class and the youth. Notwithstanding that the political establishment is slowly rejuvenating, with politicians born in the 1970s taking up ministerial and mayoral posts, the persistence of nomenklatura-style management practices alienates post-Soviet generations. There is no strong bond between the two—and the consensus may become weaker if outdated engagement techniques are not changed.

As post-Karimov Uzbekistan has demonstrated, in its first years in power a new leadership aims to

win the hearts and minds of ordinary citizens. It is unclear whether this populist trend will continue or end once president Shavkat Mirziyoyev secures his own power vertical, but the power transition has created a window for certain democratic changes that offer a rare chance for the establishment of new relations between the young and the authorities. Kazakhstan, too, may one day open such a “transition window,” and if it does, it will be vital for civil society to be prepared to clearly articulate the demands and expectations of young voters.

The underlying assumption of this paper is that the future development of Kazakhstan will depend significantly on to what extent the government is prepared to adapt to changes in demographics, generational dynamics, and societal values. It is also driven by the author’s personal experience of engaging with youth as an institutional researcher at the private Narxoz University, where as many as 8,000 millennials and post-millennials study. My interaction with representatives of these two generations has intensified since joining the online media outlet *Steppe*, which has thousands of readers across Kazakhstan. As an editor, I have had the privilege of speaking with many young Instagram celebrities, entrepreneurs, artists, and scholars, and have noticed that social media is providing millennials and post-millennials with an alternative public space to gain recognition from their peers and voice their concerns about key social and political issues.

The main argument of this paper is that millennials and post-mil-

lennials are using Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook not only to watch funny videos, post selfies, or read news, but also to consume political content created mostly by agemates. In this study, I focus on four of the most vivid and popular digital content creators, who are practicing civic activism on social media and raising youth awareness about many issues. Topics recognized as worthy of coverage by young content-makers may provide us with insight into what “politics” means to young people and how they use social media to drive interest in civic activism. It is particularly important to examine how young activists are framing and presenting their messages and ideas to “win the hearts and minds” of their peers. Indeed, social media provides a platform for diverse cultural exchange; knowing the latest trends, tastes, and mindsets of youth allows content-producers to get their attention.

Before proceeding to the selected cases, it would be useful to provide (1) a general youth portrait and (2) a detailed analysis of post-millennials. As they move toward adulthood, their attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles have the ability to shape or influence official rhetoric and government policies in key areas. The authorities already monitor social media on a daily basis to understand popular sentiment and prevent mass demonstrations; millennials and post-millennials, as the most active social media users, will therefore come to be on the radar of government agencies and will push the latter to formulate responses to their concerns and expectations. In light of this, I will also describe (3) the social media

practices of Kazakh youth.

As these generations get older, their interest in politics will grow. It is therefore important not only to learn how they differ from older generations in terms of their use of social media, but also to scrutinize (4) the social media strategies young key opinion leaders (KOLs) use to attract attention and shape the views of their audiences. In many ways, this depends on the content’s topical focus, how the content is produced, its length and visual design, and the language of the producer. It is also important to examine what meaning KOLs give to their social media presence and the content they have created.

Kazakh Youth

According to 2018 figures, citizens aged 14-29 comprise one-fifth of Kazakhstan’s population (21.5 percent or 3.9 million people). While 43 percent of youth live in rural areas, there is continuous migration to cities, stimulated by the desire to find a decent job and take advantage of urban leisure and consumption infrastructure. According to the private Brif Research Agency, young people have several major traits. First, they are conformist in the sense that family and marriage are the two most important goals in their lives. Only 10-15 percent of youth prioritize career, travel, and self-improvement over family. Interestingly, as a study by the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies revealed, helping other people, being an influential man or woman, having a good reputation, and being independent are not priorities for youth. They put material comfort above love and

possession of knowledge. Notably, too, only 12 percent of respondents described faith as an “absolute value.”

Consequently, young boys and girls generally consider work a means to earn money. They care deeply about work insofar as it is a means of ensuring their comfort and welfare, but they do not believe it to have any inherent value. Although young people want to earn good money, therefore, they have no desire to work hard. Polls also show that most of them see university education as a waste of time, nothing more than a ritual necessary to get a diploma. However, parents and adolescents tend to lack an awareness that graduation from university is not a guarantee of a job and that there are few opportunities in the “prestigious professions” students often choose to study at university. Hence, 41 percent of Kazakhstan’s young citizens wish to leave the country to acquire permanent residency

in a foreign country, find a job, or get education at a foreign university. Official figures show that 120,000 Kazakh students are studying abroad, the vast majority of whom are enrolled in Russian and Chinese universities. Such socio-economic problems as the low quality of local education, expensive housing, and unemployment push youth to migrate and seek better opportunities.

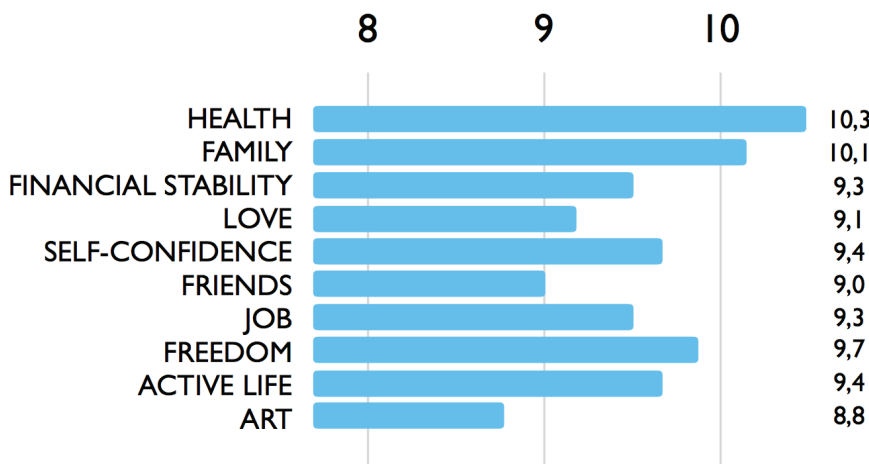
These problems, according to the director of the Youth Information Service of Kazakhstan, Irina Mednikova, translate into a lack of motivation, political passivity, and paternalism. Millennials and post-millennials can hardly name any official and civic initiatives that target youth. Even if they have learned about key government strategies, such as “Kazakhstan-2030,” in school or university, they do not consider politicians “role models.” High-ranking officials, in particular, are widely perceived to be corrupt. Although young people

are much happier and more optimistic than adults, they are also concerned with rising food prices, university fees, expensive rent prices, and low salaries. These issues might push young men and women in big cities, particularly in the capital, Astana, to participate in mass protests once they become adults and have more responsibilities. Nevertheless, the nationwide results of a Public Opinion Institute and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung survey shows that so far young Kazakh citizens are not interested in taking part in civic initiatives or engaging in politics.

Values of Post-Millennials

According to a survey conducted by a team of researchers (including myself) among post-millennials in five major cities in Kazakhstan, the three things teens value most are health, family, and freedom. Of course, all of them want to avoid being sick, but the huge and growing popularity of social media apps—particularly Instagram, Dubsplash, and Musically—has motivated many of them to care about how they look in the mirror and what they eat. Thanks to high oil prices in the 2000s, practicing a “healthy lifestyle” (*zdorovyi obraz zhizhni*, or ZOZh) became trendy among the upper and middle classes: people were able to afford higher-quality food, sport activities, and even vacations in Turkey or Egypt. Although the fat years came to an abrupt end with the 2008 economic crisis and the decline in the oil price, which hit economic growth in Kazakhstan hard, the culture of ZOZh has certainly affected the younger generation, as

Figure 1. The most important values for teens



Source: Author’s survey

it made their parents much more concerned about what their children had on their plates and what they did after school.

Even if Kazakhstan is the largest consumer of alcohol in Central Asia, teens drink less than members of the older generation, who lived through mass unemployment and limited leisure after the fall of the Soviet Union. The proliferation and popularity of gyms and fitness centers across major cities stimulates people to have an attractive physical appearance. Universities likewise encourage people to look cool and stylish. Young boys and girls use being healthy, fit, and sexy as a way to get respect and recognition from their peers—or, to put it in Bourdieusian terms, to gain and increase their symbolic capital.

Another—and much darker—reason for the younger generation to prioritize their health is that Kazakh society has become excessively atomized, with families caring only about their own security and well-being. Severe economic problems have affected household incomes, aggravated unemployment, and forced the government to cut back its social provisions. Citizens expect less and less from the government in terms of improving their living standards. They view each new government initiative with suspicion, thinking that these projects are created and launched only to steal money from taxpayers. Raised in this circumspect atmosphere, teens understand that if they do not care for their health now, they will not be able to achieve anything in the future.

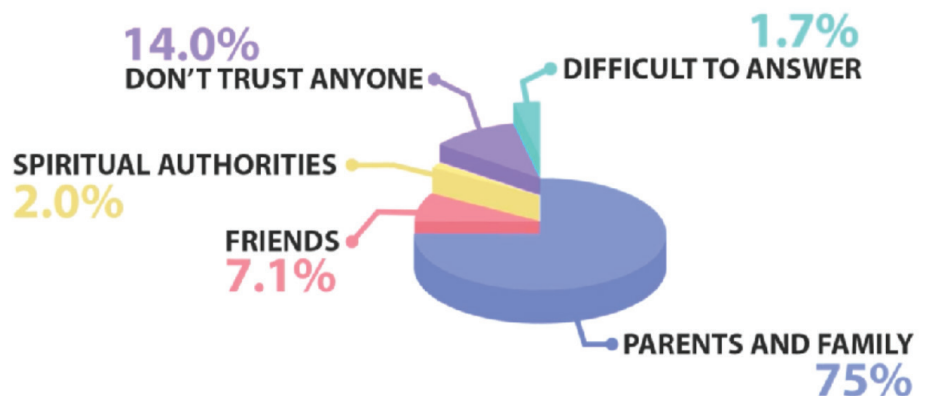
Since parents want their children to be successful, to thrive financially, and to care for them when they get old, young people feel constant pressure to get good marks in school, pass university entrance exams, and find a decent job after graduation. Like “helicopter parents” in the US, parents in Kazakhstan are over-focused on their children: though they may want children to take responsibility for their own actions and decisions, elders seek to control and direct young people’s lives as much as possible.

Two local drivers of such behavior need to be specifically mentioned. First, having been traumatized themselves by the harsh realities of the 1990s, the older generation simply does not want their children to find themselves in similar conditions and therefore overprotects them. Second, the Kazakh tradition of helping relatives during bad economic times as a survival strategy is still being practiced, leading to expectations that young people will likewise care about their elders in the future. The stakes are even higher

for the one-third of Kazakh children who are being raised by a divorced single parent.

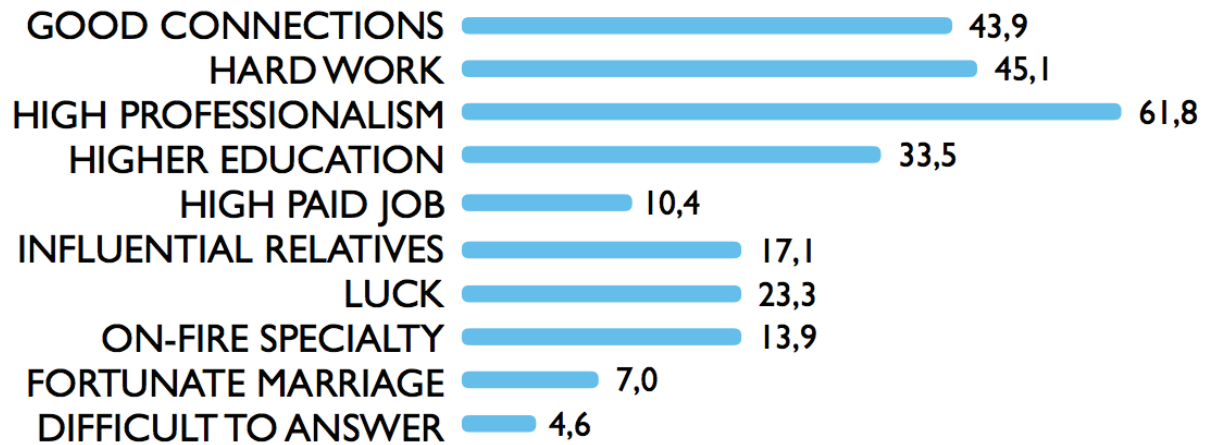
Accordingly, family is the second most important thing to teenagers after health. The two are, in fact, related: young people are aware of the precarious conditions in which their families live and the tough competition in the labor market, and know that they must be physically and mentally strong to live up to their parents’ expectations. They also feel how weak they are without the moral and financial support of their parents, particularly during the university years. Exposed to consumerist culture via the internet and media, young urbanites realize that their parents are their main sponsors, since the vast majority of teenagers do not work to get pocket money. Nevertheless, as Figure 1 shows, concerns about financial stability are significant. That is why teens value self-confidence and ascribe huge importance to employment. With social mobility in steep decline, teenagers realize that the support of their parents is critical to tackling the harsh realities of the

Figure 2. Whom do teenagers trust most?



Source: Author’s survey

Figure 3. What defines success?



Source: Author's survey

adult world.

The other side of the coin is that three-quarters of the new generation most trusts their parents and family members. Meanwhile, 14 percent do not trust anyone, 7 percent most trust their friends, and just 2 percent of respondents count on spiritual leaders. Their views may evolve in the future, but facts on the ground show that Kazakh youth consider family the one and only source of authority. This reflects the broader societal trend of a loss of confidence in national-level institutions.

In a context where teens are socializing less and less with their peers offline, the very concept of friendship needs to be re-evaluated. Interactions with classmates and neighbors are less binding and “self-sacrificing” than in the past: they may go out together, but just to relax and take their minds off test preparation for a while. Adolescents in 9th-11th grade spend most of their after-school time on national university entrance tests. Parents and school managers exert strong

pressure on students and expect them to get high scores. While families want their children to get government scholarships, principals and teachers are primarily concerned with the school’s ranking. The pressure is so strong and expectations so high that some boys and girls have committed suicide after failing to receive high scores.

For many teenagers, passing university exams becomes the ultimate goal, forcing them to spend all their time on test preparation. Although young people are very critical about the quality of higher education in Kazakhstan, they almost universally agree that a university diploma is a prerequisite to getting a job. To the majority of our respondents (73 percent), having a degree is an extremely important asset to building a career. That being said, only 27.8 percent think that their parents could afford to contribute to this education. In a context of rising tuition fees and falling incomes, most elders cannot send their children to prestigious and expensive universities. Teens are

therefore obliged to compete with their peers to secure a scholarship and decrease the burden on their families.

Symptomatically, young Kazakh citizens are embracing individualism. Almost one-third assume that their personality is what sets them apart from their agemates. Sixty-one percent think that being a high-quality professional will make them successful in life. Forty-five percent believe in the benefits of hard work and 43 percent acknowledge the importance of having or establishing good connections with other people. One-tenth of young people think that working at a highly-paid job would mean they were successful, while only 7 percent of teens consider an advantageous marriage a means of achieving success.

These findings clearly illustrate that adolescents raised in a period of slow economic growth are quite realistic about their capabilities. That is why they acknowledge the importance of being an in-demand professional who can withstand any difficulties

as an adult in an individualistic, non-meritocratic society.

Accordingly, almost half of them believe that good connections (*khoroshie sviazi*) matter. Accustomed to paying bribes or using connections to get imported goods and receive state services quicker than others during the Soviet era, the older generations continue to rely on the assistance of their relatives, close friends, and acquaintances when seeking a job, organizing expensive celebrations, and enrolling their kids in kindergarten or school. Adolescents are aware of the importance of having influential elders: many of them have heard rumors about professors and university staff taking bribes from students in exchange for high marks. Moreover, teens have grown accustomed to stories about elders helping their own children to get positions in local government entities. This reality has also led young people to mistrust various institutions in Kazakhstan.

Youth and Social Media

Kazakh millennials and post-millennials spend a great deal of time online. In this, they are not entirely different from older generations: all in all, 70 percent of the population is now using various social media platforms to chat, share opinions, post photos, or watch videos. The difference is which social media these different generations use: young people aged 18-29 are much more active on vKontakte and Instagram, while their elders prefer MoiMir, Odnoklassniki, and Facebook.

While many state-owned and private TV channels have turned to YouTube and other social media platforms to reach alternative audiences, it is telling that the private “Gakku” Kazakh music channel is the most popular YouTube account in the country, with 1.4 million subscribers and 892 million views. The second most popular channel on YouTube is “Channel 7,” known for a variety of sitcoms produced in the Kazakh language. Young Russian-speaking video-makers known as the “Yuframe,” who first became

famous on Instagram, decided to launch their own YouTube channel in 2015. They now have over 635,000 subscribers and their small video sketches, social videos, and pranks have been watched 141 million times. The “Khakha Show,” established in 2015, is another popular channel, with videos produced exclusively for a Kazakh-speaking audience.

In 2018, it became possible to observe a certain institutionalization of social media production with the establishment of the “Salem Social Media” (SSM) agency, headed by Aleksandr Aksyutits, former Press Secretary of Nur Otan, the presidential party. Salem provides financial, logistical, and technical support to young talents producing a wide range of video content. The agency has co-opted several successful projects and attracted very popular Instagram and YouTube celebrities to various shows, events, and video products. It now controls 8 major YouTube accounts with a total of 740,000 subscribers. These channels include “Normal’no obshchaites” [Talk No

Figure 4. What teens think their lives are lacking



Source: Author’s survey

Bullshit], “Shou Iriny Kairatovny” [The Irina Kairatovna Show], and “Shtat Nebraska” [The State of Nebraska], all of which were very popular before the establishment of SSM. In addition, over 200 short videos produced by SSM are published and promoted each month via 9 Instagram accounts with a total of 1.3 million followers.

Consequently, young citizens play a major role in the development of Kazakhstan’s social media and their saturation with content in the Russian and Kazakh languages. In the absence of a strong meritocracy in many government agencies and employment problems facing youth in the private sector, social media provides one of the few social mobility opportunities available to young people. Given that these creative men and women became popular for their entertaining videos, one might assume that young followers are not interested in consuming political content, but they are in fact not apathetic about what is going on in Kazakhstan.

The huge amount of funny videos circulating on Instagram and YouTube may marginalize producers of political content, particularly content created or sponsored by opposition figures such as Mukhtar Ablyazov. Following France’s decision not to extradite the ex-banker to Kazakhstan, Ablyazov launched a massive YouTube campaign against the Kazakh government and urged citizens of the country to unite and protest. Many political analysts argue that the government’s 2018 decision to block social me-

dia platforms in the evenings was occasioned by Ablyazov’s daily YouTube videos and Telegram posts.

While security agencies are closely tracking those who support Ablyazov, the appointment of younger bureaucrats to several key bodies responsible for engagement with civil society and official propaganda implies that Akorda—the Kazakh presidential administration—cares deeply about Ablyazov’s campaigns and the youth’s estrangement from politicians.

Criticized for its lack of engagement with ordinary citizens, Nur Otan is now striving to rebrand itself and become attractive to young citizens. Part of this effort is the appointment as first deputy of 48-year-old former MP Maulen Ashimbayev, a graduate of Tufts University’s Fletcher School. Former Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies director Erlan Karin’s (age 43) appointment to head the biggest government channel, “Kazakhstan,” and his active recruitment of creative millennials to various projects, as well as the introduction of new TV programs, confirms the authorities’ conscious desire to attract young people’s attention to the state-controlled media. After former mayor of Astana Asset Issekeshiev (age 48) became Head of the Akorda Presidential Office, popular Facebook blogger Zhana Ilyicheva was invited to a press conference given by Nazarbayev. The Minister of Information and Communication, Dauren Abayev (age 39), is himself a very active Facebook user, using the plat-

form to respond to ordinary citizens’ questions and polemicize with famous bloggers and entrepreneurs. These appointments might simply be part of Akorda’s outreach in advance of the next presidential election, but the decision to make 2019 “the Year of Youth” implies that there is more to it than that, a more thoughtful strategy of reconciling the youth with the political authorities.

Young Activists on Social Media

In this section, I look at young activists that use different social media platforms to practice civic activism and increase their followers’ awareness of many political issues in Kazakhstan. Although these content creators and influencers are millennials, a substantial share of their subscribers are post-millennials.

Za Nami Uzhe Vyekhali. Two former journalists, Dmitry Dubovitsky (age 29) and Dmitry Khagai (age 30), decided to launch this YouTube channel in August 2017. Although the first six months were in beta testing mode, their vlogs on contemporary political issues have started to attract the attention of adult viewers, turning these ex-journalists into one of the most popular content-creators in the Kazakhstani blogosphere. Today, they have more than 104,000 subscribers, the vast majority of whom are 18 or older. With their videos having been viewed more than 16 million times, the channel is now able to monetize its popularity by advertising various new applications, news outlets, betting firms, etc.

The main mission of the channel is to pose the hard questions that media outlets do not dare ask of politicians, corporate players, and celebrities due to (self-)censorship. The authors argue that YouTube allows for independent editorial policy and provides a forum to talk about things that ordinary citizens care deeply about. The topics of the most popular videos are the possibility of early presidential elections, the bankruptcy of local banks, the illegal behavior of rich kids, the resignation of Nazarbayev’s closest affiliates, the tragic killing of figure skater Denis Ten, security sector reforms, the scenario of Russian secession, etc. By talking about these critical issues, they hope to awaken civic consciousness.

Dmitry Dubovitsky, the co-founder of the channel, thinks that YouTube allows content-creators to reach far more people than do TV channels, newspapers, and other online media resources. According to him, there is no longer any

need to hire too many journalists or pay for the creation and maintenance of a website or publishing house to print your newspapers: “If the video you created is interesting, then YouTube will suggest it to other users. You don’t need to pay for an advertisement.” This means that with little money you can become a visible and popular content-creator within the local YouTube sphere.

Rapid feedback from viewers is crucial, as it helps content-makers adapt their work to make the audience feel that their suggestions and opinions matter. This in turn helps build a strong bond between producers and consumers, which is necessary to increase the number of subscribers and amount of payments from future clients. Although the project is currently far from bringing in substantial revenue, making videos and talking explicitly about sensitive issues brings the creators a sense of self-fulfillment.

While declining to frame them-

selves as political activists, the founders of the channel embrace civic activism. They want ordinary citizens to understand that each political development, from an increase in gasoline prices to the ratification of the Caspian Sea agreement, directly affects their lives. In this respect, the project is driven by a desire to foster individuals’ involvement and interest in political issues. However, they do not agitate people to go into the streets and organize mass demonstrations. The founders affirm that they are not going to join any oppositional forces and do not see any of them as constructive movements.

“*Jurttyn Balasy.*” Murat Daniyar, a 22-year-old Russian-speaking blogger from Almaty, uploaded his first video to YouTube in September 2017. Since then, he has produced 37 videos, prompting 20,925 users to subscribe to his channel, “Jurttyn Balasy” (Other People’s Child). Eighty percent of subscribers are men aged 18-34, mostly from Almaty. Murat does everything alone: he writes scenarios, films footage, and edits.

Murat prioritizes YouTube over other platforms because Instagram is full of “Viners,” people who produce short, fun videos and do not push people to think about social problems. According to him, if one can generate interesting content on YouTube, one easily increases one’s number of followers. Murat describes Kazakhstan’s blogging sphere as sterile and argues that many public figures, particularly famous Viners, are deliberately staying silent on social and political

Figure 5. The cover of “Za Nami Uzhe Vyekhali” Channel



Source: “Za nami uzhe vyekhali” YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCiLLaUQtcaab-bw9-uQysRjw>.

problems. He urges these celebrities to publicly voice political opinions, since millions of young citizens are paying close attention to what they do. He says that it is not a crime to be civically engaged and explicitly opine about the wrongdoings of national or local governing bodies.

In his 5-10-minute-long blogs Murat talks about controversial issues and critically examines many sins of contemporary Kazakh society. The problems of urban transportation in Almaty are what first provoked him to go to YouTube. To his surprise, his first video received positive feedback from many viewers. Commentators encouraged him to continue making blogs and agreed, if necessary, to donate money to support him in doing this. Subsequent videos were dedicated to the hottest issues, including the renaming of one of the central streets of Almaty to Nazarbayev Avenue, the latinization of the Kazakh alphabet, and public hearings on the construction of a new ski resort in the Kok Zhailau valley. The young YouTuber heavily criticizes key opinion leaders, claiming that they engage in “political prostitution.” He assumes that those public figures who supported the construction of the ski resort are corrupt and wicked. Murat laments that Kazakh society is not shaming these individuals, whom he claims are rotten at the core.

Murat is also critical of some Soviet-style practices that persist in today’s Kazakhstan. Many university students are, for instance, forced to attend official political celebrations as “extras.”

Figure 6. Murat Daniyar in one of his blogs on YouTube



Source: “JURTTYŃ BALASY” YouTube channel, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UClmqO1ELiMtzP2YGXhWE_lw.

The blogger blames city administrations for this and treats the Kok Zhailau case as evidence of a confrontation between civil society and the authorities. He thinks officials should stop treating citizens as mindless “sheeple,” since times have changed and the Soviet Union no longer exists.

Accordingly, the main goal of “Jurttyn balasy” is to raise awareness among young citizens and increase their interest in politics. Although Murat hesitates to call himself a political blogger, he acknowledges that with each passing day the number of videos on his channel about political issues increases. He therefore admits that what he does is directly related to politics and political activism. He argues that young people, tired of moral admonition and the criticism of their elders, would rather listen to an agetmate than to an adult male. Consequently, he positions himself as an ordinary guy who loves to hang out with friends, play vid-

eo games, and read books. Murat believes that the new generation will make Kazakhstan a better place and must show that the youth is ready for change.

Le Shapalaque Comics. Launched in March 2017 by several enthusiasts from Astana in their early twenties, Le Shapalaque produces comics and satirical illustrations. Its popular topics include corruption, power relations between the younger generation and their elders in the family and work, the differences between the former capital (Almaty) and the current one (Astana), traditions, popular culture, and everyday practices of ordinary citizens.

With 20,700 followers on Instagram, the Le Shapalaque team argues that social media helps them communicate directly with readers and reach them faster than classical media outlets, including newspapers and television. It is less visible on other social media, with only 1,486 followers

on VKontakte, and even fewer on Facebook and Telegram. Half of consumers of Le Shapalaque comics are aged 18-24; they are university students or recent graduates from Almaty, Astana, Shymkent and Karaganda. Just over half are women. According to the creators of the comics, this particular audience prefers Instagram because it is old enough to have left vKontakte, but still too young to be active on Facebook.

While regarding themselves as artists, the goal of the creators of Le Shapalaque is to push people to think critically. For them, it is a political project, but they are hesitant to consider it a form of political activism. When asked about means of engaging in politics, they somewhat sarcastically responded that one needs to be a member of the ruling political

party, Nur Otan, hinting that opportunities are scarce for young creative people like them. They have never participated in any political campaigns and contend that politics needs to be fixed.

The authorities turn a blind eye to many socio-economic and political problems. Le Shapalaque comics try to create a bond with ordinary citizens by demonstrating that someone else does care about these issues. According to Le Shapalaque founder Adil Zakenov, humor is often the only tool that can help people tackle the world's toughest challenges. One of their comics, for instance, describes the career ladder of state employees: first give bribes to access power, then take bribes once in power (see Figure 7). Aware of the legal risks in a country like

Kazakhstan, the team members consult with lawyers before publishing some of their works on social media.

#SaveKokZhailau. Environmental issues are becoming a crucial element of youth mobilization. The new generation of activists and influencers is, for instance, calling on social media users to sign a petition against the construction of a ski resort in the mountainous Kok Zhailau area of Almaty that has been lobbied for by local authorities. While activists of different ages and backgrounds are united against this expensive initiative, the engagement of the #SaveKokZhailau team could be seen as a turning point. Their publications on Instagram helped to collect over 33,000 signatures after the online petition was launched at the beginning of November 2018. Although the final decision has not yet been made, local authorities have been forced to use different tactics to accommodate these protests. In early December, Almaty mayor Baurzhan Baybek said that the authorities had taken into consideration all critical remarks and suggestions coming from civil society and had decided to make certain changes, such as decreasing the area of deforestation.

Responding to some of the skeptics, art-activist Suinbike Suleimenova (age 25) argues that the Instagram hype around Kok Zhailau is “returning voices, rights, and freedom to the people,” as many citizens are fed up with being silent. Instagram is a “virtual square” that allows people to gather, rise up, and talk

Figure 7. The career ladder of a state employee: give bribes, take bribes



Source: La Shapalaque Comics [@shapalaque] Instagram profile, <https://www.instagram.com/shapalaque/>.

Figure 8. Instagram influencer Madina Mussina



Source: Madina Mussina [@devochkakolbasa] Instagram profile, <https://www.instagram.com/devochkakolbasa/>.

about important things.

Madina Mussina, an Instagram influencer, invites her 72,100 followers to share posts about “Save Kok Zhailau.” She thinks that in order to achieve their ultimate goal, activists need to boost the hype. After her first several publications on this topic, students began to send her private messages saying that university or college authorities were telling them to put their signatures on blank sheets of paper or on documents to support the construction of the ski resort. According to Mussina, times have changed: applying Soviet-era style methods of scaremongering and treating people as a “herd of sheep” no longer works. In the era of digital technology, social media, and a diversity of information sources, there is a need for an open and sincere dialogue between society and rulers.

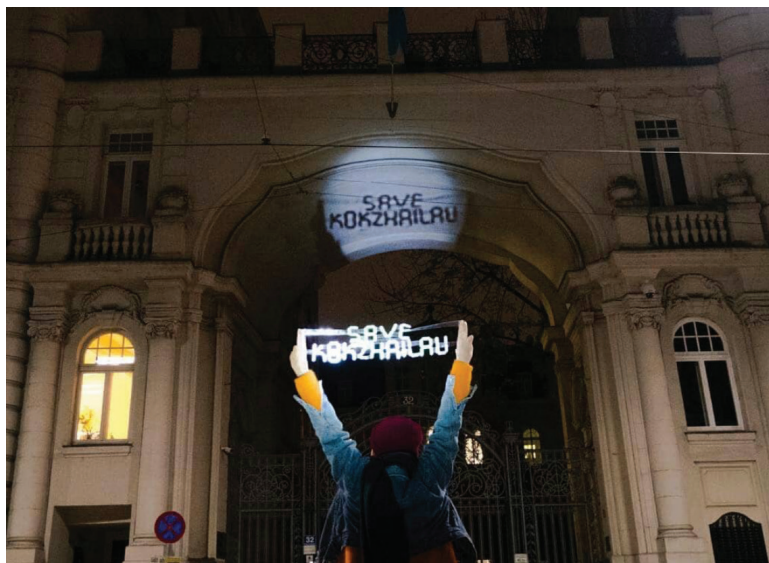
Mussina calls herself a citizen with soul, feeling, and opinion.

She does not want to be afraid of sharing her point of view, since she is “not agitating for violence, drug abuse and murder, but for preserving nature.” What she cares about is protecting the environment and preventing the implementation of the “crazy ideas of fat men with a lot of money.” While the influencer acknowledges that her interest in this topic emerged only recently, similarly to blogger Murat Daniyar, she criticizes celebrities and so-called “opinion leaders” for abstaining from sharing their own views on Kok Zhailau. She thinks that if someone has many followers and is respected by the people, he or she should talk about social issues. Mussina argues that there is no need to organize or attend street protests, since social media can help pressure the authorities with no more than a click.

Following Madina Mussina, 30-year-old actress and Instagram influencer Aisulu Azimba-

yeva (96,600 subscribers) has at least once urged her followers to assert themselves and defend Kok Zhailau against “rich men who do not care about the people.” To complement this Instagram activism, young artists Anvar Musrepov and Nazira Karimova staged a performance near the Embassy of Kazakhstan in Vienna at the beginning of November 2018. They protested against the ski resort by organizing a “luminiscent picket.” On his Instagram account, Musrepov explained that the government of Kazakhstan has never considered the opinion of ordinary citizens and only cares about its international image. They thus decided to attract the attention of an international audience to trigger an official response from Astana. Even if this picket went largely unnoticed, it is an example of the kind of tactics employed by young Kazakh activists. In November 2018, a group of Kazakh students gathered in Times Square to

Figure 9. An art performance by Anvar Musrepov and Nazira Karimova



Source: Anvar Musrepov [@anvarmusrepov] Instagram profile, <https://www.instagram.com/anvarmusrepov/>.

raise global awareness about Kok Zhailau and show solidarity with their fellows in Kazakhstan. To be heard and to avoid being sentenced for protesting by Kazakhstan's law enforcement agencies, young activists choose foreign cities, such as Vienna or New York, for their street actions.

Conclusion

Even as the Kazakh authorities are refashioning the content of state-owned TV channels, using social media, and appointing younger bureaucrats to the ministries and agencies that curate so-called "ideological work," millennials' and post-millennials' lack of trust in official institutions persists. The political indifference of young citizens is driven by fear of organizing and attending mass demonstrations, as well as by a lack of faith that the government will listen to their claims.

Nevertheless, the growing popularity of the content created by young bloggers, satirists, and influencers implies that coverage of political and socio-economic issues is beginning to sell. Social media platforms act as safe spaces with less censorship and government control, giving young activists a unique opportunity to share their political views and interact with their audiences without any mediators. The topics they cover, ranging from urban transportation to corruption and environment, show that creators and audience alike are concerned with national and city-level problems. Even if the Kazakhstani youth is largely apolitical, their very ignorance and lack of respect for the authorities is, in es-

sence, an unconscious political attitude that limits the impact of state propaganda. On the eve of a presidential transition, Akorda authorities are faced with the serious challenge of finding a common language with the country's youth, which seems to be slowly entering a new era of at least partial civic activism.

Notes

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¹³ Youth Scientific Research Center, "The Youth of Kazakhstan 2017 National Report," May 10, 2017, <http://eljastary.kz/articles/14/2>.

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³¹ Ibid.

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