CENTRAL ASIA PROGRAM

Agents of Change? Civic Engagement of Western-Educated Youth in Kazakhstan

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Kazakhstan has a significant youth population. Over 51 percent of citizens are under the age of 29, the vast majority of whom were born under the rule of the first president of independent Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Over 25 percent of the nation's population are millennials.[1] The younger generation is faced with numerous socio-economic challenges, including lack of employment opportunities and job growth, limited social mobility, underrepresentation in the state structures, and limited space for social and political expression. As a step toward tackling this vast array of problems, 2019 was declared the "Year of Youth" in Kazakhstan. The program for this year seeks to develop policies that would bring considerable social benefits for young people. Activities include, inter alia, social engagement with the state through volunteerism and social responsibility initiatives.

Although this initiative is well-intentioned, it may, ironically, have been jeopardized by the young people themselves—who dared, for the first time in a long time, to make their voices heard after Nazarbayev decided to resign from the presidency in March. On April 21, 2019, two young activists held up a banner at the Almaty marathon that read, "You cannot run from the truth," for which they both received 15-day prison terms. Even earlier, in March, after interim president Tokayev's decision to rename the capital city to Nur-Sultan yet again without consulting the public, young people expressed their disagreement online. As more young Kazakhstanis have joined this wave of discontent, the country has seen a spree of creative youth protests, from a series of online sketches ridiculing the regime's reaction to peaceful actions like writing famous slogans on their bodies or holding up blank signs on public squares (for which the young people involved are still detained). As these examples show, the youth of Kazakhstan are coming up with new ways of speaking their minds. However, the dichotomy between a state that wants a positively engaged youth, on the one hand, but does not allow it to peacefully express itself, on the other, has created a problem with serious repercussions.

My interest in this paper is in how youth engage in civic and social initiatives. I am especially concerned with the contribution of Western-educated young people to social change. This social group represents a compelling case—with some of them already in power, they will have a tremendous opportunity to shape the

post-Nazarbayev era, including by fostering democratic values. Hence, my research question is: How do young Western-educated Kazakhstani young people promote social change through civic engagement initiatives?

To answer this question, I surveyed 113 individuals from Kazakhstan aged 18-35 who either received their education or worked abroad (primarily in Western countries). The survey included questions on the spheres in which they are civically engaged, their motivation for participating in such initiatives, factors inhibiting their civic engagement, and how their international experience changed their perception of the notion of social engagement.

The limitations I encountered during the project centered on the lack of extended studies on the topic of Kazakhstani youth engagement and Western-educated graduates in particular, as well as the sample size of the survey. A larger sample would have been needed to ensure that the study was representative. Still, this paper offers significant insights into the issue of youth civic engagement and the role of Western-educated youth in it. It proceeds as follows. First, it discusses the theoretical concepts of civic and social engagement, with a specific focus on the political landscape of Kazakhstan's authoritarian regime and how this affects forms of civic activism. It also touches upon the interplay between the quality of education and the level of engagement. Second, the paper explores the general environment of youth engagement in Kazakhstan, mapping key youth policy actors and what they do on the ground. Third, it analyzes the engagement of Western-educated youth by presenting and interpreting the survey data.

Theoretical Framework

Theorizing Civic/Social Engagement

In this paper, "civic engagement" and "social engagement" (hereafter CSE) will be used interchangeably. Coming to terms with what constitutes CSE is an arduous process; the scholarly community contends that this concept is hard to define and to measure. Owing to "conceptual stretching,"[2] the term might include a wide range of activities depending on how the notion of "civic" is construed. Robert Putnam advocates for a comparatively all-encompassing definition, stating that civic engagement includes a wide variety of actions, from social networks and political participation to newspaper-reading.[3] Other groups of authors give the term a more nuanced definition. Instead of "civic engagement," they propose "active citizenship," putting the focus on collective rather than individual action and seeing civic involvement as being based on engaging with community issues through work in all sectors, not only the government.[4] This could also be described as "collective action [that] influences the larger *civil society*."[5] Finally, civic involvement as a precursor to *political participation* involves moving individual actions toward collective action solely through the instrumentality of the political process.

It is a challenge to narrow down the scope of what comprises civic engagement due to the multifaceted nature of the concept and, in our case, the lack of data on youth's perception of what it means to be socially engaged. However, the main idea is that "[the] active citizen participates in the life of a community to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future."[6]

In this research, I employ the notion of a "latent"—also called "pre-political"—form of civic engagement, a notion developed by Ekman and Amna.[7] Their concept illuminates the hidden tendencies of civic participation in authoritarian states. The citizenry in non-democratic regimes do many things that should not necessarily be categorized as direct civic engagement leading to political involvement or results. However, they might have strong potential to become political involvement or have a particular influence on policies. Many young people are engaged in formally non-political or semi-political domains. This type of activity does not directly target the authorities, but it nevertheless results in involvement in current social processes. These activities may include volunteering, charity, helping to support vulnerable social groups, education initiatives, or online means of engagement (social media activities). However, unlike Ekman and Amna, I do not draw a line between "civic" and "social," as the two processes produce essentially the same result: involving young citizens in civic activities.

Ekman and Amna find the closest equivalent to "latent engagement" in Schudson's notion of

"monitorial citizens" who are informed about and interested in politics yet who generally choose to avoid formal channels of political participation. Although they remain active in the civic realm, they act politically only when "they feel it is really imperative."[8] I believe these related concepts apply well to the current state of youth involvement in civic processes in Kazakhstan.

How Does Education Influence Social Engagement?

Better-educated youth contribute to society in various ways, including civic activities. An individual's relative level of education has a causal effect on his or her level of democratic engagement.[9] Someone who has a comparatively higher level of formal education than others in a given social setting enjoys higher social status. This means that the more educated individual is better equipped to convey a political message, thus making it more likely that he or she will become politically involved.

The interplay between the level and quality of education and younger generations' involvement in civic activities might seem obvious—education universally brings improvements to all forms of engagement.[10] Though it is difficult to identify specific variables that cause more educated individuals to participate at a higher level, some of the main factors are *development of bureaucratic competence*, *civic skills*, *cognitive capacity*, *curriculum* (also known as "classroom climate"), *student government*, *habits of associational involvement*, and *volunteering in the community* (service learning).[11] A comprehensive study of civic education in 28 nations has shown that among the aforementioned factors, classroom climate (discussing social and political issues in the classroom freely and openly) is the most significant.[12]

Kazakhstan is making progress toward such academic and administrative freedom. In 2018, Nazarbayev signed a bill that enshrined these freedoms into law. This law goes hand in hand with step 78 of the "100 Concrete Steps," a landmark development strategy designed to allow Kazakhstan to achieve its ultimate goal of becoming one of the 30 most developed nations in the world by 2050. It gives universities almost full control of curricula formation, as well as the ability to select which majors to offer on the basis of market demand rather than the state's priorities (as they were historically selected). This is undoubtedly a positive step toward greater transparency and healthy competition among universities that will improve the quality of higher education and enhance academic freedom.

Higher education enrollment and literacy rates are also trending upward. All in all, 496,209 people were enrolled in Kazakhstan's higher education institutions in 2017/2018, of whom females comprised 54.3 percent (n=269,649).[13] The number of students increased by 4 percent in 2018. The adult literacy rate (15+ years) of Kazakhstanis is 99.8 percent, an improvement over the 1989 figure of 97.5 percent.[14] However, the education system is hobbled by its failure to develop students' soft skills. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) assessment, Kazakhstan's university-level education lags behind on a multitude of such indicators, including "cognitive and practical skills," "decision-making," and "autonomy," as well as more complex indicators such as "advanced knowledge of a field," "critical understanding of theories and principles," "advanced skills demonstrating innovative approaches to solving unpredictable problems," "reflection," and "self-regulation." None are directly pursued in the higher education system of Kazakhstan.[15] This reality is directly relevant to understanding the progress (or lack thereof) of youth's social involvement. The absence of these soft skills from both local university curricula and extracurricular activities reflects the absence of a "classroom climate" or general critical engagement with material within the local system of higher education. Hence, my hypothesis is that Western-educated Kazakhstani youth should be more socially engaged.

Alternative Forms of Youth Engagement

Informal modes of youth activism typically originate in an authoritarian and repressive milieu. Regimes that inhibit civil freedoms encourage new types of action, especially in the online realm. Social media and online platforms alike create more space for youth activism and involvement than do major political institutions. The former serves not only as a

modern Habermasian "public sphere," but also as a primary setting for youth involvement in consuming, discussing, circulating, distributing, and producing content.[16] Social media offer new modes of engagement and remain a safe venue for dialogue between youths. Social media have significant potential to become a powerful tool for further increasing civic and political participation.

Another driving force behind the emergence of unconventional youth activism is disillusionment with the country's current political trajectory and lack of trust in politicians. Today's youth tends to withdraw from institutional activities because the authorities are not receptive to younger generations' demands and because young people consider politics "remote and irrelevant."[17] If conventional means do not work, they resort to new modes of expression that are "less professionalized and controlled."[18] These activities, ranging from community service to charitable contributions, rely on various forms of internet and new media technologies. Other forms of civic engagement, namely issue-based activism (a form of activism motivated by specific issues such as environment or gender issues, etc.), lifestyle politics, and identity politics have been on the rise among Western youth as well.[19] However, it is not clear if the Kazakhstani younger generation necessarily participates in all of these.

Mapping the Youth Engagement Environment in Kazakhstan

The spectrum of actors in the field of Kazakhstan's youth policy is quite diverse, and the state is the dominant one. The government devises youth engagement strategies, directs state policies to meet youth's "gut issues" (such as employment and housing), etc. It also welcomes investment in Kazakhstan's human capital on the part of international organizations (IOs). As a result, the country's youth policy landscape includes many joint "State-IO" projects or more independent youth projects backed solely by IOs. Non-institutionalized structures are also present and function on the Internet, targeting a younger audience. The state likewise realizes the necessity of utilizing younger generations, so the Salem Social Media agency, led by the former press secretary of the Nur Otan presidential party, Aleksandr Aksyutits, has recently become a significant player on the Internet scene, attracting some famous bloggers to boost the apolitical agenda among the young, marginalizing creators of political content online.[20]

The Kazakhstani regime conceptualizes its youth policies through the State Youth Policy Act of 2015 as well as presidential messages and state strategies. The latest strategy—"Kazakhstan 2020: Path to the Future," adopted in 2013—was a predecessor of the Youth Act and laid down the main mechanisms for implementing

Table 1. Forms of youth activism in Kazakhstan

Pro-government	Sponsored by international organizations/ donor foundations	Informal structures
• Mainly aimed at troubleshooting young people's socio-economic problems • Patriotic and accountable to state initiatives • Social volunteerism	• Looser in regulation • Higher quality • More effective in terms of civic engagement • Initiatives include Zhas Camp, Youth Corps, Y-Peer, AIESEC, etc.	• Mostly in online spaces, social media, and video platforms • Least regulated; may be completely unregulated

Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of research

youth policies. For the first time, the law increased the involvement of young people in the work of consultative and advisory bodies. The law also defined volunteerism as "community service" not affiliated with any political or religious organizations.[21] One of the law's key aims is to engage youth in the socio-economic and socio-political life of the country.[22] The law generally focuses on the social realm—chiefly education, health, employment, and business activities, countering corruption, nurturing "green thinking," and fostering patriotic sentiments.[23]

These multiple strategies for engaging youth with state entities and addressing youth social problems evolved into the 2019 Year of Youth. For the time being, it is the overarching framework within which for the government to work with the younger population. Its key priorities—education, employment, affordable housing, support for young families—mainly target the basic social problems. The state has for instance initiated multiple programs for supporting youth entrepreneurial activities and business start-ups. The project's roadmap also prioritizes social activism, namely tree-planting campaign—based on the "Zhasyl Yel" ("Green Nation") national green movement—and the re-creation of construction brigades and military-patriotic education.[24]

State efforts to engage the younger generation on the ground run up against countless problems. Youth's responsiveness to the myriad government projects is very low due to the state paternalistic—rather than "equal partner"—approach. The authorities engage in propagandistic and ideological mobilization instead of welcoming self-starters and proactive youth leaders, with the result that they do a poor job of raising awareness of their initiatives and increasing their visibility. Moreover, state initiatives in practice neglect the rural youth population. Administrative organs coerce students to attend various pro-state events or listen to yearly presidential messages that do not inspire youth to engage. Funding for social engagement activities is allocated through the main pro-state youth organizations, Zhas Otan and Zhas Ulan, creating corruption risks and limiting de-centralization. The sporadic character of youth policies also makes them a comparatively ineffective strategy for tackling youth engagement. As Irina Mednikova, Director of the Youth Information Service of Kazakhstan, notes:

> [...] it is quite possible that this year will only be a sedative to systemic wounds of youth policy to prevent the growth of discontent and radicalization of this large and active social group. But I always say that young people need freedom and participation in decision-making. Only then do they become a resource for the state, not a problem.[25]

Independent and international donor-funded activism has been less voluminous but more effective than that of the state, according to "Youth Mapping" research conducted in five post-Soviet states in 2018.[26] Prominent projects include ZhasCamp, Youth Corps, Y-Peer, and AIESEC. These types of initiatives are supported by international organizations and NGOs, international foundations, and embassies. The mentioned organizations deal with a broad range of youth activities, such as informal peer education, leadership and soft skills development, volunteerism, and professional and entrepreneurial exchanges between youth and experts in the business community.

Non-institutionalized social engagement, on the other hand, has been driven primarily by issue-based activism and informal modes of social influence. Traditional forms of youth engagement (voting, participation in political parties) are falling, especially in the industrialized world.[27] A recent large-scale study of Kazakh youth showed that the majority of young people are indifferent to politics and barely vote.[28] Mutual distrust between the state and the younger generation is leading youth to evade formal modes of interaction with classic institutions. Many young people therefore prefer the less-regulated online space, where they can be freer to express themselves in various forms. While the majority of young Kazakhs do not follow political content, they are not indifferent to what is happening in their country. In fact, according to a recent public opinion study conducted among the capital city youth, 54.7 percent of surveyed young people said they "feel active about" their community. When asked about the possibility of participating in a socially-driven protest, 44.2 percent

responded positively.[29] These figures indicate that semi-civic attitudes may have the potential to transform into political action in the future.

The Case of Western-Educated Youth Engagement in Kazakhstan

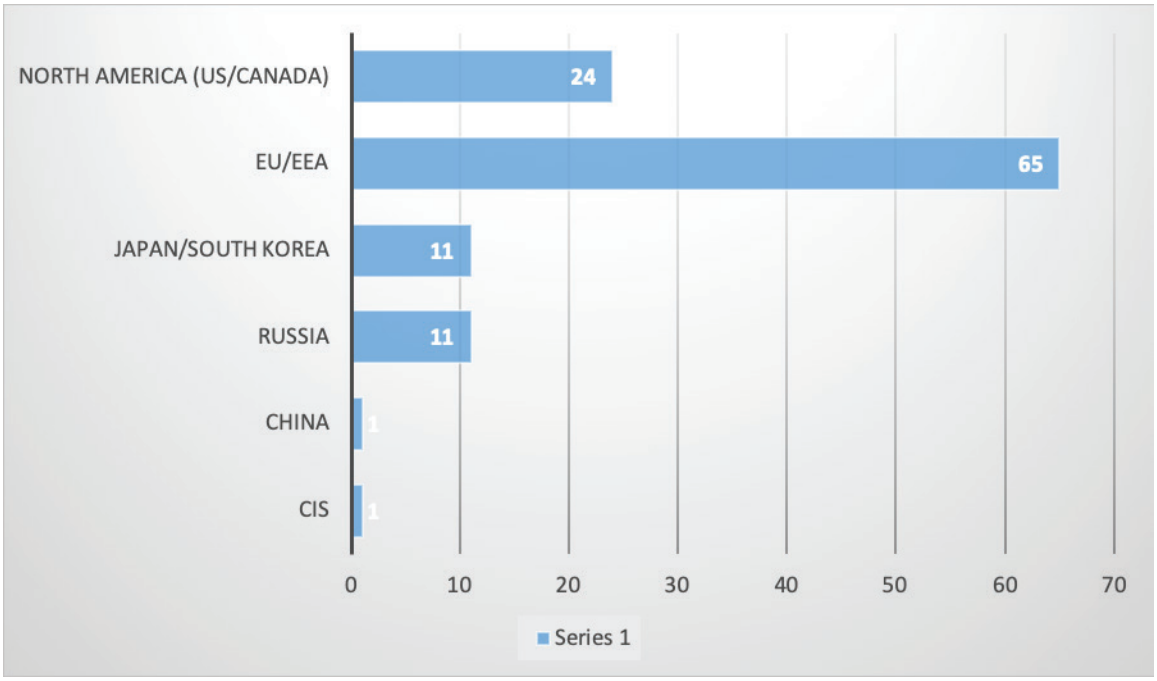
Having observed a tendency toward pre-political behavior among Kazakhstan's youth, let us now turn to look at how Western-educated Kazakhstanis perceive civic engagement and understand their place in it. It should be noted at the outset that it is difficult to locate Western-educated young people in the heterogeneous pool of civic activities because they are dispersed across all listed categories.

The creation of the "Bolashak" study-abroad program in 1993 was—and to a certain extent still is—a vision of Kazakhstan's future, a Western-values-driven approach to nurturing people with "less blinkered vision." The program was established to support the entry of independent Kazakhstan's new generation into the globalized world and overcome "Soviet-style" anachronisms in education.[30] In 2010, Kazakhstan became part of the Bologna process, with a view to drawing even closer to the developed world. This move recognized the excellence of Western science and education. Then-president Nazarbayev even concluded in a 2006 speech that "[the] Soviet education system is archaic and poses a danger to the security of the [Kazakh] nation and the state."[31]

However, to assert that Kazakhstan's Western-educated youth wholeheartedly support liberal values would be too presumptuous. The Kazakhstani elite's political disposition toward liberal ideas is quite moderate; modernization without "excessive" Westernization is perceived as the most desirable outcome.[32] The so-called "Bolashak generation" imports more technocratic approaches than democratic values and is tightly controlled both at home and abroad.[33]

In this study, I attempt to look at some aspects of civic engagement—social/civic initiatives, volunteerism, and charity work—and how Western-educated youth are involved in them. For this purpose, I designed a survey comprised of 16 open and multiple-choice questions. The survey does not specify the scope and definitions of the categories mentioned, as I wanted to explore how respondents understand what it means to be

Figure 1. Location of education and/or training



Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of research

socially/civically engaged. I also looked into specific factors that hamper the civic engagement of Western-educated youth. Finally, I analyzed how Western-style education influences respondents' civic and social engagement (CSE).

For the purposes of this study, I define Western-educated youth as young people aged 18 to 35 who have received a higher education degree, work experience, or practical training in Western-style academic settings and/or Western countries, predominantly those in the European Union/ European Economic Area (EU/ EEA) or North America. A total of 113 participants were involved in the survey: 65 females, 47 males, and one non-binary individual. On average, respondents had spent 33.6 months abroad. In terms of ethnic composition, 85.9 percent (n=97) of the sample were Kazakhs, 9.7 percent belonged to other ethnic groups (n=11), and 4.4 percent of respondents did not indicate their ethnic background (n=5). The overwhelming majority of respondents had studied abroad (67.2 percent/n=76), another 25.7 percent (n=29) had both studied and interned abroad, 6.2 percent (n=7) had solely had internships/training abroad, and 0.9 percent (n=1) had both studied and worked abroad.

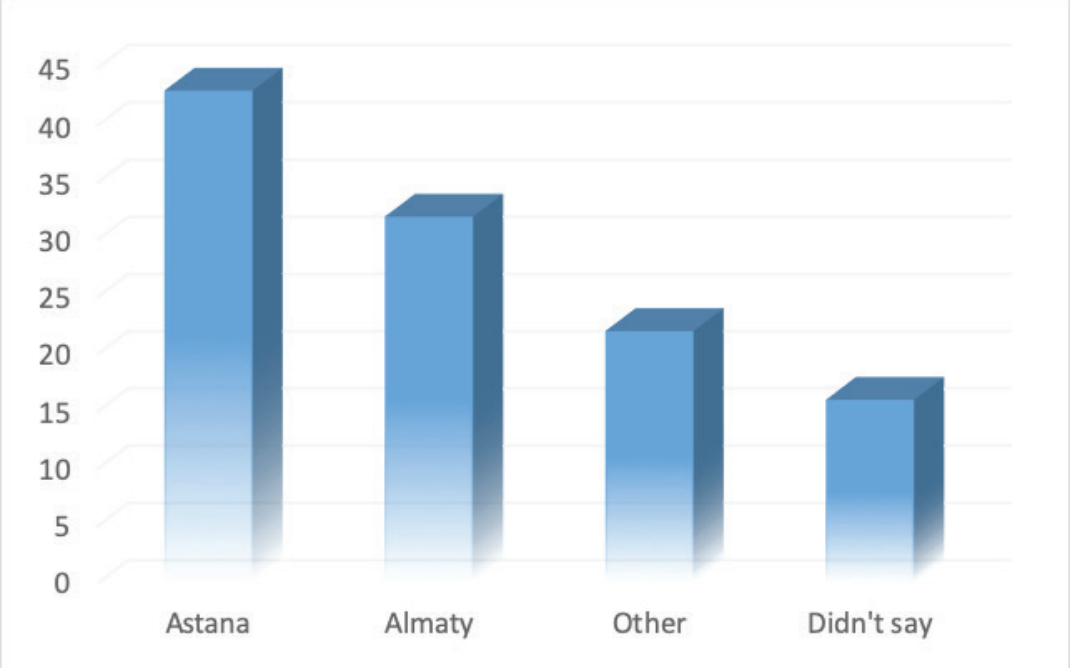
As Figure 1 shows, the vast majority of respondents obtained their training and education in the EU/EEA.

In terms of respondents' current residence in Kazakhstan, two main locations were named: Astana (n=43) and Almaty (n=32). Twenty-two respondents were in other cities (n=22), while 16 declined to indicate their current place of residence (n=16)—see Figure 2.

The plurality of respondents work in the public and quasi-public sector (n=47), followed by the private sector (n=33). The main sectors in which respondents are employed are shown in Figure 3.

When asked how they obtained their education and/or training experience, the Bolashak program dominated (n=56), followed by other scholarships (n=56) and self-financing (n=17).

Figure 2. Current geographic distribution in Kazakhstan



Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of research

Figure 3. Employment by sector

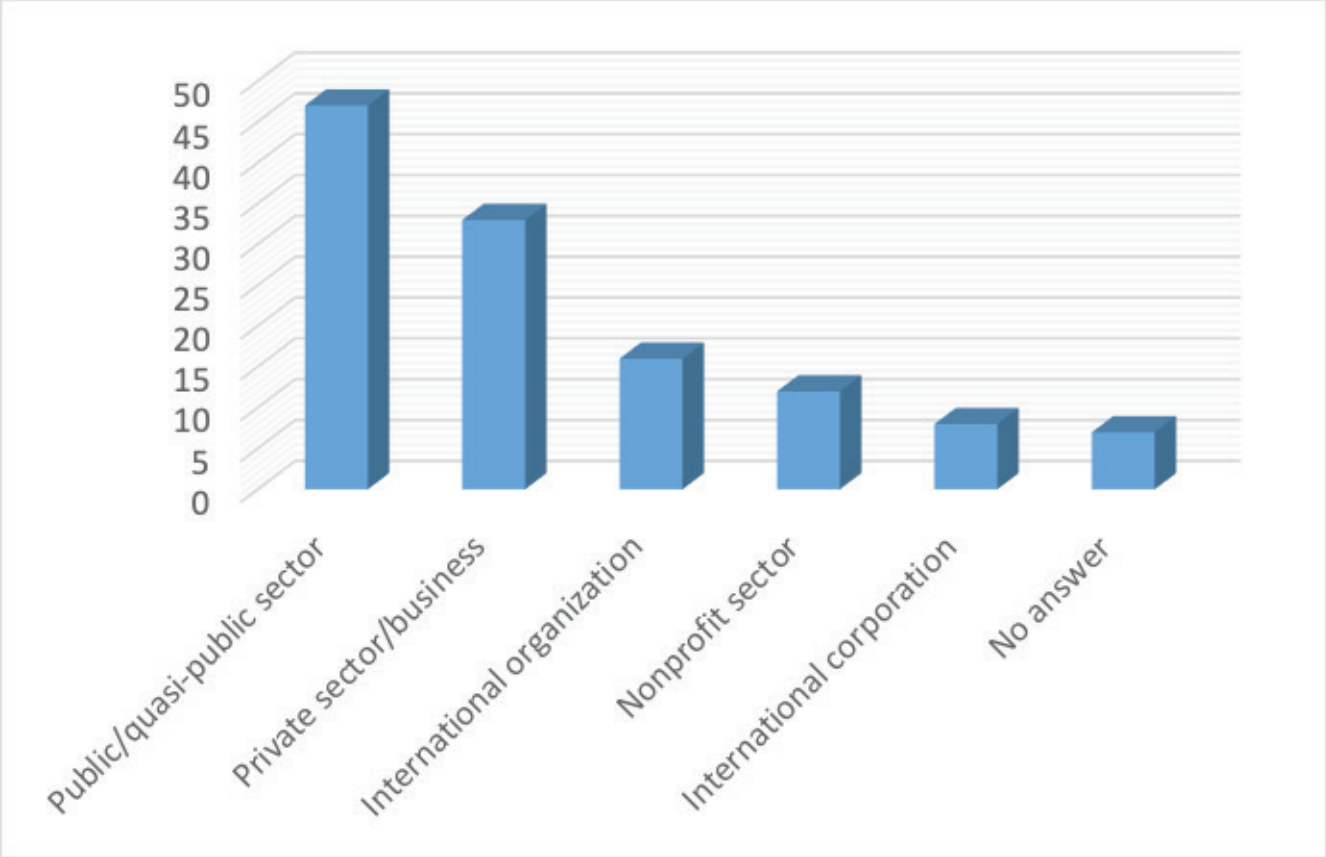


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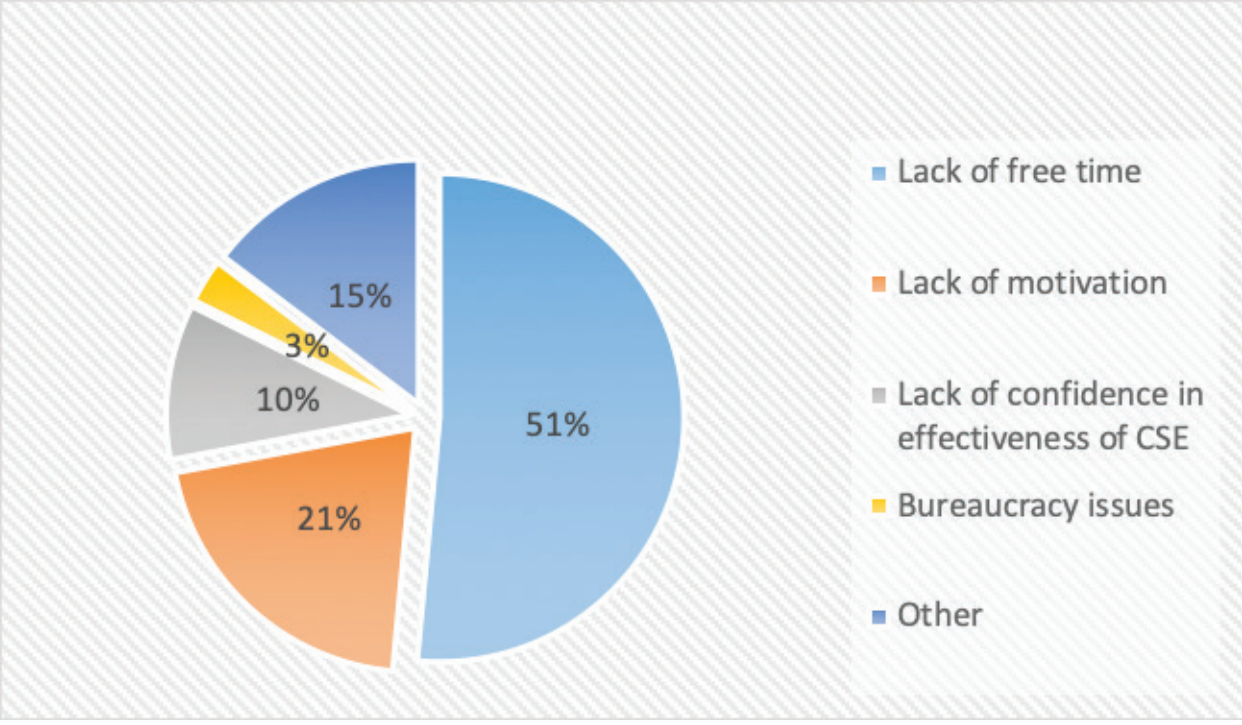
Figure 4. Factors inhibiting CSE



Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of research

In response to the question of whether they took part in any social, civic, charity, or volunteer activity in addition to their main job, 50 respondents answered in the affirmative against 63 who responded in the negative. Comparing these numbers to how respondents received their education revealed that Bolashak graduates are slightly more involved in CSE organizations than those who received other scholarships or self-financed, with Bolashak graduates representing 28 of the 50 respondents who participated in CSE activities.

To the question "Do you consider it important to participate in the civic life of the country?" a significant majority—96 of 113 participants—responded positively; seven responded negatively and nine did not answer. This number is rather indicative, as it shows respondents' predisposition toward future civic action. Among the main factors inhibiting respondents' CSE were four key reasons, displayed in Figure 4.

Among "other" responses, people expressed fear of engagement and concerns about a lack of freedom of speech or freedom of expression.

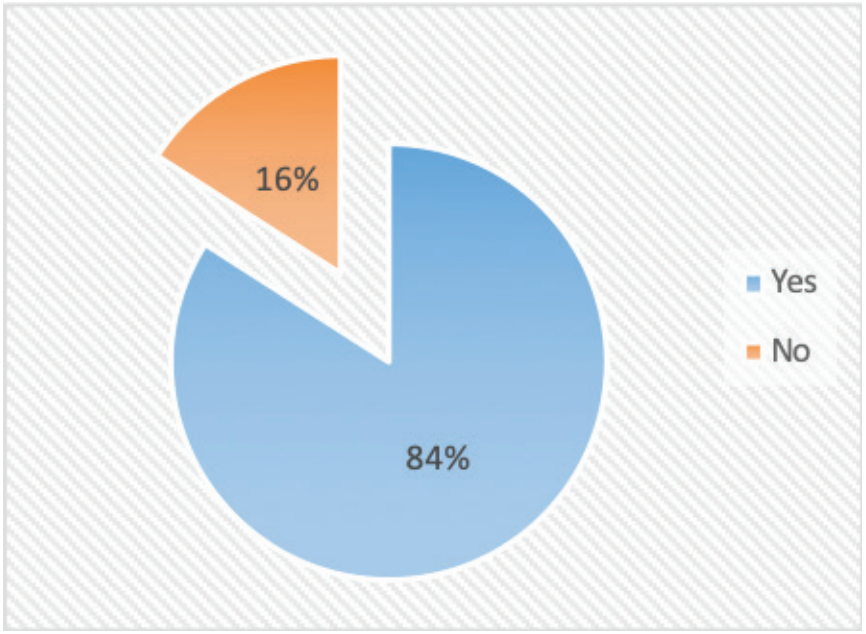
Returning to the theoretical premise that education level has a causal effect on CSE, the survey revealed that the overwhelming majority of respondents (n=95) think that their experience and education abroad had a significant impact on their understanding of what it means to be socially engaged.

Positive responses to this question clustered around several experiences. These included:

- The "classroom climate" in the West—an educational environment where students and instructors could informally and freely discuss social and political issues pertaining to their countries;
- Comparison of their experiences at home and abroad, which motivated them to change things up;
- Conceptual and critical understanding of how civic initiatives influence public institutions; and
- Participation in CSE organizations abroad and willingness to transfer best practices to Kazakhstan.

Some of the respondents gave rather encompassing descriptions of what prompted them to engage in CSE upon returning to Kazakhstan:

Figure 5. Has your international education/work experience improved your understanding of civic engagement?



Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of research

It seems to me that the issue is about people, international environment, cultural differences. In my particular case, my professors, classmates, their arguments, and our joint discussions influenced me profoundly [...] We talked a lot about the values that the EU promotes within itself and in the world. I think that encouraged me to reflect on the values in Kazakhstan's society and my contribution to it.[34]

Others noted their participation in initiatives abroad and explained that this transformed their psyche:

Active participation in a volunteer student organization in the US gave me a sense of [satisfaction] and skill development. I grasped the idea of what a community is.[35]

I understand that I can make positive changes at the local level, at my own level. Maybe these changes are not grand, but they benefit specific people, and I receive feedback from [them]. It brings deep human satisfaction.[36]

Some respondents highlighted the issue of values—the value of human capital abroad, respect for individual freedoms, and how the lack thereof in Kazakhstan influenced their perception of civic involvement:

In the West, a person is valued primarily as an individual. Human dignity is praised there. And I liked this attitude; I wanted to make life brighter in Kazakhstan too.[37]

To the question of "How do you understand the notion of social or civic engagement?," responses took two main directions. The first group—those in favor of social change—underscored the societal needs, primarily mentioning volunteer initiatives and the sense of belonging to a community rather than being indifferent to social problems:

Participation in the development of urban or state public policy through the expression of ideas, opinions, and suggestions. For example, taking part in the construction of your residential neighborhood common area, housing estate, etc.[38]

Many of this group's civically engaged youth suggested that CSE should involve creating a safe and inclusive platform, or feedback channel, for discussing and proposing solutions to the leading societal challenges.

The second group focused more heavily on the civic/political nexus, mainly the issues of protecting human rights, exerting more pressure on state bodies through the democratic mechanism of self-organization, standing up for social rights, and exercising the right to vote. Importantly, some respondents did not associate civic initiatives with the political opposition, stating that "civi[c] activity in Kazakhstan is often confused with the opposition while it is not."[39]

The majority of responses centered on the importance of being an active and responsible citizen who is not indifferent to the problems of his or her local community and society in general, and who is not only active online but also contributes to positive change offline.

Conclusion

The multifaceted nature of civic engagement expressed in theory is reflected in the Kazakhstani realities on the ground. Western-educated youth are engaged in a variety of activities, not all of which can be categorized as direct civic engagement. Many of them are in a latent form. However, this hidden, unsystematic, and pre-political participation can lead to relatively explicit and political demands, as demonstrated by the unprecedented mass youth protests that preceded and followed the presidential elections of June 2019.

The results of this study revealed that although Western-educated youth engage in social and civic initiatives only on a limited basis, they *do* engage. Young people readily contribute to educational, charitable, and volunteer activities, as well as to some human rights initiatives. They do not perceive themselves as an opposition force, but rather seek opportunities within the established political order to increase social justice, promote respect for human rights, strive for the betterment of society, and get their voices heard by decision-making bodies. This vision of cooperation rather than confrontation is challenging the established Western view that active youth civic engagement equates to opposition to the state.

The survey also showcased the receptiveness of this cohort to change, and these young people are fairly likely to participate in efforts to bring such change about. The regime, preoccupied as it is with the transfer of power and maintaining its stability, is

not particularly interested in giving free rein to youth civic activism, let alone developing strong civic institutions. That is why the space for youth social expression remains minimal, and the state will probably continue to react quite harshly to uncontrolled displays of youth civic activism.

Recommendations

Given this challenging political context—including the dominance of the state over virtually all socio-political domains—and based on the research findings at hand, I propose that the **Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan**:

• Develop a campus-based university peer-learning pilot program that would employ recent Kazakhstani graduates of Western universities as instructors to promote civic engagement through training in communication skills, critical thinking, and leadership. A curriculum development and oversight committee created together with a Ministry representative and comprised of faculty members, a Bolashak administrator, and more senior alumni of Western universities would select these graduates based on their proven track record of leadership and engagement with civic initiatives.

I further recommend that **university management:**

• Increase partnerships with Western universities and their recent graduates to support the teaching of civic and social responsibility in higher education;
• Create university-based research centers that would provide evidence-based models of civic engagement;
• Collaborate with international donor organizations that specialize in higher education to support such research centers; and
• Facilitate networking among Western-educated alumni.

Notes

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