



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ASIA

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF DEVELOPMENT

“Listening State?”: Exploring citizens’ perceptions of Open Government in Tokayev’s Kazakhstan

Life in Kyrgyzstan Conference

12.10.2023

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Accepted by the Central Asian Survey (forthcoming)

Abstract

The Open Government reform has been actively adopted across various non-democratic regimes, including post-soviet Central Asia. The reform is supposed to bolster responsiveness and transparency through the active use of information-communication technologies, and numerous authoritarian countries have recently adopted and deepened open government reform. In this work, we study whether open government reform contributes to responsiveness in autocracies using the case of Kazakhstan under Tokayev rule (2019-present time). We investigate the concept of the Listening State recently adopted in Kazakhstan through the analysis of novel primary data. The perceptions of ordinary citizens reveal that the open government reform in the country has not led to the realization of its key goal of increased responsiveness. Therefore, open government reform has serious limitations in achieving its ultimate goal of a better listening state to people's needs in autocracies.

Keywords: open government, responsiveness, autocracy, authoritarian upgrading, Kazakhstan.

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Funding:

1. Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan
2. The Eurasian Integration Institute (Astana, Kazakhstan)

Based on my doctoral dissertation.

Open government: Increasing responsiveness or authoritarian upgrading?

- Theoretical Research Questions
- Does Open Government as a reform lead to increased responsiveness of public sector in autocratic states in Central Asia?
- Does the open government reform become a tool to achieve authoritarian upgrading?



Why Open Government in Central Asia?

1. Literature gap on reasons for open government adoption in non-democratic countries; **narrow focus at technologies and e-government component.**
2. Open Government in Central Asia has been studied through the prism of state officials and civil society activists (O, Connor 2019, Janenova & Knox 2019, Kurmanov & Knox 2022). **A lack of studies on the perception of citizens.**
3. Studies on authoritarian legitimation overemphasize **the role of state** (Omelicheva 2016) and others.



Research Question – Tokayev's Listening State as Open Government reform

- RQ1. How has the Open Government reform affected the responsiveness of state officials to citizens in Kazakhstan?
- RQ2. What are the perceptions of Kazakhstani citizens regarding the effectiveness of the open government reform adopted by Tokayev?



framework of Open Government

Component	OPEN DATA	OPEN PARTICIPATION	OPEN COLLABORATION
Stage	1	2	3
Focus	Dissemination of transparent and easy-to-use information to citizens regarding policies and work of government.	Participation of citizens in policy formulation and public services formulation. Direct participation of citizens in policy making through	Deeper collaboration with activists and civil society in the design of public services and functions
Sub-concepts	Transparency, Access to Information, Quality of information, Use of information	Participation, e-participation, online citizen engagement in policy and decision-making	Collaborative governance, Co-production
Specific tools	Access to open data portal, Government bills and legislation open to public, e-government and Open Government websites	Town-hall meetings, community engagement, online chat rooms, virtual front-office and interactive feedback forms.	Working groups with inclusion of civil society activists, Expert meetings, Virtual platforms, councils

Open Government Framework (compiled by the author based on the analysis of scholarly literature, mainly Lee & Kwak 2013, Gil-Garcia, Gasco-Hernandez and Pardo 2020).

Open Government – engaging a wide citizenry and accountability

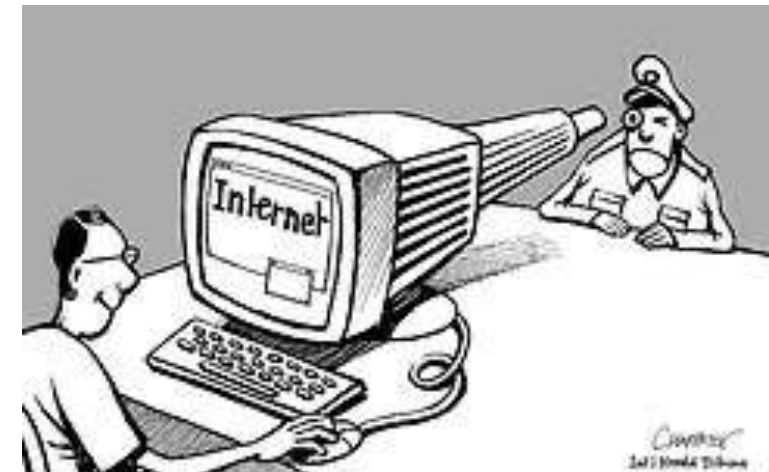
- Open Government as an inherently democratic reform (Harrison et al. 2012) can impact institutional power structures by engaging a wide citizenry through **participation**.
- Meijer, Curtin, and Hillebrandt (2012) argued that Open Government is about providing opportunities for citizens to participate in policy-making, engage state officials, and **'voice' their legitimate needs and concerns**.
- Numerous autocracies have adopted Open Government reforms aimed to achieve increased responsiveness of state apparatus to citizens (Alstrom et al. 2012).

Obstacles to responsiveness in the Global South

- The extant research shows that the open government reform adaption has a rather mixed impact on state apparatus responsiveness of citizens in autocracies.
- Slough (2021) noted that the provision of information (citizens' complaints) had a negative impact on the provision of public services to **low-income groups and otherwise disadvantaged citizens**.

Open Government – networked authoritarianism

- Another strand of the literature argued that autocratic states used the imitation of Western democratic reforms to oppress and manipulate citizens (Guriev and Treisman 2019) and to achieve regime legitimacy (Gerschweski 2018).
- In such systems, the authoritarian regime would remain in full power while allowing a wide range of conversations on the Internet and online participation tools.



Open Government – authoritarian upgrading

- Authoritarian upgrading (Haydemann, 2007) essentially meant the reconfiguration of governance and the use of specific regimes strategies to encounter external or internal pressure for democratic change and liberalization.
- Hence, the non-democratic regimes embark on shallow liberalization to achieve three main goals: to satisfy and control the civil society, to manage the opposition and other relevant elites and to extract potential economic benefits of selective reforms (Vollmann et al. 2022).

Political Context of Kazakhstan



- 2022 January Events
- Political Transition from Nazarbayev to Tokayev
- Domestic pressures for change



Methodology (1) – case of Kazakhstan

- We have chosen a case of Kazakhstan to explore the open government reform and authoritarian upgrading for several reasons.
- First, Kazakhstan as it is shown in the literature has been considered as one of the leaders in adoption of e-government and broader open government structure in Central Asian region.
- Second, the country that is a hard-line autocracy has experienced significant domestic pressure to adopt a wider democratization reform in the recent years.
- Third, the second president Tokayev has emphasized the Open Government Reforms in his Listening State concept as the most critical reform of his rule.

Methodology (2) – survey conducted in Aug 2021

- Quantitative: Survey of citizens N=1200. The survey was conducted in August 2021 and consisted of 11 parts and 58 questions. The sample size of the survey was 1,200 respondents over the age of 18 living in rural and urban areas.
- The sample is representative in terms of the parameters - region, place of residence, gender, age, and ethnicity - which is close to the corresponding proportions of the socio-demographic composition of the population over 18 years old at the beginning of 2018. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in each region's regional centers and several district centers.

Methodology (3) – Focus Groups conducted in June 2022

- Qualitative: We conducted 5 focus groups targeting low-income citizens across Kazakhstan in June 2022. In aftermath of 2022 January Events.
- Recruitment: We recruited groups by sex and income (economic class), focusing on lower- and middle-income citizens. In cities, participants were recruited in less prosperous areas (bazaars, markets, summer cottages, outskirts of cities, mosques, etc.)

Table 2. Conducted Focus groups.

Location	Urban/Rural	Region	Date	Number of participants	Duration
Nur-Sultan (Astana)	Urban	Capital	08.07.2022	8	2 hours
<u>Dubovka</u>	Rural	Central Kazakhstan	10.07.2022	10	2 hours
Zhanaozen	Urban	Western Kazakhstan	13.07.2022	8	1.5 hours
<u>Ryskulova</u>	Rural	Southern Kazakhstan	15.07.2022	9	2 hours
<u>Oskemen</u>	Urban	Eastern Kazakhstan	20.07.2022	8	2.5 hours

Kazakhstan – open government formation

- 1st stage - One Stop Shops – 2005-2015
- 2nd stage - increased transparency and access to information 2015-2019
- **3rd stage - transition to open participation and responsiveness (the Listening State concept). 2019-present time**



Listening state – 3rd stage of open government reform – Tokayev in 2019

Component	Goal	Institution/Mechanisms of realization
Increased collaboration with society	To promote collaboration with key groups from society on strategic policy issues	National Council of Society Trust
Widened participation of citizens	To improve participation of citizens in dealing with local and national issues/citizens complaints and requests.	Open Government and Digital Infrastructure (E-Otinish and E-Natizhe services)
Increased Responsiveness of state officials	To encourage state officials to actively resolve citizens' appeals and requests. To engage state officials to become more open to citizens through social media.	Creation of accounts and pages of state bodies and officials on Social media. The websites of local and central state bodies.



Quant Results – general effectiveness of the “Listening State”

Survey Results: Perceptions of Effectiveness of the Listening State in Kazakhstan

The results of the survey show that half of the respondents have some understanding of the concept of the "Listening State". However, only every tenth respondent claims to be familiar with this concept. 40% of respondents have heard something, but have little idea of the content (see Table 3). This demonstrates that the Kazakh Government has not been effective in the dissemination efforts of the concept to wider populace.

Table 3. Are you aware of the concept of Listening State in Kazakhstan

Yes, I am fully aware	10
Heard something, but do not fully understand	40
First time I hear about this concept, <u>Do</u> not Know	50

Quant Results: Not so Listening State

Table 4. In your opinion, what principles of the “Listening State” concept are being implemented or not being implemented today?

	Implemented	Not implemented	Do not know
State officials started to hear about citizens' problems	51,7	33,9	14,4
State bodies began to respond quickly to the needs of the population	51,5	35,1	13,4
Pluralism of opinions (different points of view) is accepted	46,0	34,8	19,2
Officials at various levels have become more accessible and open to the public (through social networks, etc.)	45,0	39,6	15,4
Party diversity (multi-party system) and a large number of social movements started to emerge	43,7	41,1	15,2
Government policy started to reflect citizens' needs	43,0	42,4	14,6
A strong civil society is involved in the discussion of government policy in order to solve them	42,5	43,4	14,1
I am sure that my preferences and needs will be heard by the government authorities	41,9	44,7	13,4
Members of parliament actively send requests to the Government and require it to take concrete measures	39,7	43,0	17,2
High-quality consideration by state bodies of citizens' appeals and requests	34,6	46,5	18,9

Overall, this section demonstrates that the Listening State concept is not well known among general populace. Furthermore, citizens note that the principles of Listening State are not fully implemented that reveals the isomorphic mimicry side of the reform. Respondents reveal that their preferences and voices are not generally “heard” by the Listening state.

Quant results: Little faith in responsiveness of state bodies in KZ

The survey results show that respondents have little faith in the responsiveness of state bodies both at the central and local levels (see Table 5). Only 42.5% believe that the central state authorities pay attention to citizens' appeals. Approximately the same attitude is shown by respondents regarding the reaction of regional authorities: 41.3% believe that they pay attention to citizens' appeals.

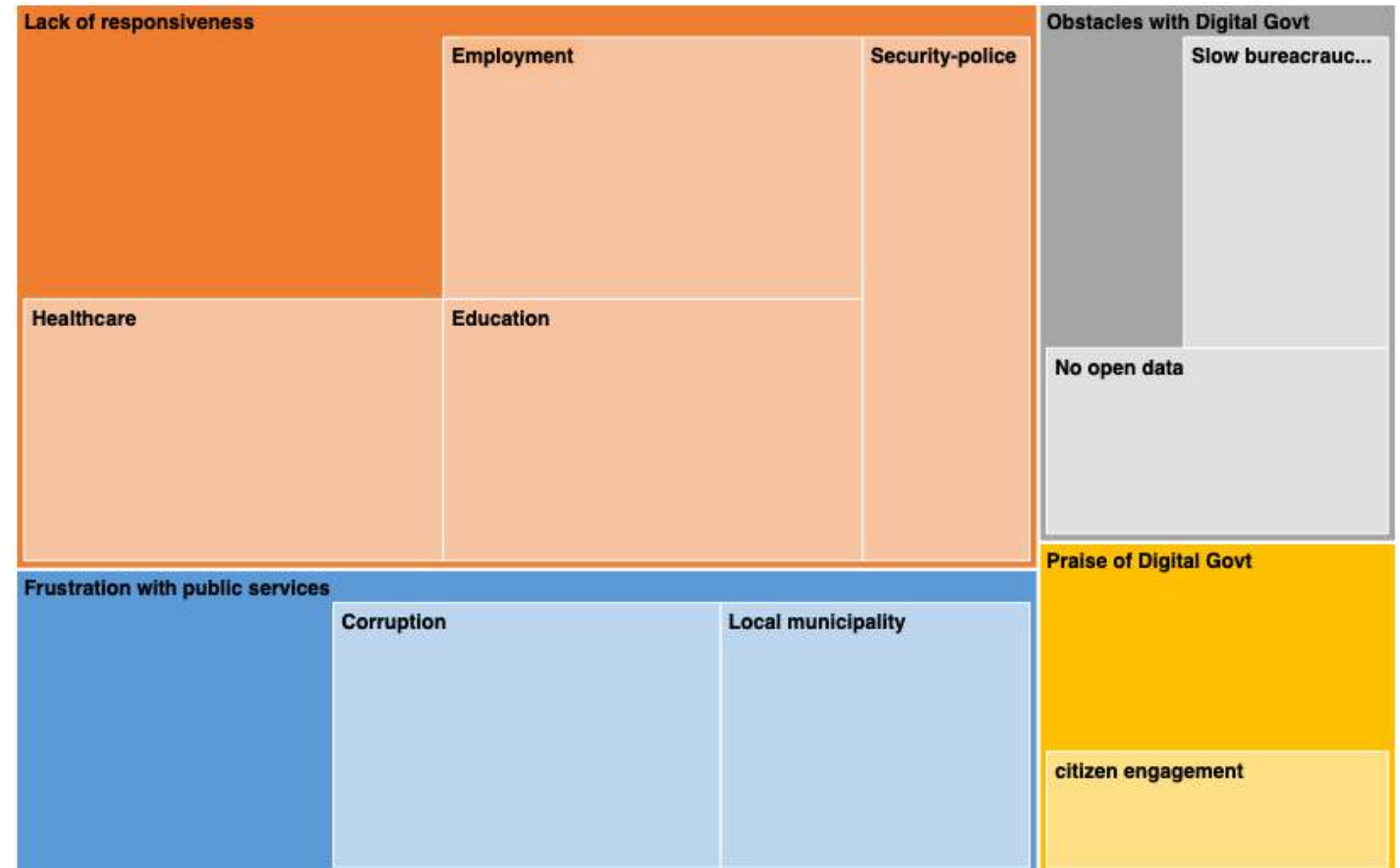
Table 5. Many citizens, when they have problems, turn to the central state authorities or local municipalities. Do you think that the authorities pay attention to the appeals and requests of citizens? (% of respondents)

	Pay attention	Do not pay attention	Don't know
Central state authorities	42.5%	38.6%	19%
Local municipalities	41.3%	39.1%	19.6%

Qualitative results: key themes

Table 8. Frequency of Categories and Themes.

Theme	Category	Total Frequency
Lack of Responsiveness	Lack of Responsiveness	38
	Security-police	15
	Healthcare	31
	Employment	26
	Education	26
Frustration with public services	Frustration with public services	12
	Local municipalities	6
	Corruption	36
Obstacles with digital gov't	Obstacles with digital gov't	8
	Slow bureaucracy	3
	No open data	3
Praise of digital gov't	Praise of digital gov't	9
	Successful citizen engagement	3



Qualitative Results: Dissatisfaction with public services

- Focus group participants revealed their discontent with the quality of the provision of public services in such areas as healthcare, education, and security. Stories of corruption and low level of accountability of police officers were told.
- Respondents expressed frustration with the general provision of public services and the high level of corruption. Despite the promises of the Listening State, citizens experienced difficulties in accessing public services

Qualitative Results: Voices of ordinary people

- *In order to serve the people, the Government must, first of all, carry out an honest service to the ordinary people. Because, right now, certain promises are given to people, and then a lot of money is stolen. (Focus Group in Ryskulova, 15.07.2022).*
- *...The akimat [local municipality] sent me [through this program] to Balkash [South of Kazakhstan]. So I came there, and there were awful conditions. In the municipality, they promised me a good job there with three meals a day, a good house, and a decent salary. The reality was so much different. (Focus Group in Dubovka, 10.07.2022)*
- *Bribes. All that we have done poorly is the result of bribes. "Bake", "Sake", familiarity... Everything is forgiven, guilty remain unpunished, and state officials protect their own people. (Focus Group in Ryskulova, 15.07.2022).*

Qualitative Results: Voices of ordinary people (2)

For some who do not have the Internet or a computer at home, this is, of course, a problem - they have to go to the public service center, stand in line, and wait.

(Focus Group in Nur-Sultan, 08.07.2022).

It is necessary for residents of villages like me who do not know how to use these services and applications to explain what it is and how to use it. If there were some kind of help center, free of charge, people would use it.

(Focus Group in Ryskulova, 15.07.2022).

Maybe there are decisions of the Government, akimats [local municipalities], but we don't know about it; they would not tell us somehow. State bodies don't tell anything anywhere, and people do not know. The state officials make decisions among themselves, and we do not know anything.

(Focus Group in Nur-Sultan, 08.07.2022).

Key findings - conclusions

1. This work contributes to the literature by the limits of Open Government as a Western democratic reform in autocracies. Notably, we confirm the findings of Cassani (2017) and Kurmanov & Knox (2022) that autocratic regimes cannot encourage citizens' actual participation through a shallow responsiveness channel.
2. This argument is especially valid for low-income and aged groups of citizens who are demonstrated to have little information about public services and government efforts at maintaining a monitoring system of citizens' appeals and complaints, which confirms the works of Slough (2021) on the inequality of service provision.
3. The Kazakh regime had to neutralize domestic pressure for democratization that was building up for years. Hence, the Listening State reform, through the declarative goals of widened participation of citizens, increased responsiveness of state apparatus, and enlarged collaboration with civil society groups 'upgraded' (Haydemann 2007) the autocratic regime in Kazakhstan during political transition.

Many thanks for your attention!

