

THESIS APPROVAL FORM
NAZARBAYEV UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

COMMUNICATIVE ADAPTATIONS OF POLITICAL ACTIVISTS IN KAZAKHSTAN: A
STUDY OF ACTIVIST STRATEGIES UNDER AUTHORITARIANISM IN KAZAKHSTAN

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in

Eurasian Studies

at

NAZARBAYEV UNIVERSITY -

SCHOOL OF SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

2026

Abstract

This thesis explores how pro-democracy activists in Kazakhstan adapted their online communication from 2019 to 2026 to reduce risks of censorship, monitoring, and repression while maintaining political engagement and shifting to online-only activism. Using existing theories of activist communication in autocracies, it examines the communication strategies of three Almaty-based activists (Assiya Tulesova, Oyan, Qazaqstan, and Jurttyn Balasy) across three social media platforms (Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube). These adaptations differ in type, repertoire, language, and continuity of activism, all of which threaten to lose followers' attention. Activists' responses also depend on how they manage varying levels of censorship, monitoring, and repression. In response to these autocratic governance mechanisms, they self-censored, increased the use of the Kazakh language, and sometimes reduced or paused online activism. In contrast to existing explanations, activists did not continue mobilizing and resisting repression, switch platforms, or become anonymous. This study adds to theories of online activism in bilingual authoritarian settings by analyzing the dilemma of using language as a symbol of activism and the risk of alienating an audience that may not know that language.

The thesis explores communicative adaptations of pro-democracy activists through four interconnected periods: the carefully orchestrated election of President Toqayev in April - July 2019, the period of 2019 - 2021, the Qandy Qantar unrest in January 2022, and the post-Qantar consolidation of power from 2022 to 2025. The thesis rests on evidence supporting or weakening four hypotheses on how activists adapt: by self-censoring the content of their messages, by manipulating their choice of language, by reducing or suspending their online activism, and by switching social media platforms.

The findings show that communicative adaptation is not uniform across the three actors. All three shifted the content of their messages from explicit calls for protest-based mobilization toward documentation of repression, symbolic and historical framing of regime's activities, and analytical commentary of regime's actions. Only Jurttyn Balasy used an explicit textual disclaimer, and only in one video published in April 2019. Oyan, Qazaqstan has been bilingual in Russian and Kazakh since its first post in June 2019, and added English for the first time in January 2025 during the campaign in support of arrested Oyan, Qazaqstan's activist Temirlan Yensebek. This trilingual post represents the only documented case of boomerang activation in this study (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Tulesova and Jurttyn Balasy continued to communicate primarily in Russian to preserve their audience. None of the three actors switched to less monitored ones such as Telegram, and the well-resourced actors used multiple platforms in parallel instead. Assiya Tulesova, the only single-person actor, suspended her online activism on Instagram for thirteen months between January 2022 and February 2023, while both multi-person actors, Oyan, Qazaqstan and Jurttyn Balasy, did not suspend theirs continued to their digital activism. The thesis contributes to three streams of literature. It integrates language choice as a central dimension of communicative adaptation in bilingual postcolonial contexts and shows that each cycle of repression encourages activists to adapt their online communication.

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Acknowledgement

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of many people who have been by my side throughout this journey.

First and foremost, I want to thank my family. I want to dedicate this work to my grandfather, who passed away last year. He believed in me before I believed in myself, and everything I have achieved is in no small part because of him. I carry his support with me every day.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the members of my thesis committee, Professor Alexei Trochev and Professor Andrey Semenov for their guidance, patience, and thoughtful feedback throughout this process. Their professionalism and support pushed me to think more carefully and write more clearly, and this thesis is much better because of them.

I am deeply grateful to Professor Dinara Pisareva, who agreed to serve as my external adviser, read the thesis, and offered valuable commentary and constructive feedback. Her willingness to engage with this work meant a great deal to me.

I would also like to thank all the Professors of the Department of Eurasian Studies for two years of intellectual challenge and support. The conversations, courses, and feedback I received shaped not only this thesis but my development as a researcher.

Finally, to my friends, thank you for your patience and for being there for me during difficult days.

Introduction

Between 2019 and 2026, opposition activists in Kazakhstan continued to communicate publicly with their audiences despite a steady tightening of state surveillance, online censorship, and physical repression. The most visible turning point was Qandy Qantar in January 2022 protests that began in Zhanaozen over fuel prices and spread nationwide, leaving over 200 dead and thousands detained in the wake of of President Toqayev's declaration of a state of emergency, "shoot-to-kill" order, and a five-day-long nationwide Internet shutdown (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Polese et al. (2026) conceptualize the post-Qantar shift in online pro-democracy activism as a "recalibration of political agency," an adaptation of pro-democracy activists to new regime-imposed constraints. Activists shifted to challenging government policies and seeking dialogue with the authorities through digital and hybrid online and offline forms, rather than through street protest. However, I argue in this thesis that activists' adaptation to the regime's increased oppressiveness began earlier, in 2019, during the carefully orchestrated election of Toqayev, who had been handpicked by his predecessor, President Nazarbayev (Junisbai 2025, Sullivan, 2025). As I examine below, pro-democracy political activists began adapting to digital space in the wake of the post-2019 election protests and their brutal suppression (Caron, 2021).

The literature on digital repression offers clear expectations for how activists should adapt under these conditions. Kurmanov (2024) describes Kazakhstan's regime as a form of networked authoritarianism in which the state can block sites, delete content, monitor online speech, and shut down the Internet, as it did in January 2022. Guriev and Treisman (2019) argue that modern autocrats retain power not through mass violence, but through information management. Earl et al. (2022) and Roberts (2018) show that such regimes combine arrests and criminal prosecution with more flexible tools of online content removal, online platform friction, and flooding of online spaces with pro-regime content, which selectively increase the cost of certain forms of online activism, for example, calling for street protests. Gohdes (2020) describes a surveillance dilemma

that pushes activists off highly visible platforms. Kamalova (2025) and Kurmanov, Smith, and Schenk (2025) add a further expectation for bilingual postcolonial contexts: after February 2022, activists are expected to shift from Russian to Kazakh as an act of decolonial resistance against perceived Russian influence. They see this not only as a cultural trend but as a conscious choice of activists, and in their interpretation, this adaptation has given the Kazakh language a decolonial status.

The three cases examined in this thesis confirm these theoretical expectations only partially. Activists did not switch from Instagram and YouTube to less censored platforms. They duplicated content across platforms simultaneously. None of them adopted pseudonyms: all three operated under their real names throughout the period, even as repression intensified. Direct political criticism continued, with specific officials and institutions named, while a uniform shift toward Kazakh as the dominant language of activism did not take place. What changed instead, and what this thesis analyses were the content of messages, the selective addition of English to address international audiences, and, for one of the three actors, the temporary withdrawal from public communication altogether. The puzzle is not whether activists adapted, but how their adaptations differed across actors operating in the same repressive environment.

Existing studies of activist adaptation in Kazakhstan address this puzzle at different levels of analysis, but none combines them. Polese et al. (2026) capture the trend at a broader civic level through the evidence from the focus groups interviews. Kudaibergenova (2024) explains in detail the Oyan, Qazaqstan drawing on narrative interviews with activists and a decade of ethnographic fieldwork in Central Asia's art and political communities. Kurmanov, Smith, and Schenk (2025) examine the choice of language by youth activists who were not directly controlled or pressured by the state. They were adapting to pressure coming more from outside the Kazakhstan, rather than from within it: Russia's war in Ukraine, the influx of Russian "relokanty" to Kazakh cities in September 2022 and the perception of neocolonial sentiments in everyday life. What remains missing is an actor-level comparison of how the same activists adapt platform, content, language,

and audience simultaneously, across multiple waves of repression, in a setting where the state is the primary source of pressure. My study addresses this gap: the lack of a comprehensive actor-level analysis of how individual activists simultaneously adapt the platform, content, language, and audience in the face of multiple waves of repression by analyzing three activist actors, Oyan Qazaqstan, Assiya Tulesova and Jurttyn Balasy. Their communicative adaptations from 2019 to 2026 may allow us to understand how they manage their visibility, risk, and political identity in a bilingual authoritarian context.

The main theoretical question of the study is: How do opposition activists adapt their communication strategies in response to increased surveillance, censorship, and repression in a consolidated autocracy?

To answer these questions, the thesis poses three empirical research questions. Firstly, did they adapt them? Secondly, if yes, how have Kazakhstani activists changed their choice of platforms, level of transparency and public visibility and targeted audience, language and wording of political messages in response to increased surveillance, censorship, and repression? Thirdly, how do these communicative adaptations differ in three cases - Oyan Qazaqstan, Assiya Tulesova and Jurttyn Balasy? These cases are useful because they are the same actors who live in Almaty, the largest city in Kazakhstan, and who experienced direct repression through detention for and police questioning of their digital activism throughout the period of my study. They represent variation in membership - movement-based activism (Oyan Qazaqstan and Jurttyn Balasy) and single-person activism (Assiya Tulesova). They use different types of digital activist communication: online-only political commentary (Jurttyn Balasy) versus initial street protests to online-only activism (Oyan Qazaqstan and Assiya Tulesova). They also differ by the content of their social media messages by shifting away from mobilization content (calls for protest, demands for collective street actions) to informational and symbolic content (documentation, comments, information campaigns, individual cases). Finally, one activist, Assiya Tulesova, who had tried to participate in official politics through running in the local elections and launching her own political

party, publicly announced suspension of her activism. Meanwhile, Oyan Qazaqstan and Jurtty Balasy continue their activist communication

The structure of the thesis consists of four chapters. Chapter 1 sets out the theoretical framework and literature review. It defines key concepts of repression, surveillance, and censorship; compares research with literature on digital repression in informational autocracies; examines communicative adaptation as a way to reduce risks; describes the Kazakh context from the 2019 elections to the post-Qantar period; highlights five processes of activist adaptation; and formulates four hypotheses in empirical chapters. Chapter 2 presents three empirical examples: Oyan, Qazaqstan, Assiya Tulesova, and Jurtty Balasy, describing their posts, audience engagement, and adaptive responses over three periods (2019-2021, 2022, and 2023-2026). In chapter 3, four hypotheses are compared with empirical data, and it is examined whether and how each participant adapted the content of their messages, their language choice, frequency of public speaking, and choice of platforms. Chapter 4 concludes with a summary of the results obtained, a discussion of the theoretical contribution of the study, and a description of the limitations and directions of future research.

Chapter 1 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1.1 Key concepts and definitions

Before examining activist's adaptation to repression, surveillance, and censorship, I need to define these concepts. I borrow definitions of repression, surveillance, and censorship from scholarly literature.

Repression is defined by Davenport (2007) as "actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organization, within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities and beliefs perceived to be challenging to government personnel, practices or institutions". This definition covers arrests, detentions, prosecutions, and other direct sanctions. At the same time, in my research, I rely on

Earl et al. (2022) definition of digital repression as actions directed at a target to raise the target's costs for digital social movement activity and/or the use of digital or social media to raise the costs for social movement activity, wherever that contestation takes place. Earl, Maher, and Pan (2022) argue that the state increases these costs in two ways: through information coercion (arrests, surveillance, harassment) and through targeted actions that encourage activists to engage in less risky forms of self-expression, making some forms more effective. In their table 2, they extend this distinction to the digital sphere, defining information coercion (restricting access or content through Internet shutdowns, content filtering, deplatforming, and shadow banning) and information channeling (influencing information production and consumption through flooding, distracting content, and disinformation). In Kazakhstan, since 2019, the government has applied both analog and digital repression, combining coercive measures: mass arrests during the 2019 post-election protests, criminal prosecution of Oyan, Qazaqstan activists, and the detention of approximately 10,000 people during the January 2022 Qantar events with digital coercion (the five-day Qantar Internet shutdown, deleting content) and information channeling (pro-government bloggers involved distribute official materials (Kurmanov and Knox, 2024), as well as the public articulation of "red lines" by high-ranking officials such as Yerlan Karin). Importantly, while analog repression may decrease, digital repression may increase, as I will explain in Chapter 2.

Surveillance is defined by Lyon (2007) as "the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction". In the context of digital authoritarianism, Gohdes (2020) explains this concept as an online data collection that provides information about the identity and location of opposition actors. Earl, Maher, and Pan (2022) define surveillance as a form of covert coercion - repression that "seeks to achieve suppression through nonperformative means, such as using surveillance or agent provocateurs to dismantle the institutional capacity of social movements." Digital surveillance works precisely because it is not meant to be observed. It works through tools such as deep packet inspection, monitoring of Internet traffic, email, and app content, as well as tracking activist networks. Activist

who suspect they are being watched are self-censored, withdraw from networks, or switch to safer platforms, even if this is not directly followed by arrest. In Kazakhstan, surveillance is a form of covert coercion that targets activists both digital and physical spaces. In my study, the identity and addresses of three pro-democracy activists is known. The regime surveils their digital and physical activism, collects information about their sponsors - domestic and international - that could be used later as incriminating or delegitimizing through rumors. Kazakhstan “purchased a \$4.3 million automated monitoring tool[s] to track signs of political discontent on social media” in 2018 (Sairambay, 2021).

According to Rakhmetov (2026) internet censorship understood as state efforts to regulate digital communication, online content, and participation. Censorship also raises information costs for activists by deleting content and blocking platforms. Kurmanov and Knox (2024) call Kazakhstan’s censorship of online activism as networked authoritarianism, when the government can block undesirable websites, delete unwanted online content, and disconnect the Internet in the whole country, which happened in January 2022. Earl, Maher, and Pan (2022) define digital censorship as a form of information coercion. While traditional censorship focused on “suppressing knowledge”, digital censorship also “also suppresses individual expression - the ability of individuals to speak to each other and to be seen by others - which has direct implications for coordination and mobilization”. It can be overt (Internet shutdowns, banning VPNs) and covert (filtering, throttling).

In autocracies, internal channels of political influence are blocked, public gatherings require state permission, and explicit disagreement with the regime’s policies carries personal risk for pro-democracy activists, including detention, fines, internet bans, and reputational damage (Lewis, 2016). Davenport (2007) observes that increased surveillance, censorship, and repression of pro-democracy activism do to the same result. He calls this the “punishment puzzle,” where the same type of pressure leads to different outcomes. Partly, this is because of activists react to them differently. Some activists may violently resist, as it happened in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 (Collins,

2011; Zwerman and Steinhoff, 2005), others may cease their activism, and others may adapt by changing their communication with the followers at home and abroad as well as the government, as I explore in this thesis. I focus on this communicative adaptation in which political activists in Kazakhstan change their online communication with their followers by changing online platforms, reducing public visibility, switching the language, the target audience for and the content of their messages. This is why I am interested in studying this variation and choices of Kazakhstani activists under increasing repression, surveillance, and censorship.

Risk reduction in this study refers to a set of communication and tactical adjustments by which activists reduce the costs associated with government surveillance, censorship, and repression while continuing to engage politically (Earl, Maher, and Pan, 2022). Earl, et al. (2022) distinguish between two main forms of repression: physical, which include arrests, detentions, criminal charges, fines, and searches of activists' homes; and online, which include surveillance, censorship, access restrictions and account blocking. Activists in Kazakhstan adapt to both forms, but adjustments vary depending on which type of cost is most important at the moment. Following Earl, Maher, and Pan (2022), I view these costs not as a single force, but as four distinct risks: censorship, surveillance, analog repression, and digital repression, each associated with its own adaptation model.

The risk of censorship → activists adapt by circumventing it. When the government filters, restricts, or delete content, activists turn to circumvention tools such as VPN, Tor, Psiphon (Earl, Maher, and Pan 2022). Roberts (2018) describes this as "porous censorship": controls that function not as a strict ban, but as a tax on information. It can often be circumvented, rarely enforces with punishment, and mostly legal to evade. Activists are also adapting by switching to uncensored platforms, creating new social media accounts when existing ones are blocked or restricted, and duplicating their content on multiple platforms so that it is available to their subscribers.

The risk of surveillance → activists adapt by publicly disclosing information about surveillance attempts. Earl, Maher, and Pan (2022) define digital surveillance as the systematic monitoring of

activists' online activity by government agencies, often using third-party tools and data platforms. In Kazakhstan, two specific surveillance practices were publicly documented during the period covered by this study (see Chapter 2). In this study, public disclosure is a documented adaptive response: Oyan, Qazaqstan, published information about the security certificate on August 5, 2019 and the Pegasus notification on November 24, 2021 (369 likes), turning surveillance attempts into content.

The risk of analog repression → activist adapt by switching from offline to online actions. Davenport (2007) defines state repression as the use of physical force or legal coercion by political authorities to restrict the behavior of citizens. Similar repressions in this study relate to their physical and legal forms: detention, fines, criminal charges, and searches of activists' homes. In Kazakhstan, this tactic intensified after the 2019 elections and the events in January 2022 (Human Rights Watch, 2020; 2022). Activists are adapting by moving from visible street protests to digital and localized forms of participation in political life of a country: online petitions, social media campaigns, and individual pickets, as documented by Polese et al. (2026). Davenport (2007) also highlights silence and withdrawal as one of the possible adaptive responses to repression. However, switching to online actions does not guarantee the safety of activists. For example, in October 2024, the police contacted Jurttyn Balasy and questioned him at the police station for his online criticism of the alleged nuclear power plant under article 247.2 of the Criminal Code on spreading of "deliberately false information".

Risk of digital repression → adaptation by self-censorship or suspension of online activity. Earl, Maher, and Pan (2022) define digital repression as the use of digital technology by political actors to monitor, intimidate, coerce, or counter dissent and activism. Adaptive measures include self-censorship, the use of disclaimers and softened framing, the replacement of explicit political demands with analytical or satirical content, and the temporary suspension of public publications (Earl, Maher, and Pan 2022; Davenport, 2007).

Pro-democracy activism, according to Polese et al. (2026), is political engagement that describes whether activists who advocate for democracy and against authoritarianism continue to participate in politics at all. An activist's continued involvement in criticizing government in their social media: recalibration of political agency means that activists adapt (by shifting from visible street protests to digital and localized channels such as online petitions, social media campaigns, email appeals, and local complaints on Telegram or Instagram) their forms of participation in political life of the country while maintaining their political engagement, understood as a broader commitment to political action. This commitment must be made visible to activists' existing and potential followers. Cheap smartphones and internet costs reduce the cost of this visibility and expand the reach of activist messages to audiences across the world.

In my study, the term "activist" is used to refer to political activists advocating for democratic regime and challenging the authoritarian regime, rather than individuals advocating for other regime types or engaging in non-political forms of activism.

Movement-based activism and single-person activism.

The movement-based activism, understood within the framework of the concept of interconnected action by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), where collective political action is organized through digital networks rather than formal organizations, with personalized communication, permanent membership, and shared political goals coordinated without central leadership. In Kazakhstan, this type of activism was visible in the 1990s but Nazarbayev's regime gradually succeeded in eliminating it through repression, corruption, and cooptation. I examine the latest attempt to create such a movement called "Oyan, Kazakhstan!" (Kudaibergen, 2024) through online communication in my thesis. In contrast, **single-person activism**, when political actions are carried out by an individual activist who acts on her or his own behalf, creates her or his own audience, and bears personal costs for her or his communication. In the analysis of hipster mobilization in Almaty Isaacs (2023) describes Assiya Tulesova as an example of individual political performance: an anonymous offline action that became public through social media after

her arrest and trial without any organizational structure supporting it. I examine her adaptation to increased censorship, surveillance, repression through communication in this thesis.

Initially, both Oyan, Qazaqstan and Assiya Tulesova protested the regime in the streets of Almaty and criticized the government actions online. In contrast, there are online-only political commentators, who criticize the regime and whom the social media users perceive as political activists. These activists comment on current political events and scrutinize official interpretations of them but do not participate in street protests. Litvinenko (2021), studying political YouTube in Russian, conceptualizes opposition video content as a form of “alternative television” that fills the gap left by traditional state-controlled media in authoritarian environments where political commentators act as bloggers rather than politicians or movement leaders. Youtube serves as the basis for my analysis of Jurtty Balasy, one of the most popular blogger with the audience of followers (465,000 followers) as a political commentary available only online, unlike the first two types. As part of Isaacs’ description (2023) of the mobilization of “Almaty hipsters” based on performances, satire and aesthetics of social networks, Jurtty Balasy shares the Russian-speaking, urban profile of this audience, but his communicative repertoire is closer to creative and ironic journalistic commentary than to activist mobilization. I examine how this digital activist adapted to increased censorship, surveillance, repression in my thesis.

Activist communication describes a three-way relationship between the regime, activists, and the audience. However, it is also important to consider the media. Journalists, both independent and government-affiliated, represent a special type of audience that activists seek, as favorable or even neutral media coverage helps convey activists’ ideas to a broader public that activists themselves cannot reach directly through their own social media channels (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). In autocracies, the media landscape itself is contradictory: state-controlled and pro-government media often ignore or discredit activist protests and reports, while independent media (such as Vlast, Adamdar.ca, and Radio Azattyk in Kazakhstan) provide a parallel channel that activists can rely on (Lewis, 2016).

This thesis distinguishes between two types of media: the most popular online media platforms in Kazakhstan controlled by activists (Instagram, Telegram, YouTube channels Run by activists themselves), and traditional media (online news portals Run by professional journalists). Social media, through which activists communicate, provides direct, unfiltered communication with the audience, while traditional media expands the reach of activists' messages and may either help or hurt pro-democracy activism.

Audience engagement of activists refers to the measurable reaction of their audience to a particular post, which in this case is expressed as a combination of likes, comments, reposts, views and shares (Tenenboim, 2022). This reaction reflects feedback and connection between activists and their followers, and the challenge of activists is to maintain this connection through communication, according to the theory of connective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Just like autocrats manage information to and for citizens to remain in power, pro-democracy activists manage information and communicate with their followers. This is a real challenge because activists can maintain political activity (continue to publish posts and make pro-democracy demands), while losing the audience, as it was evident in fewer likes, shares and comments of the messages posted by Oyan, Qazaqstan, during Qandy Qantar in January 2022. One of the specific forms of engagement management that has not yet been studied by scholars is the switching of languages in bilingual societies to attract the attention of a new audience. This thesis attempts to address this gap by examining how activists in Kazakhstan switch from Kazakh to Russian and English in order to reach different groups of followers.

1.2 Digital Repression in Informational Autocracy

Guriev and Treisman (2019) argue that modern autocrats do not retain power through mass violence. Instead, modern autocrats are information autocrats that govern through information management and create a facade of legitimacy of their regimes. According to Pallas and Bloodgood (2022), autocrats have developed tools to neutralize shaming from abroad and

transnational pro-democracy propaganda, thus weakening the boomerang effect (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Meanwhile, Western governments increasingly subordinate respect for democracy and human rights to strategic interests (Pallas and Bloodgood, 2022), as it was evident in the weak Western condemnation of the brutal suppression of the Qandy Qantar protests. A central feature of such regimes is the selective nature of repression, when they do not put pressure on everyone, but on specific people, for example, opposition leaders. In turn, those activists who feel threat of repression or who are repressed by the regime have to adapt to the risk of potential criminal prosecution, harassment or coercion yet maintain their agency through communication with their followers. This logic has been observed in Kazakhstan and Central Asia, when the state does not put pressure on everyone equally or constantly. While relative freedom on social media is allowed, the state is targeting specific individuals or movements (Kurmanov, 2024). The threat of repression increases during elections, protests, or political crises, as noted by Schedler (2006) in relation to authoritarian regimes in general. In my study, this is 2019 presidential election, in which between 9 and 13 June, authorities detained more than 4,000 people (9-13 June) nationwide for protesting early voting, and 677 people were placed under administrative arrest after overnight trials at police stations conducted without lawyers (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Open Dialogue Foundation, 2019). The OSCE Election Observation Mission documented “There were widespread detentions of peaceful protesters on election day in major cities” (BBC, 2019). Also, Qandy Qantar (Bloody January 2022), which was not an election, but a significant moment in Kazakhstan's recent history, after which the repression of opposition activists became more intense. As pro-democracy activists face unpredictable pressure, activists' reactions to pressure also vary. Some activists continue to communicate by changing tactics, others fall silent, and others switch to supporting the state's narratives (Kurmanov, 2024).

I am interested in communicative adaptation of activists, which is a strategy of activists who want to avoid these costs by choosing platforms, adjusting the content of messages, language and

visibility for the audience, trying to avoid the risks of provoking repression, censorship and surveillance (Earl et al.,2022).

It is important to note that the restrictions that activists adapt to rarely take the form of an outright prohibition. Roberts (2018) describes two mechanisms that explain to what activist should adapt. The first is friction, when access to content is not completely blocked, but the search for information becomes slow and inconvenient for the audience, as sites start loading slowly, or the VPN is constantly disconnected. In Kazakhstan, the authorities throttled and blocked social networks during the post-2019 elections (Access Now, 2022), forced users to use a government-issued root certificate that allows HTTPS interception, in 2019 (CPJ, 2019), shut down the Internet throughout the country for a week in January 2022 (Hu, 2022; Polese et al., 2026), throttled news websites during the early presidential elections in 2022 (OONI, 2024), and again restricted Internet access before opposition rallies in Almaty in October 2023 and during protests against flooding in Kulsary in May 2024 (Freedom House, 2024).The second is the flooding, when the state does not completely delete activists' posts on social networks, but begins to post other content that does not relate to what the activists really want to say and because of which the activists' content is hidden under a lot of unnecessary content. In Kazakhstan flooding has been documented as a result of manipulation of social networks by the state. The Oxford Internet Institute included Kazakhstan in its global list of countries with documented cyber warfare activities for 2020, classifying it as a country with permanent, centralized, medium cyber troop capacity operations (Bradshaw, Bailey, and Howard, 2021). During the pre-term presidential elections in 2022, fake accounts were used to simulate active public support for the incumbent president and to suppress critical voices (Global Voices Advocate, 2023). At the end of 2023, Meta deleted an unreliable network of more than 1,700 Facebook and Instagram accounts created in Ukraine that posted posts in support of the government of Kazakhstan and criticized the opposition (Freedom House, 2024). Therefore, in this case, activists are not directly confronted with the fact that their content is "prohibited." These

two mechanisms may lead to the loss of audience for activists and this effect is similar to censorship.

A distinctive feature of information autocracy is that digital repression is selective in nature. Instead of completely blocking the Internet or entire platforms, the government is targeting specific activists and specific content and allowing entertainment content (Earl et al., 2022). The point of this tactic is to prevent people from noticing censorship, as blocking all content or the Internet would cause outrage. This shows that activists must adapt to such invisible censorship. In this case, the Kazakhstani information environment is an actively managed space that limits what activists can safely say, where and to whom (Kudaibergenova, 2024). Keeping Internet accessible creates a particular dilemma for the autocrats. Gohdes (2020) argues about the surveillance dilemma facing authoritarian governments. If the state does not block the Internet, it allows activists to communicate and organize, but the state can also carry out digital surveillance and its authoritarian propaganda. And if the government restricts the use of the Internet, it will not be able to monitor activists and their actions, but this may cause public discontent. This dilemma helps explain why Kazakhstan does not completely shut down the Internet, but introduces selective censorship. Although the events of January 2022 in Kazakhstan show that the state can still completely shut down the Internet (for more than five days during Bloody January protests) when regime is under severe threat (Zhandayeva, Rosenberg, 2022).

1.3 Communicative Adaptation as Risk Reduction

While street mobilization has disappeared in Kazakhstan after Bloody January 2022, activists continue to use digital communication. It is necessary to understand how their communication with the followers changes over time under increased censorship, surveillance, repression. I draw on the concept of repertoires of contention, which was introduced by Tilly (1986) and developed by Tarrow (2011). According to Tilly, the “repertoire of contention” defined as “the ways that people act together in pursuit of shared interests”. I apply this concept to online-only movement-

based and single-person activists, when their goal remains unchanged, for example, the democratization of the political regime in Kazakhstan. While strategy implies a repertoire of tactics to achieve a goal, adaptation means a sequence of specific actions within the strategy. Tarrow (2011) also points out a key feature of tactics. This is their modularity, when tactics are used in different conditions and against different opponents, without changing the strategic goal. For example, switching to a new platform, here one tactic is when activist banned/censored on one platform, then switch to another platform until it is banned there, and then switch to another platform. However, switching to another platform entails a loss of audience, and this choice between risk avoidance and audience reach is central to understanding communicative adaptation. Another tactic is to stay visible on all possible platforms because regime lacks ability to ban on every platform. These tactics involve a tradeoff between risk avoidance and audience reach, which is central to the analysis in Chapter 2.

A more concrete of typology of such tactics is offered by Museum of Protest's Guide (2025) about Resistance Tactics that describes a number of communication tactics employed in regimes where street protest carries high costs and risks of repression. 1. In the field of secure and covert communication, activists are switching to encrypted platforms, using VPN, code words and symbolic language, memes and metaphors to convey political meaning, bypassing censorship. In my study Oyan, Qazaqstan, Assiya Tulesova, Jurtty Balasy each used forms of symbolic communication (see Chapter 2). 2. In the field of digital resistance, activists document repression by taking photos and videos and refute state propaganda in real time via social media. In my research, Oyan, Qazaqstan documented police violence during the protests after the 2019 elections and the events of January 2022, Assiya Tulesova filmed and posted videos from the courtroom during her trial in 2020, and Jurtty Balasy posted a video on YouTube documenting a police visit to his house in October 2024 year (see Chapter 2). The Guide about Resistance Tactics by Museum of Protest explains the logic that communication ceases to be a free choice in authoritarian regimes. And at this time, activists are simultaneously balancing between two goals: 1) to remaining

politically active, and 2) managing/reducing the risk of surveillance, repression and censorship. This explains that every activist's communication decision is a choice about who will read her message and how visible it is to the state. It is also a choice of role where activists could define themselves as political mobilizers, political commentators or documenters of repression (Oyan, Qazaqstan called for a boycott of the 2019 presidential election, and Jurtty Balasy publicly stated his "negative" vote in the referendum on the construction of a nuclear power plant in 2024 (see chapter 2) (Museum of Protest, 2025).

Glazunova (2022) shows this using the example of Russian. She examines Russian political activists from 2011-2012 and argues that adaptation consists of changing communication tactics in response to repression, but without changing the strategic goal of reaching and mobilizing an audience. When faced with censorship, platform blockages, and criminal harassment, Russian activists used different communication formats: documentary video investigations, populist direct appeal to the audience, and entertainment video formats. Also, activists combined different roles. How politicians and activists participated in the elections, how journalists conducted anti-corruption investigations, how bloggers mastered social networks and how activists organized street protests. Activists such as Navalny, Yashin, Sobol (former employee of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation and general producer of his YouTube channel Navalny LIVE), Zhdanov, and Milov switched between these roles, depending on the political moment and the level of repression. Glazunova (2022) concludes "The restrictive political environment has forced him(Navalny) and his colleagues to adapt to new restrictions, to try on different communication roles, and to orchestrate a dissident campaign using mostly digital means."

In the Kazakhstani context, I am studying a similar logic of tactical adaptation, but it is visible through different tactics. For example, instead of investigative journalism, Kazakhstani activists shifted from explicit political demands to symbolic communication. Because after January 2022, such tactics were risky in Kazakhstan. Activists in Kazakhstan also did not combine the roles of politicians or journalists, but adapted their roles differently. As I will explain in the next chapter,

the activists have adapted to play the roles of online-only political commentaries, documenters of repression, and symbolic communicators.

Communicative adaptation extends beyond platform choice and form of public communication. Studying political activists in the Middle East and China Poell (2014) shows that as surveillance, censorship, and repression increase, activists are changing not only their platforms, but also the way they speak publicly. The activists used coded language, pseudonyms, and refused to make direct calls for collective action. These changes also affect the audience, as the encoded language is understandable to those who are already politically involved, thereby narrowing the audience from the general public to a narrow circle of interested followers. In this context, adaptation is seen as a broad shift in the communicative repertoire, which affects ways to avoid risk. Poell (2014) argues that there is a cycle of mutual adaptation between state censorship and the adaptation of activists. When activists find new ways to communicate covertly, such as using symbolic language, self-censorship, or creative reformulations, the state develops new ways to suppress their strategies. For example, Iranian bloggers changed words, used pseudonyms and avoided direct political statements because they anticipated the risk of repression. This cycle makes it clear that changing the platform is not the only adaptation option, but activists must also adapt the content of their messages. In this sense communicative adaptation is also a form of risk avoidance. In contrast, Kazakhstani activists did not hide their names, which shows that they maintained their personal visibility in social media, and which makes it easier to attribute content of messages to these activists, not to someone else.

1.4 The Kazakhstani Context: Toqayev's election, COVID-19 pandemic, Qandy Qantar, and Russia's War

Many consider the January 2022 unrest as a starting point of the Toqayev's regime consolidation (Kudaibergenova and Laruelle, 2022). I agree with them. But I argue that communicative adaptation of pro-democracy activists began in June 2019, shortly before Toqayev's first presidential election, when a small group of Almaty-based pro-democracy activists announced on

social media a formation of the pro-democracy movement “Oyan, Qazaqstan!” (Kudaibergen, 2024). Activists from this movement actively covered post-election protests and their suppression. Toqayev’s declaration of the COVID-19 state of emergency in the spring of 2020 effectively banned any street-level political activity, which meant that pro-democracy activists had to switch to digital activism, despite the adoption of the new law on peaceful assembly in the fall of 2020. In the wake of the brutal suppression of Qandy Qantar the participation of citizens in street protests has decreased, as compared to 2019, due to the fear of physical repression. Moreover, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine forced the Akorda to censor and repress most anti-Putin and anti-Russian messages posted in Russian on social media in order not to irritate the Kremlin. These multiple pressures create tension for activists when they needed to be actively communicating with their followers, but it was dangerous due to the higher chance of persecution.

As a result, after January 2022, the choice of language in Kazakhstan became part of the adaptation of activists. The arrival of a large number of Russian citizens in Kazakhstan and Russian’ invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has intensified the already heated online discussions (Kamalova, 2025). Moreover, Toqayev was still improving his Qazaq while the Kremlin tracked Russian-language content only. Under these conditions, Qazaq was more often spoken of as the language of authenticity, national pride, while Russian and mixed languages “shala Kazakh” has become not only an indicator of a low level of language proficiency, but also in some online forums has become a sign of a lack of authenticity or even proximity to pro-Russian sentiments (Kamalova, 2025). It is important to emphasize that this shift is driven by the arrival of migrants from Russian and cultural and political factors in Kazakhstan society, rather than increased repression, surveillance, and censorship against activists. According to the national population census of 2021, 80.1% of the population of Kazakhstan reported speaking Kazakh, up from 74% in 2009, while 83.7% reported speaking Russian (Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021). Such factors include Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the announcement of partial mobilization in September 2022 and, as a result, the arrival of about 1.66 million Russian

citizens in Kazakhstan, public statements by Russian politicians (Vyacheslav Nikonov, Tigran Keosaian), which were perceived as a threat to Kazakhstan's sovereignty, as well as the ongoing process of Kazakhization: the renaming of place names, the de-Russification of surnames, and the transition from Cyrillic to Latin script (Kamalova, 2025). As my analysis in Chapter 2 shows, not all activists changed their language, for example, Oyan, Qazaqstan remained bilingual, while Assiya Tulesova and Jurttyn Balasy continued to communicate mainly in Russian.

Kurmanov, Smith and Schenk (2025) interviewed Kazakhstani activists to explore how activists in Kazakhstan navigate their language choices in the period of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, after which the influx of Russian migrants to Kazakhstan increased. This resonates with Poell's (2014) argument that an activist tactically adjust how they communicate to manage their visibility. However, in Poell (2014), these choices are made depending on the risk of repression, while Kurmanov, Smith, and Schenk (2025) show that in Kazakhstan, language choice is also determined by cultural and political shifts, regardless of government censorship. At that time, the youth activists decided to switch to communication in Qazaq as an act of anti-colonial resistance strategy. Kamalova (2025) also considers the shift to the Kazakh language as a decolonial meaning, however, argues that it was a broad social trend in Kazakh society, and not just an activist strategy. One of the Kazakh activists interviewed by Kurmanov, Smith and Schenk was a woman engaged in language, gender and political prisoners activism. She told about her transition from Russian to Kazakh and English. She explained this by saying that her audience knows both languages and therefore there was no need to use Russian (Kazakh interviewee #5, 13 June 2024). This confirms that the choice of language is a communicative adaptation. However, the authors also documented internal tensions over language. Some activists who had a low level of Kazakh were ashamed of this, and felt excluded and some activists were afraid that language purism could create a social hierarchy within activist communities. This indicates a tradeoff, when switching to Kazakh can bring the activist closer to one audience, but risks losing another audience. But how do activists who are under government surveillance cope with this tradeoff? Because limitation of

their study is that authors studied youth activists who were not monitored or pressured by the state (Kurmanov, Smith and Schenk, 2025). The cases I study show that when risk of repression is high, the choice of language is less related to the decolonial meaning, and more related to the preservation of a wide audience. Toqayev's government publicly supported the revival of the Kazakh language and the rehabilitation of victims of Stalinist repression (Kurmanov, Smith and Schenk, 2025), while simultaneously using legal and non-legal mechanisms against politically active critics (Rakhmetov, 2026). This suggests that Akorda selectively uses the cultural and linguistic dimension of the decolonization agenda, which is consistent with nation-building, while at the same time tolerating the broader discourse on decolonization only to the extent that it does not lead to open political opposition.

Nevertheless, this literature describes a language shift at the level of public discussions and online forums. And it remains unclear how activists, who are monitored by the state, choose to write their post on social networks. Does an activist choose Kazakh to look patriotic and authentic, or does activist write in Russian to reach a large audience? Poell (2014) examines how activists choose language by using code words, pseudonyms, and self-censorship. However, the choice between languages is a feature of the bilingual Kazakh context. Kudaibergenova (2024) documents that activists in Oyan, Qazaqstan used both languages simultaneously because they wanted to reach a broader audience. For example, in April 2019, on the eve of the early presidential elections (the first in the modern history of Kazakhstan, which were held without the participation of Nursultan Nazarbayev as a candidate), activists Assiya Tulesova and Beibarys Tolymbekov unfurled a banner along the Almaty Marathon with the inscription "You can't Run away from the truth. For fair elections." Both were detained and sentenced to 15 days of administrative arrest for violating the rules of peaceful assembly. The action became one of the symbols of an emerging wave of civic activism among Kazakhstani youth and preceded the creation of the movement "Oyan, Qazaqstan", which was created later that year. The slogan was written by activists in Russian and the hashtags in Kazakh and in Russian languages. Assem Zhapisheva from Oyan, Qazaqstan is a

journalist who also worked in the bilingual media space, and covered events in two languages for the audience. This shows that activists may choose regardless of increased repression, surveillance, censorship which language to communicate information to expand audience reach.

In short, activists had to adapt not only to increased censorship, surveillance, repression but also to the anti-Russian decolonization discourse, which regime did not openly support, and popularization of Qazaq language, which was supported by the regime.

1.5 Tactical Repertoire of Communicative Adaptation under Increased Censorship, Surveillance, Repression

Pro-democracy activism under authoritarian rule faces a special situation when the activist needs to continue his political activity, but the usual ways of expressing it are under surveillance, censorship and repression. It seems that the activist has only two options: to speak out loud or to remain silent. But there are many intermediate options: the question is not whether the activist speaks at all, but how exactly they do it.

In this study communicative adaptation is conceptualized as a cost-benefit calculation of activists, their risk avoidance - changing behavior to avoid risk of repression, of censorship, and of surveillance. Communicative adaptation is considered as a change in the tactical repertoire. While the political orientation of activists remains stable, due to increased repression and censorship, activists are changing their public forms of participation. Therefore, choosing a platform, language, audience, and form of communication is understood as a change in tactics.

Here I study five processes of activist adaptation of their communication with the audience. How they frame their messages, choose which language to communicate in and in what platform, targeted audience, sincerity of the content and becoming silent.

The first process is framing, through which activists select certain aspects of reality and present them as meaningful to the audience (Entman, 1993). Framing theory argues that activists constantly adapt the frame in response to the changing everyday realities of surveillance, censorship and repression (Entman, 1993; Snow and Benford, 1988). Empirical evidence from the

Chinese case show that China's censorship is targeted. The authorities remove posts that urge people to take action against the government, rather than simply criticizing the government (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2023). Similarly, in Kazakhstan, the state allows activists to speak online, as long as they do not start calling their audience to action. In the Kazakhstani context, Karin (2024) notes that activists must not cross 'red lines' in public discussions: interethnic and linguistic issues, religion and foreign policy are presented not as censorship, but as a "call for correctness and restraint," while warning that the state will "resolutely suppress" rhetoric perceived as divisive.

Sincerity of the content is the second adaptive process, in which activists openly state their political positions and goals in their messages. They also reduce or expand sincerity depending on the level of political risk. One activist or movement can communicate sincerely when the risk of censorship and repression is lower, but hide it when the risk of censorship and repression is increased. Poell (2014) shows that there is a cycle of mutual learning between state censorship and the adaptation of activists. When activists find new ways to communicate covertly, such as using symbolic language, self-censorship, or creative reformulations, they may lose audience. In addition, the state develops new ways to suppress their covert messaging. This cycle makes it clear that activists must also adapt the content of their messages, yet keep their pro-democracy vision clear to the audience.

The third process is language selection. In the Kazakh context, the choice of language is not neutral, as activists communicate in a bilingual space where Kazakh and Russian carry different symbolic, political effects. A low level of Kazakh language proficiency can become a barrier to communication, as activists who do not know the language well enough risk being shamed or excluded (Kurmanov, Smith and Schenk, 2025; Kamalova, 2025). It is important to emphasize that this shift is not due to increased repression, surveillance, and censorship against activists but may also shift because of cultural and political factors after January 2022, in particular, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the arrival of Russian migrants in Kazakhstan reinforced the anti-Russian decolonial sentiment (Kamalova, 2025). Kurmanov, Smith and Schenk (2025) show that some activists switched to Kazakh as an act of decolonization resistance, while Kudaibergenova (2024)

documents that others retained bilingual communication to reach a wide audience. Therefore, below I examine if the content of the Kazakh-language messages is pro-democratic.

The fourth process is temporary silence. Davenport (2007) defines silence as withdrawal from public activity, one of the possible outcomes of repression. This does not mean that this is the end of the activist's political identity, but rather becoming invisible, hiding from the digital visibility and stopping public communicative presence in response to the risks of repression. Glazunova (2022) documents such a pattern when, after the protests in 2011, Russian activists were forced to "act from the underground or disappear from the public sphere entirely" as repression became extremely harsh. Silence a form of adaptation that risks losing audience.

The fifth process is changing the platform. As surveillance, repression, and censorship increase, activists may switch to other platforms as the government blocks some platforms. Glazunova (2022) documents that the Russian government blocked LinkedIn in 2016 and unsuccessfully blocked Telegram in 2018-2020 as part of the "Sovereign Internet" after protests in 2011 that aimed at controlling online content and internet infrastructure. Roberts (2018) describes friction as a mechanism where the state slows down access to content, rather than blocking it completely, and this makes certain platforms inconvenient for an activist to communicate with audience. However, changing platforms also has costs, when activists switch to another platform, they risk losing some of their audience.

Table 1.1 Five processes of communicative adaptation and their connection to the four hypotheses

Process	Hypothesis	Connection
Process 1: Framing.	Hypothesis 1: Content of messages.	The hypothesis captures the framing dimension by testing whether activists reduce radical content and shift toward more personal, moral, and symbolic

Process	Hypothesis	Connection
		narratives that still convey political meaning at lower risk (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013).
Process 2: Sincerity of the content.	Hypothesis 1: Content of messages.	The hypothesis tests whether activists manage their sincerity by keeping their pro-democracy vision visible to the audience while minimising legal risk. Together with Process 1, the two dimensions - what is published and what is withheld - reflect the activist's management of sincerity.
Process 3: Language selection.	Hypothesis 2: Manipulating language.	The hypothesis tests the tradeoff between Kazakh, Russian, and (selectively) English: switching to Kazakh can bring the activist closer to the Kazakh-speaking audience but risks losing the Russian-speaking audience, while English is added selectively when activists believe international attention can have a tangible impact (Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

Process	Hypothesis	Connection
Process 4: Temporal silence.	Hypothesis 3: Suspending online activism.	The hypothesis tests silence at the level of communicative behaviour, rather than as a complete rejection of activism.
Process 5: Changing the platform.	Hypothesis 4: Platform switching.	The hypothesis tests the tradeoff between risk avoidance and audience reach: when activists switch to other platforms, they risk losing some of the audience that may not follow the activist to another platform (Gohdes, 2020. Kurmanov, 2024).

1.6 Hypotheses

In this section of the chapter, building on my theoretical framework, I highlight four hypotheses based on the extensive literature review.

Following Poell (2014), who shows that government censorship shapes activist communication, and activist strategies influence how the state develops new control methods, which encourages activists to further adapt. In the Kazakh context, this cycle is noticeable after the 2019 elections, when protests led to increased surveillance and arrests of protesters. This prompted activist to shift from mobilising protests to documenting repression. The events of January 2022 marked a turning point in the history of Kazakhstan, when state repression increased dramatically. At this time, the government and activists adapted their strategies again. This, in turn, provoked further government

responses: new restrictions on online communication, selective pressure from platforms, to which activists adapted again by switching platforms, changing content, or reducing visibility. Each cycle of government actions and activist reactions leads to the next one. The following hypotheses reflect possible adaptations within the cycle of mutual adaptation between the State and activists, rather than as a separate reaction to a certain degree of repression. The hypotheses are also formulated based on the above-mentioned theoretical framework. In areas where current literature on digital repression and activist communication has clear expectations, such as platform switching (Gohdes, 2020; Roberts, 2018), content of messages and self-censorship (Poell, 2014; King, Pan and Roberts, 2013) and suspending online activism (Davenport, 2007; Glazunova, 2022). The bilingualism hypothesis is unique because it is based on the bilingual and postcolonial situation in Kazakhstan, where the choice of language has a symbolic and political significance that does not depend on censorship and state supervision (Kamalova, 2025; Kurmanov, Smith and Schenk, 2025).

Hypothesis 1 Adapting the content of messages

Within this cycle of mutual adaptation, activists are more likely to adapt both what they publish and what they choose not to publish as the regime develops new methods of controlling online communication. On the one hand, activists reduce radical content and shift toward more personal, moral, and symbolic narratives that still convey political meaning at lower risk. It concerns what activists publish, not what they choose not to publish. King, Pan, Roberts (2013) point out that in an authoritarian context, censorship is directed against posts that call for collective action, rather than against those that criticize the government. On the other hand, activists also anticipate the government's response in advance and adjust their communication to avoid direct censorship. Poell (2014) points out in Middle East and China that online censorship and offline repression force activists to adapt their communication using symbolic language and creative reformulation of words. Together, these two dimensions - what is published and what is withheld - reflect the

activist's management of sincerity: keeping their pro-democracy vision visible to the audience while minimizing legal risk.

Hypothesis 2 Manipulating Language

Opposition activists in Kazakhstan are more likely to adapt their language choices by using Kazakh in contexts where they seek to express decolonial resistance, while continuing to use Russian to reach a broader or mixed audience. It is important to note here that the choice of language by activists is not only explained by increased surveillance, censorship and repression, but by the way activists use language in their messages for different audiences. Kamalova (2025) documents that the shift towards the Kazakh language accelerated after Russia's 'invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the arrival of a large number of Russian citizens in Kazakhstan and Russian', which coincided with an increased repression during the January events in 2022. But this indicates a tradeoff, when switching to Kazakh can bring the activist closer to Kazakh - speaking audience, but risks losing Russian-speaking audience. In addition to the Kazakh-Russian tradeoff, activists can also add English as a third language to communicate with international audiences such as foreign NGOs, embassies, and human rights organizations. Following Keck and Sikkink (1998), this represents an attempt to activate the boomerang pattern in order to circumvent the regime and mobilize external pressure. However, given the weakening of the geopolitical context after Qantar (Pallas & Bloodgood, 2022), this thesis suggests that trilingualism will be used selectively and rarely, only in cases where activists believe that international attention can have a tangible impact.

Hypothesis 3 Suspending online activism

Activists are more likely to reduce their public visibility by posting less frequently, restricting account access, or withdrawing from activist communication when the costs of visible political presence become too high. Based on Davenport (2007), where the author calls silence one of the possible results of repression, I track this result at the level of communicative behavior, rather than a complete rejection of activism. While it is difficult to predict the timing of the return to activism,

the activists must communicate to their followers that they temporarily stop their public digital activism.

Hypothesis 4 Platform switching

Within this cycle of mutual adaptation activists opposed to the regime in Kazakhstan are more likely moving to less censored platforms when a particular platform becomes a site of state surveillance or censorship. According to Gohdes (2020), high visibility on social media allows the state to monitor activists, but the state cannot block all platforms at the same time, as the state selectively filters content so as not to provoke public outrage, and following Kurmanov (2024), the regime does not yet have sufficient methods to control online spaces at the same time. This means that when activists switch to other platforms, the government can develop new monitoring capabilities, which encourages activists to adapt further. Roberts (2018) describes friction as a mechanism that makes platforms uncomfortable and slow, which causes activists to move to other platforms. However, changing the platform comes with costs. When activists switch to other platforms, they risk losing some of the audience, which may not follow the activist to another platform.

Evidence of Risk Adaptation as Risk Avoidance

The risk of surveillance is treated separately because it cannot be avoided through tactical communication in the same way that censorship and repression can. All three actors use their real names, remain publicly available, and operate on platforms where the government has documented monitoring capabilities, including the \$4.3 million automated social-media monitoring tool reported in 2018 (Sairambay, 2021). None of them used pseudonyms, unlike the Iranian bloggers in Poell (2014). The evidence of adaptation here is therefore not avoidance, but exposure: activists publish information about surveillance attempts in order to make them political. This pattern is already documented for Oyan, Qazaqstan in the post on the security certificate of 5 August 2019 and in the post on the Pegasus notification of 24 November 2021 (see Chapter 2).

The exposure to analog repression in 2019 is uneven across the three actors, and this matters for the hypotheses that follow. Assiya Tulesova was detained on 21 April 2019 and given 15 days of administrative arrest under Article 488, Part 3 of the Code of Administrative Offences. Members of Oyan, Qazaqstan were not collectively detained, although individual activists associated with the movement faced repression at later points (the search at the apartment of Temirlan Yensebek in May 2021 and the criminal case under Article 274 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan). Jurttyyn Balasy did not take part in street protests in 2019 and was not detained in this period; his first documented contact with the police was the visit on 22 October 2024 over the nuclear power plant video, opened under Article 247.2 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The risk of analog repression therefore varies across the three actors and across periods, which I expect to produce different patterns of communicative adaptation.

Hypothesis 1: Self-censoring the content of messages for followers

Before increased repression and censorship, I expect activists to make explicit pro-democracy demands, calls for collective action (boycotts, protest attendance, ballot spoiling), and announcements of upcoming protests. After increased repression and censorship, I expect that the content of the message will shift to moral frames, symbolic ones that convey political meaning without sharp formulations, direct criticism and blame of President Toqayev. The hypothesis covers both what activists publish (Process 1, framing) and what they choose not to publish (Process 2, sincerity). Following Poell (2014), self-censorship can also take the form of disclaimers, coded formulations, pseudonyms, or the deletion of posts. Deletion is detectable by cross-referencing activists' own accounts against archived versions of their posts and through references to removed content in independent media (Vlast, Adamdar.ca, Azattyq).

Hypothesis 2: Manipulating languages of messages for followers

Before increased repression and censorship, I expect the choice of language to depend on the

audience: Russian for the broader urban audience, Kazakh for the Kazakh-speaking public, and bilingual posts where activists want to reach both. If activists published predominantly in Kazakh before 2022, this would suggest that the shift toward Kazakh was already under way independently of repression (Kamalova, 2025. Kurmanov, Smith and Schenk, 2025). After February 2022, I expect (1) anti-Russian and anti-colonial messages to be in the Qazaq language to reduce the risk of being censored and repressed by Akorda and the Kremlin; and 2) messages about harsh repression to be in English to attract the attention of the transnational human rights NGOs who could shame the authorities to reduce the risk of harsh punishment (Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

Hypothesis 3: Reducing or Suspending online activism

Before increased repression and censorship, I expect all three actors to maintain visible public communication with pro-democracy content on social media. After repression and censorship, I expect that at least some actors will reduce their public visibility by posting less frequently, restricting access to accounts, or announcing a temporary suspension of their digital activism. Following Davenport (2007), I track silence as a communicative behaviour rather than as a complete rejection of activism. Following Glazunova (2022), I also expect that reduced visibility may not be uniform: collective and team-based actors with distributed personal costs may continue to post, while single-person actors who bear all the costs alone may withdraw.

Hypothesis 4: Platform switching

Before increased repression and censorship, I expect all three actors to be publicly present on the platforms with the widest audience reach in Kazakhstan: Instagram for Oyan, Qazaqstan and Tulesova, YouTube for Jurttyyn Balasy. After increased repression and censorship, the standard expectation in the literature (Gohdes, 2020. Roberts, 2018) is that activists move to less censored platforms. Telegram is the candidate destination because channel posts are not indexed in general search, individual engagement is visible only to subscribers, and the platform has a history of

resisting takedown requests in other authoritarian contexts, as documented by Glazunova (2022) on Russia's failed attempt to block Telegram between 2018 and 2020. None of this makes Telegram immune to monitoring, but it raises the cost of monitoring for the state relative to Instagram and YouTube.

Table 1.2 Predictions Across Four Hypotheses and Three Actors

Hypothesis	Oyan, Qazaqstan	Assiya Tulesova	Jurttyn Balasy	Confirmation criterion
Self-censoring content of messages	I expect a decrease in protest announcements and explicit political demands, replaced by personal stories about injustice or symbolic posts	I expect her publications to become more symbolic after repression	I expect a shift from direct political criticism to vague critical commentary on the status quo	The share of explicit pro-democracy demands decreases and the share of moral/symbolic framings increases. Deletion detectable by cross-referencing accounts against archived versions and references in <i>Vlast</i> , <i>Adamdar.ca</i> , <i>Azattyq</i>
Manipulating languages	I expect bilingual content where Kazakh is used in contexts of decolonial resistance, while Russian continues to	I expect the shift to be visible through hashtags, captions, and comments on Instagram	I expect language changes to be visible in YouTube videos and Telegram posts	The hypothesis is confirmed if the language pattern matches the predicted distribution by topic and audience: Kazakh for anti-Russian and anti-colonial messages, English for

	reach a broader or mixed audience			messages about harsh repression directed at transnational human rights NGOs
Reducing or suspending online activism	I expect Oyan, Qazaqstan to post less frequently or temporarily stop publishing after specific repressive events	I expect Tulesova to reduce the frequency of publications	I expect Jurttyn Balasy to post videos on YouTube less often after specific repressive events	The hypothesis is confirmed if reduction or suspension follows specific repressive events
Platform switching	I expect a transition from Instagram to Telegram after increased repression and censorship	I expect either a similar switch or no switch at all	I expect sensitive content to move from YouTube to Telegram, while general analytical content remains on YouTube	The hypothesis is confirmed if activists openly explain to their followers that they are switching platforms in response to repression or censorship; not confirmed if justified by other reasons (popularity, audience, format)

Study design

The empirical evidence in this thesis is collected through three case studies (Yin, 2018). I chose them using a purposive sampling strategy. They do not represent all pro-democracy activism in Kazakhstan. Instead, they serve as examples of young pro-democracy activists who use different strategies of communicative adaptation. Scholars of pro-democracy activism in autocracies have used the case study design to explore tactics and strategies of activist resilience under conditions of increased digital repression (Glazunova, 2022. Kudaibergenova, 2024).

All three cases are physically located in Almaty. They are publicly active on social media from 2019 to 2026, but their communicative adaptations were different. The first is Oyan, Qazaqstan, a group whose composition changed throughout this period and which moved from street protests to online-only activism. Kudaibergenova (2024) demonstrates that this was an unusual political group in Kazakhstan: it was leaderless, its decision-making process was collective, and the membership was fluid and informal. The movement's audience grew over the period: its Telegram channel, opened on 6 June 2019, attracts on average about 1,400-2,000 unique views per recent post (the last five posts on @oyanqazaqstan in 2025 average 1,700 views, with the channel's subscriber count standing at approximately 1,300), while its Instagram account ¹@oyanqazaqstan opened on 25 July 2019, currently has approximately 14,000 followers. Engagement on Instagram peaks around moments of acute repression: 12,200 likes on the December 2024 anniversary post and 10,900 likes on the January 2025 post on the search at Temirlan Yensebek's home (see Chapter 2).

The second case is Assiya Tulesova, who represents highly visible and personalised single-person activism. She initially protested on the streets of Almaty, just like Oyan, Qazaqstan, but adapted to increased surveillance, censorship, and repression differently. She was prosecuted twice: first

1

https://www.instagram.com/oyanqazaqstankz?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw==

administratively, sentenced on 21 April 2019 to 15 days under Article 488, Part 3 of the Code of Administrative Offences for the marathon banner action, and then criminally, charged on 8 June 2020 under Articles 378 and 380 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan and given on 12 August 2020 a 1.5-year suspended sentence with probation (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Tulesova's online presence concentrated on her Instagram account. The trial communication around her was emotionally intense, highly mediated, and highly visible across Instagram and YouTube as well as through online solidarity campaigns by third parties such as the *Protest Körpe* project (Diplomat, 2020). However, in contrast to Oyan, Qazaqstan, she then temporarily disappeared from social media and only partially returned. She stopped posting activist content and effectively suspended her activism (her last personal post was on 13 June 2023). Currently @miroi (Asya Datpta Tulesova Instagram account²) has 4k followers. I observe her audience at the post level - likes, comments, and shares per post, all reported in the tables in Chapter 2 rather than at the account level. This is consistent with the conceptualization of Tulesova in Section 1.1 as a single-person activist whose visibility is event-driven rather than account-driven.

The third case is Jurtty Balasy. Kosnazarov (2019) describes Murat Daniyar (Jurtty Balasy) as a politically engaged YouTube ³blogger whose first blog appeared in September 2017 and who, by the time of the marathon banner action in April 2019, had produced 37 videos and prompted 20,925 users to subscribe to his channel (Kosnazarov, 2019). His audience grew rapidly during the period of increased repression: by November 2019, he had passed 100,000 YouTube subscribers, and at the time of writing the channel has approximately 464,000 subscribers, the largest audience of any of the three actors in this study. His work fits into the broader landscape of youth digital activism in Kazakhstan, but I bring it as a contrast to the analysis of the first two cases. This case offers online-only political commentary, and unlike Oyan, Qazaqstan and Assiya Tulesova, Jurtty Balasy was already known to the Kazakh social media audience in spring 2019. In contrast to

² https://www.instagram.com/miroiu?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw

³ <https://www.youtube.com/@jurttybalasy>

Oyan, Qazaqstan and Assiya Tulesova, Jurttyñ Balasy did not take part in street protests. Instead, he criticises the regime through indirect comments and explanations of current events and government policies. His video commentary is the work of a small production team, including operator and technical staff, and features professionally prepared videos in contrast to the more spontaneous output of Oyan, Qazaqstan and Tulesova.

The thesis is further structured based on four focal points: April–July 2019 (the election of Toqayev), 2019–2021, January 2022 (the Qantar unrest), and 2022–2025. The first period, April–July 2019, covers the election of Toqayev, when over 4,000 people were detained around 9 June 2019 (Human Rights Watch, 2020), and the state-issued security certificate enabling HTTPS interception was introduced in July 2019 (CPJ, 2019). The decrease in censorship, surveillance, and repression between this period and the second one (2019–2021) created the conditions for more open and visible communication by activists. As Kudaibergenova (2024) shows, Oyan, Qazaqstan was launched in June 2019, and social media, in particular Instagram, became an important field of political broadcasting, alternative information, and new forms of activism. The third period covers the events of January 2022. Polese et al. (2026) consider this period a major turning point for political participation in Kazakhstan, after which street protests sharply decreased and activists switched to digital and localised forms of participation. Kudaibergenova and Laruelle (2022) also note that the January events constituted a dividing line for activist communication: before Qantar, activist content combined direct mobilisation (calls for protest, ballot spoiling, "Seruen" walks) with documentation of repression. After Qantar, mobilisation content largely disappears from the social media of the three actors and is replaced by documentation of repression, demands for the release of named prisoners, and symbolic anniversary content. The last period, 2022–2025, is the post-Qantar period, during which President Toqayev concentrated power in his hands while public street mobilisation remained suppressed. While analog repression decreased compared to the January 2022 peak, digital repression did not decrease. Activists

therefore had to adapt to symbolism rather than to more open and visible communication, as they did in the second period.

Table 1.3 Levels of Surveillance (S), Censorship (C), and Repression (R) across periods

Period	Level of S, C, R	Effects on communication
1. April-July 2019 election of Toqayev	S extremely high C high R extremely high	Activists' street protest mobilisation and digital documentation of repression
2. 2019-2021	S high C medium R high	More open and visible communication
3. January 2022 unrest	S -severe C severe R severe	Internet shutdown – impossibility of digital activism
4. 2022-2025	High	Moving to less controlled platforms and reduced their public visibility. Content becomes more symbolic and Communication becomes audience-selective

As for the evidence, the main source used in this work is publicly available digital social media content posted by these three actors. In total, this thesis analyses 96 posts across Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube: 55 posts by Oyan, Qazaqstan (25 on Instagram and 30 on Telegram, with some posts duplicated across both platforms), 12 posts by Assiya Tulesova on Instagram, and 15 videos by Jurttyn Balasy on YouTube.

Table 1.4 Distribution of analysed posts and videos by actor, platform, and period

		Number of posts/videos				
Actor	Platform	Period 1. April- July 2019 election of Toqayev	Period 2. 2019- 2021	Period 3. January 2022 unrest	Period 4. 2022- 2025	Coverage in Media Outlets
Oyan, Qazaqstan	Telegram	5	11	4	10	Azattyq, Freedom House
	Instagram	1	10	4	10	Azattyq, Human Rights Watch
Assiya Tulesova	Only Instagram	2	7	1	2	Adamdar.ca, Amnesty International
Jurttyyn Balasy	Youtube	3	3	1	8	Azattyqasia

These are the content of Instagram, telegram channels and posts, YouTube videos, public comments and other materials that are publicly available and relate to selected cases. I also use published interviews with these activists and the media coverage of their activities whenever possible to place the message in an appropriate context, in addition to drawing on the background information from academic literature. My focus is on communicative adaptation of pro-democracy

activists, understood here as observable changes in their communication with the followers under conditions of increased surveillance, censorship and repression. In the following chapter, I demonstrate how activists change their social media communication. King, Pan, and Roberts (2013) help to understand why, from an analytical point of view, public communication is important under censorship. I take the idea that messages may carry out not only the opinions, but also signals of connection, coordination, and mobilization, explaining in the Kazakhstani context why and how pro-democracy activists adapt increased surveillance, censorship and repression.

Chapter 2 Empirical cases

2.1 Oyan, Qazaqstan

On June 5, 2019, journalist Assem Japisheva, political scientist Dimash Alzhanov, artist Suyunbike Suleimenova and economist Kasymkhan Kapparov announced the creation of Oyan, Qazaqstan in response to the presidential elections in Kazakhstan, when Kazakhstan's first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, handed over power to Kassym-Jomart Toqayev, as the transfer of power was without democratic elections. The name of the movement, which translates as “Wake up, Kazakhstan” refers to the 1909 poem “Oyan, Qazaq!” by Mirzhakyp Dulatov, one of the founders of the Alash movement. The poem called on Kazakhs to take responsibility for their nation under Russian colonial rule. By choosing this name, the founders connected their movement to the Alash tradition of national awakening and political agency, and distinguished it from other pro-democracy groups that did not draw on this symbolic heritage. The activists demanded free and fair elections for the next president. Initially, on June 6, 2019, the activists launched a Telegram channel⁴, later on July 25, 2019, they created an Instagram account after the news about post-election police brutality against those who protested fraudulent vote results. This delay is itself a symptom of a communicative adaptation, as activists have expanded their activism on Instagram, which was a more public and visual platform, to publish and document state repression.

⁴ <https://t.me/oyanqazaqstan>

Between 2019 and 2026, the movement went through various communication phases, from open mobilization to symbolic activism and international advocacy. Following the repertoire of Tilly's confrontation, these phases reflect a communicative adaptation, since as state repression intensified, activists adapted their tactical repertoire while maintaining the strategic goal of democratizing Kazakhstan's political regime.

In contrast, to other activist groups, Oyan, Qazaqstan announced in its social media that it had no leader and no formal membership, thus making its decision-making trully collective and its composition fluid and anonymous. Anonymity was important for the protection of its members against government surveillance and potential repression. Oyan, Qazaqstan declared that it rejected formal party membership and allowed every member to participate in its activities in any way she or he wanted. Therefore, it was impossible to determine the exact number of activists, which was a distinctive feature of self-organization (Kudaibergenova, 2024). However, I focus on publicly observable dimension of their communication with the followers. Their strategic goal was to remain connected with their audience and maintain a political presence, while their tactics have evolved in response to the repressive conditions.

Isaacs (2023) explains Oyan, Qazaqstan in the context of the creative class of cosmopolitan youth of Almaty. Their political mobilization is based on satire, performance, and the aesthetics of social media, and their values are shaped by liberal democratic norms. This explains the strategic goal of Oyan, Qazaqstan (democratization of the regime, free elections) and the tactical repertoire (hashtag campaigns, visual posts, symbolic walks).

Table 2.Oyan, Qazaqstan: communicative activity in Periods 1 - 2 (April 2019 - December 2021)

Channe	Date	Post	Metrics	Government	Adaptation\
I			(views,likes, comments,language, shares)	Response (Immediate\direct)	Consequences\ Media

Period 1 April-July 2019 election of Toqayev					
Telegram	6 June 2019 3 days prior to presidential elections	“Hello everyone! Thank you for supporting the Oyan, Qazaqstan...”	First post in Kazakh: 2.4K views Second post in Russian: 2.5K	No immediate response at this stage	it was discussed in the media that “new civic movement urges Kazakhstan to wake up” (independent media)
Telegram	June 7, 2019 (two days before the elections)	“Active protest against unfair elections, step-by-step instructions for spoiling ballots”	In Russian: 2.8K In Kazakh: 2.5K	Repression: More than 1,000 citizens who came out for a peaceful protest against falsified elections in Almaty and Astana were detained.	increased media discussions (Human Rights NGO)
Telegram	12 June, 2019	Post “Urma! Atpa!” (Don't hit! Don't Shoot) message addressed to police as well as followers	Photo post in Kazakh: 2.8K views, followed by a message in Russian 3.2K views	Repression: Police in Almaty and Astana use excessive force, block mobile network and the internet (9-13 June 2019).	increased media discussions (Human Rights NGO)
Telegram	July 4-5, 2019	“Seruen” multi-city civic walk coordination. Full	5.5K in Russian	Repression: Police detained citizens in Shymkent and	Increased media discussions

		information: time, locations, Rules	3K in Kazakh	Aktobe while they were out walking.	(Independent media)
After the creation of Instagram, all posts were duplicated in the telegram channel.					
Instagram	25 July 2019	First video post on Instagram, “Oyan!” (Wake up!) Hashtags: #qazaqkoktemi #menoyandym #ihaveachoice	332 likes 1 comment Only in Kazakh Hashtags in Kazakh and English languages	The arrest of protest participants continued	More symbolic than a mobilization post, only in Kazakh.
Period 2. 2019-2021					
Instagram	August 5, 2019	A post about resistance to the “safety certificate.” (online surveillance tool)	271 likes 25 comments In Russian The Kazakh was in comment	Digital surveillance: The state creates difficulties with internet access	increasing media discussions (Freedom House.org)
Instagram	August 22, 2019	A post about them having multiple accounts (Instagram, Telegram, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, VKontakte)	89 likes in Russian, 1 comment 74 likes in Kazakh 1 comment		

Instagram	September 19, 2019	Post “Hundred days of Kassym-Jomart Toqayev's illegitimate presidency.” 4,200 detained, 1,000 Kazakhstanis convicted, one activist injured	In Russian: 506 likes, 16 comments In Kazakh: 138 likes, 5 comments	Repression ongoing	Documenting the repressions
Instagram	September 25, 2019	Post: "We will protest!"	In Russian: 305 likes, 12 comments In Kazakh: 138 likes, 1 comment	Repression: Protests banned in Almaty's Yuzhny Park	At the same time, there is mobilization content, with documents of repression.
Instagram	December 23, 2020	Post “on pressure on activists.”	472 likes 2 comments , post in Russian	Surveillance: The state is spying on activists, cloning SIM cards, and pressuring their families.	Documentation of repressions
Instagram	January 10, 2021	Post: "Authorities are preventing the rally."	534 likes, 10 comments , post in Russian	Repression: Special equipment jammed mobile communications, police were in the square	increasing media discussions (news agency: Interfax)

Instagram+ Telegram	February 15, 2021	Post: pressure on Oyan, Qazaqstan activist Dimash Alzhanov: a bag of white powder attached to his door, activist says: At the end of 2020, provocations and acts of intimidation by the authorities began. After January 10, 2021 rally fibre-optic internet cable was cut in his apartment (building)	Only in Russian , Instagram : 434 likes, 7 comments; telegram: 1900 views	Repression delayed	
Instagram+ Telegram	May 15, 2021	Search at the apartment of Oyan, Qazaqstan activist and administrator of “qaznews” page Temirlan Yensebek , criminal case	Russian: 1159 likes , 35 comments Telegram in Russian : 4200 views	Repression immediate : pre-trial investigation under Article 274 part 2, criminal code of the Republic of Kazakhstan «dissemination of	Highest engagement of 2021

		opened for “insulting Elbasy”		knowingly false information »	
	May 15, 2021	Post: Temirlan has come out of the interrogation. Thanks for support.	Russian 422 likes Telegram: 1600 views	-	-
Instagram	June 2, 2021	“Seruen” announcement in Almaty June 5 , 2021	Post in Kazakh and Russian in one post 347 likes 17 comments Telegram 3000 views	-	-
Instagram	November 24, 2021	“Some Oyan, Qazaqstan’s activists received Apple notification that their smartphones were targeted by state- linked attackers. Pegasus spyware is suspected”	In Russian 369 likes 8 comments	Digital surveillance was confirmed by third-party notification (Apple)	Documentation of digital surveillance

In January 2022, mass protests against the increase in gas prices began in the city of Zhanaozen, which quickly spread throughout the country. The state declared a state of emergency, deployed

CSTO troops, declared the protesters "terrorists," and shut down the Internet throughout the country (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Table 2.2 Oyan, Qazaqstan: communicative activity in Periods 3 - 4 (January 2022 - 2025)

Period 3. January 2022 unrest					
Instagram	January 3, 2022	Post: "We support the peaceful protest in Mangystau."	In Russian: 1009 likes in Kazakh: 441	Repression: On January 5-6, a state of emergency was declared throughout the country (as the march also spread to other cities)	The content of the post was supportive. Duplicate in Telegram
Instagram	January 4, 2022	A video post about the activists being detained	In Russian: 930 likes 30,679 views	Repression: The activists were detained	increased media discussions (Independent media)
Instagram	January 7, 2022	Post "Official Statement from Oyan, Qazaqstan: We are for peace and for the people of Kazakhstan"	In Russian: 1,287 likes, 48 comments In Kazakh: 238 likes	Repression: The state calls all protesters "terrorists."	Duplicate in Telegram
Instagram	January 10, 2022	Post "January 10 is a day of national mourning in Kazakhstan."	125 likes in two languages	Censorship: Internet shutdowns continue	Lowest engagement Duplicate in Telegram

		(Officially announced by government (Akorda.Kazakh)			
Period 4. 2022-2025					
Instagram	February 24, 2022 (Russia's invasion of Ukraine)	Video post: "Activists, including those from Oyan, Qazaqstan, were detained for an anti-war rally at the Consulate of the Russian Federation in Almaty! The activists expressed solidarity with Ukraine and chanted "No to war", "Hands off Ukraine" Activists called on the public to support the police.	Only in Russian 977 likes, 17,865 views	Repression: Activists were detained for an anti-war protest.	Duplicate in Telegram The detainees were released after a couple of hours
Instagram	February 24, 2022	Photo post: "The detainees were released. The	Only in Russian 691	-	Documenting the resolution

		police confiscated activist's posters, took written statements from them and demanded them to sign a document declaring they had no grievances against the police"	likes, 8 comments		
Instagram	June 5, 2022	A post about Darkhan Sharip's (Oyan, Qazaqstan's activist) solo picket in Almaty against referendum	868 likes, 10 comments in Russian	A few minutes later, the activist was detained	Individual pickets have replaced group protests. Increased media discussions (Azattyq.org state-funded)
Instagram	October 25, 2022	Post: "Why do we need a parliamentary republic?"	In Russian: 480 likes In Kazakh: 218 likes	No direct response	Shift from direct political demands to explanations their demands Duplicate in Telegram
Instagram	November 29, 2023	Post demand - solidarity with other repressed	Bilingual post 447	The trial was held behind closed doors. The activist	Activists are asking audiences to spread

		pro-democracy activists: “Marat Zhylanbaev sentenced to 7 years in prison” #FreeMaratZhylanbaev #Мартқабостандық”	likes 18 comments	was charged under Article 405 and Article 258 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan	information through hashtags, increasing media discussions (Human Rights NGO). Duplicate in telegram
Instagram	December 16, 2023 (Independence Day)	“Police are on duty near our (activists') houses.”	Bilingual post: 288 likes	Surveillance of activists on Independence Day	They're documenting and exposing the surveillance. Duplicate in telegram
Instagram	January 5, 2024	“Letter from activists from prison” Post	Bilingual post: 348 likes	Six activists were sentenced to 15 days in prison under Article 488, Part 6.	Duplicate in Telegram
Instagram	16 December 2024	Post “Umytylmas.1986 2011 2022 Keshirilmes.”	Bilingual post: 12,200 likes, 4,145 shares, 79 comments	No direct response	Memory of repression as symbolic entry point, political argument in both languages with historical dates and mourning.

					Duplicate in telegram
Instagram	17 January 2025	Breaking news: search at home of satirist Temirlan Yensebek	In Russian 10,9k likes, 769 comments , 3220 shares	Yensebek arrested. Article 174.	Later sentenced to 5 years home restricted freedom. First English language content increased media discussions (Human Rights NGO). Duplicate in telegram
20 January 2025	Instagram	Asem Zhapsheva, Oyan, Qazaqstan activist, detained at solo picket in support of Temirlan Yensebek; held a poster "Сатира - кылмыс емес" (Satire is not a crime) in front of GATOB building, Almaty	Kazakh, Russian; 977 likes, 12 comments, 73 shares	Detention of Assem Zhapsheva for solo picket	Documenting detention of Oyan, Qazaqstan activist in real time; post duplicated on Telegram

20 January 2025	Instagram	Assem Zhapsheva sentenced to 15 days of administrative arrest by online court hearing	Kazakh ,Russian; 3,529 likes, 178 comments, 330 shares	15 days of administrative arrest for Zhapsheva (online court hearing)	Reporting court outcome; high engagement; post duplicated on Telegram
21 January 2025	Instagram	Akmaral Jakibayeva, Oyan, Qazaqstan activist, detained at solo picket in support of Yensebek, in front of GATOB	Kazakh ,Russian; 632 likes, 23 comments, 44 shares	Detention of Akmaral Jakibayeva for solo picket	Documenting detention of a second Oyan, Qazaqstan activist; post duplicated on Telegram
21 January 2025	Instagram	Court fines Akmaral Jakibayeva 196,600 tenge for solo picket; online hearing lasted 10 minutes	Kazakh, Russian; 1,467 likes, 62 comments, 97 shares	196,600 tenge fine for Jakibayeva (online court hearing, 10 minutes)	Reporting court outcome; explicit demand: "We demand the immediate release of Yensebek, Biketov, and Zhapsheva. Satire is not a crime!"; post duplicated on Telegram

21 January 2025	Instagram	Video comment by Akmaral Jakibayeva's lawyer Ruslan Sherubayev	Russian; 327 likes, 12 comments, 11 shares	-	Post duplicated on Telegram
25 January 2025	Instagram	Launch of public campaign "Сатира - қылмыс емес!"; instructions for followers to send letters to the prosecutor's office via E-Otinish; link in profile header; hashtag #сатирақылмыс емес	Kazakh, Russian; 640 likes, 19 comments, 41 shares	-	Formal campaign launch, followers asked to take action through E-Otinish; post duplicated on Telegram
4 February 2025	Instagram	Assem Zhapsheva released after 15 days; she thanks all who supported her with food parcels and letters	Kazakh, Russian; 6,425 likes, 151 comments, 109 shares	Release of Assem Zhapsheva after 15 days of detention	Post duplicated on Telegram

2.2 Assiya Tulesova

Until April, 2019, Assiya Tulesova was known only within a small circle of environmental activists. She participated in public hearings on the construction of the Kok-Zhailau project, and

the Common Sense Foundation, where she worked, released the AUA app for monitoring dust concentrations in Almaty. Her background was environmental activism, not a political one. She became publicly known after a marathon in Almaty in April, 2019, and her last Instagram post was in June 2023. Assiya Tulesova had no intention of becoming a public activist. On April 21, 2019, when Assiya Tulesova and Oyan, Qazaqstan's activist Beibarys Tolymbekov hung a banner "You can't Run from the truth" (#adilsailayushin in Kazakh "for fair elections" and in Russian #уменьяестьвыбор "I have a choice") over the bridge during the Almaty marathon. The bilingual design reflected the activists' intention to reach several audiences at the same time: the Russian-language slogan and hashtag were addressed primarily to the Russian-speaking urban public, foreign Runners and national media covering the marathon, while the Kazakh-language hashtag was aimed at Kazakh-speaking users of social networks and symbolically asserted the civic identity of Kazakhs. According to activist Beibarys Tolymbekov the action was intended to be anonymous and no Instagram posts or media campaigns were planned (Asylbek, 2025). That same day, activists were detained for 15 days for violating the Rules for holding peaceful assemblies. The news about arrest spread across Kazakhstani social media, and after six days Jurttyyn Balasy (see below) published a video in Russian about Assiya Tulesova and Beibarys Tolymbekov's arrest. Just a few days later, solidarity protests on social media erupted across Europe and the United States according to the independent online outlet Adamdar/Ca (2020). Assiya Tulesova's court speech in Russian was transcribed and published as a text on the website adamdar.ca, was shared on Instagram by other users where solidarity hashtags were in three languages: Kazakh #Асяныбосат and Russian #СвободуАсе accounted for over 100 posts each, while in English #FreeAsya accounted for over 500 posts. Notably, in most of the posts, all three hashtags were used simultaneously, reflecting the activists' strategy of simultaneously appealing to Kazakh-speaking, Russian-speaking and English-speaking audiences (both the local public and the international community). The speech itself became a political text, quoted on protest posters (Adamdar 2020).

Among the three actors studied, Tulesova is the only one who was officially prosecuted two times and spent 65 days in the Almaty jail. Unlike the other two activists in this study, she tried to participate directly in official politics. After her release, on August 20, 2020, Assiya Tulesova published a post announcing her release with a bilingual visual, "Don't Close Your Eyes - Freedom is at Stake," and a long text in Russian, in which she wrote that the appeal hearing against her sentence lay ahead. In September 2020, she used her Instagram channel to draw attention to an interview she gave to the Balu Kz channel about air quality in Almaty. In December 2020, she became a co-founder of the PROGRESS Party, whose registration was blocked by the tax authorities for bureaucratic reasons. In February 2023, she put forward her candidacy for the Almaty City Council Maslikhat, but in March 2023, the Election Commission refused to register her. These attempts covered both institutional policy at the national level (creation of parties) and participation in elections at the local level (nomination of candidates to maslikhats) and included both official channels (registration of parties through the Ministry of Justice, registration of candidates through the Election Commission) and unofficial channels (online petitions, public statements, mobilization the audience on Instagram).

Table 2.3 Assiya Tulesova: communicative activity across the four periods (2019–2023)

Channel Instagram only	Date	Post	Metrics Language: Russian only	Government response	Adaptation\ Consequences
Period 1. April-July 2019 election of Toqayev					
Offline: marathon in Almaty	21 April 2019	Banner in Russian: “You can’t Run away from the truth.” (#adilsailayush in in Kazakh	-	On the same day, she was arrested.	Action was planned as anonymous. But after the activist’s arrest, media

		“for fair elections”)			discussion increased .
Court speech (adamdar.ca article)	21 April 2019	“I went out at the call of conscience”, “I have a choice.”	Quoted on banners as a solidarity campaign in Kazakh, Germany, USA and other countries	15 days administrative arrest; article code 488, part 3 (violation of Rules on peaceful assemblies)	Increased media discussion (independent media such as Vlast.Kazakh, Adamdar.ca; Azattyq.org)
Instagram	17 December 2019	Photo: “banner in Russian: Kazakhstan without the Nazarbaevs”. Long essay	1521 likes, 57 comments	No direct response	-
Instagram	8 June 2020	Explain about “furazhka incident.”	3179 likes, 622 comments	Arrested for 50 days; article criminal codes 378 and 380	Increased media discussion, the highest engagement post. Her arrest is more likely to shift from offline action to digital presence
Period 2. 2019-2021					

Instagram	20 August 2020 (after release from SIZO)	Bilingual post “Don't close your eyes - freedom is at stake.” Text in Russian	1178 likes, 89 comments	Court verdict: 1,5 year restricted freedom	
Instagram	10 September 2020	Promotes a YouTube interview on Instagram about air quality in Almaty	563 likes, 27 comments	Trial ongoing	Different content for different platforms, expand audience beyond political followers?
Instagram	17 December 2020	Post announces “PROGRESS” party, text: “our way to celebrate independence is to defend it”	1676 likes, 86 comments	The party does not get registered. Tax authority blocked her candidacy	Attempt at institutional adaptation?
Instagram	6 January 2021	Post #elections2021	468 likes, 10 comments	Opposition candidates systematically excluded (January 10 elections)	After this post her frequency of publication drops

Instagram	31 March 2021	Post “Assiya Trial: Part 3 Parole”	280 likes, 20 comments	Her request for parole was approved by the court	compared to 2020, engagement is low
Period 3. January 2022 unrest					
Instagram	6 January 2022	Post in Russian: “We have never been so close to the fact that our country has become a country for us.”	558 likes, 37 comments	Qantar: state of emergency. Internet shutdown	The content of the message completely changed from 2019-2020
Instagram	Silence till February 2023	-	-	-	Silence as adaptation
Period 4. 2022-2025					
Instagram	7 February 2023	Post: candidacy for maslikhat membership	1708 likes, 107 comments	The Electoral Commission blocks her candidacy	Return from silence. High engagement despite a 13-month silence
Instagram	13 June 2023	Last personal post (from a concert , no captions)	84 likes, 4 comments	-	-

2.3 Jurttyn Balasy

Jurttyn Balasy (Murat Daniyar) is the third case in this study, which is used as a contrast to Oyan, Qazaqstan and Tulesova in terms of how communicative adaptation develops over time. He was not part of the Oyan, Qazaqstan in 2019; unlike Tulesova, he did not enter public politics through offline activism. His main platform is YouTube, whose first blog appeared in September 2017 and for now his channel has about 464,000 subscribers, which is the largest audience among the three cases. Given his popularity, any study of digital pro-democracy activism in Kazakhstan, has to pay attention to his communicative adaptation.

His communication format is an analytical and explanatory political commentary created by a team including an operator and technical staff. In all five periods, the key issue in this case is not the transition from one form of activism to another, but how he adapted the format of expert commentary in the face of increasing repression, surveillance, and censorship.

His first politically significant video for the period under review, released on April 27, 2019, six days after Tulesova's marathon rally, focused on her arrest and integrated the case into a broader discussion about unfair elections, thereby linking his channel to the same cycle of 2019 pre-election protests that led to the emergence of Oyan, Qazaqstan. and the politicization of Tulesova, but from the point of view of analytical commentary, rather than direct participation in activism.

Table 2.4 Jurttyn Balasy: communicative activity across the four periods (2019–2026)

Channel	Date	Post	Metrics Language: Russian only	Government response	Adaptation/ Consequences
Period 1. April-July 2019 election of Toqayev					
Youtube	27 April 2019	«15 days of arrest for	80 954 views	-	Self- censorship: disclaimer:

		calling for fair elections»			“the author of the video expresses his personal opinion. And also is not responsible for the perception of the content”
Youtube	16 June 2019	"Elections, rallies, and appeals to the authorities"	108 100 views	-	Audience growth
Youtube + Telegram	22 July 2019+7 August	“Certificate INsecurity” «Toqayev's Twitter post»	171 709 views – youtube 2,5 views - telegram	Certificate cancelled	Telegram used for unfiltered post, not publishable on youtube
Period 2. 2019-2021					
Youtube	11 march 2020	«Is it time to get out of Kazakhstan?»	325 590 views	-	Civic-analytical videos generates more views rather than political topics

Youtube	26 August 2020	«Corrupt officials will be in jail.»	136 664 views	-	-
Youtube	April-May 2021	"Disgraceful deputies" \ "Called a deputy to a debate" \ "The deputy canceled the debate" 3 videos as a set	320\234\164K views	Madi Akhmetov (deputy) response to the JB's comment , he accepted the call for debates, but later refused	Increased media discussion
Period 3. January 2022 unrest					
Youtube	19 January 2022	"The results of the protests: Is Nazarbayev era finished \ is Toqayev our president?"	217 891 views	-	Analytical framing of Qantar, no call to action
Period 4. 2022-2025					
Youtube	4 March 2022	"Russian attacked Ukraine: who is Kazakhstan for?\ WAR"	372 459 views	-	High engagement of this period

Youtube	1 June 2022	"THE REFERENDUM: are we being deceived? \Analysis of amendments to the Constitution"	222 538 views	-	Informational analysis
Youtube	29 September 2022	"RUSSOPHOBIA \MOBILIZATION ON \HOUSING ISSUE" (Explains Russian mobilization)	209 628 views	-	-
Youtube	19 July 2023	"Democracy without elections: Almaty vs. Akim Dosayev"	263 809 views	"Monitoring of Dosaev's mentions in the media and social networks." By Dosaev. "A number of media were among the authors whose mentions of Akim	Increased media discussion

				were regarded as negative, including Jurttyn Balasy”(azattyqas ia)	
Youtube	30 January 2024	"Corruption in Kazakhstan: can it be defeated?"	338 344 views	-	-
Youtube	4 October 2024	"I vote against nuclear power plants, and that's why"	173 694 views	Repression: 18 days later police visit charged for Article 247.2	Increased media discussion Released after explanation. Posted video about police visit on youtube
Youtube	21 January 2025	"A criminal case for satire? 15 days of arrest for a single picket"	93 821 views	-	Lower engagement (measured by views)
Youtube					
Instagram + Telegram	9 March 2026	Mass complaint	Telegram 9k views	-	100 posts on Instagram were

		attack on Instagram			deleted, but later fully restored
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Chapter 3 Evaluation of Evidence in Light of Hypotheses

This chapter examines whether and how each of the four hypotheses presented in chapter 1 applies to the three actors. Hypothesis 1 predicts that activists adapt by self-censoring the content of their messages, replacing explicit pro-democratic demands and protest statements with moral or symbolic formulations after periods of increased repression and censorship. Hypothesis 2 predicts that activists will manipulate their choice of language, using Kazakh to post anti-Russian and anti-colonial content, English for messages addressed to international human rights NGOs, and Russian to reach a wider urban audience. Hypothesis 3 predicts that at least some participants will reduce or suspend their online activity, posting less frequently, restricting access to accounts, or temporarily withdrawing from public communication. Hypothesis 4 predicts that activists will switch from public platforms (Instagram, YouTube) to less controlled ones (Telegram) and will openly explain this transition to their subscribers. Each hypothesis is discussed separately below, and the evidence is taken from the posts documented in chapter 2.

3.1 Avoiding the risk of censorship - Hypothesis 1 Content messages

Table 3.1. Hypothesis 1 (Content of messages): Evidence by Focal Point and Actor

Period	Actor	Date	Post	Engagement	Content framing	Disclaimers / coded text
1. April- July 2019	Oyan, Qazaqstan	25 September 2019	"We will protest!/Biz sheruge	350 Russian , 138 Kazakh likes	Starting point	Does not confirm

election of Toqayev			shygamyz!" -call for assemblies in Almaty			
	Assiya Tulesova	21 April 2019	Banner at marathon and court speech "I went out at the call of conscience"	(offline)	Starting point	Does not confirm
	Jurttyn Balasy	27 April 2019	First political video, opens with disclaimer	80 954 views	Does not confirm	Confirms
2. 2019-2021	Oyan, Qazaqstan	23 December 2020	Six-slide post: personal testimonies on surveillance, pressure on families; no calls to action	472 likes 2 comments , post in Russian	Confirms	Does not confirm
	Assiya Tulesova	8 June 2020	"I acted in an emotional outburst in response to police brutality"	3,179 likes, 622 comments	Confirms	Does not confirm
	Assiya Tulesova	17 December 2020	PROGRESS party announcement: "Our way to	1,676 likes	Confirms	Does not confirm

			celebrate independence is to defend it!"			
	Jurtty Balasy	26 August 2020	"Isn't it time to get out of Kazakhstan?"	325 590 views	Confirms	Does not confirm
3. January 2022 unrest	Oyan, Qazaqstan	7 January 2022	"We are for peace and for the people of Kazakhstan" distinguishes civilians from looters	Russian 1,287 , Kazakh 238 likes	Confirms	Does not confirm
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	10 January 2022	"Day of National Mourning" - no political demands	125 likes (lowest)	Confirms	Does not confirm
	Assiya Tulesova	6 January 2022	"What reforms do we need? What to do next?"	558 likes, 37 comments	Confirms	Does not confirm
	Jurtty Balasy	19 January 2022	"Results of the protests: Is the Nazarbayev era finished?"	217,891 views	Confirms	Does not confirm
4. 2022-2025	Oyan, Qazaqstan	25 October 2022	"Why do we need a parliamentary republic?"	Russian 480, Kazakh 218 likes	Confirms	Does not confirm

	Assiya Tulesova	-	13-month silence	-	-	-
	Jurttyn Balasy	1 June 2022	"The Referendum: Analysis of amendments"	222,538 views	Confirms	Does not confirm
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	16 December 2024	"Umytylmas. 1986 2011 2022 Keshirilmes."	12,200 likes, 4,145 shares	Confirms	Does not confirm
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	20 January - 4 February 2025	"Сатира - қылымс емес!" campaign, E-Otinish	range 327 - 6,425 likes	Confirms	Does not confirm
	Assiya Tulesova	7 Feb 2023	Return post: candidacy for Almaty Maslikhat	1,708 likes	Confirms	Does not confirm
	Jurttyn Balasy	4 Oct 2024	"I vote against the NPP" - explicit political position	173,694 views	Does not confirm	Does not confirm
	Jurttyn Balasy	21 Jan 2025	"A criminal case for satire?"	93,821 views	Confirms	Does not confirm

Symbolic shift in message content. In 2019, Oyan, Qazaqstan combined explicit mobilisation messages with messages documenting state repression. On 19 September 2019, activists published the infographic "Toqayev's 100 Days" (4,200 detained, 1,000 convicted, 14 cities with protests, zero reforms; 506 likes in Russian, 139 in Kazakh). This message documents repression with

quantified evidence. On 25 September 2019, they published "We will protest! / Biz sheruge shygamyz!": an explicit call to take to the streets in Almaty's Yuzhny Park (350 Russian, 138 Kazakh likes). A shift in message content occurred in December 2020, when the movement published a six-slide post containing activists' personal testimonies on surveillance, SIM-card duplication, and pressure on families, with no calls to action and no hashtags. The activists did not name the actors responsible for these practices, but the context of preventive interrogations and family pressure points to state security bodies, and no specific purpose was stated in the testimonies. The post did not offer practical advice to followers on how to protect their digital communications; instead, it functioned as a public testimony of repression, with the caption framing it as a call to political awakening: "Having an opinion in our country means showing heroism. Follow their example, wake up!". The message content moved from mobilisation appeals to personal narratives of repression. This shift continued through 2022: on 3 January 2022, the post supporting the Mangystau march used supportive rather than mobilising language; on 7 January 2022, the official statement "We are for peace and for the people of Kazakhstan" was framed as a moral message distinguishing civilians from looters (Russian 1,287, Kazakh 238 likes); on 10 January 2022, the message "Day of National Mourning" contained no political demands and received the lowest engagement of the period (125 likes). In October 2022, "Why do we need a parliamentary republic?" reframed political demands as explanations of why these demands matter. From 2023 onwards, this pattern intensified: the message content shifted from general pro-democracy demands to targeted demands for the release of specific activists (Marat Zhylanbayev, November 2023), to indirect political criticism through irony (the message "Happy Independence Day!" on 16 December 2023, accompanied by a photo of police patrolling activists' homes), and to historical-moral framing in "Umytylmas. 1986 2011 2022 Keshirilmes." on 16 December 2024 (12,200 likes, 4,145 reposts: the highest engagement of the period). The January–February 2025 "Сатира - қылмыс емес!" campaign continued the same logic: the message content documented the arrests of Assem Zhapisheva and Akmaral Jakibayeva and asked followers to send

letters to the prosecutor's office through E-Otinish, rather than to take to the streets. This pattern is confirmed for Oyan, Qazaqstan.

Tulesova's message content shifts gradually across the three periods. In 2019, her political message took an offline form: a banner "You can't Run away from the truth" at the Almaty Marathon on 21 April 2019, and the court speech "I went out at the call of conscience" published on Adamdar.ca the next day. On 17 December 2019, her first written political post on Instagram contained a photo of the banner "Kazakhstan without the Nazarbayevs" and a personal essay reflecting on collective responsibility and civic duty (1,521 likes, 57 comments). The message content was a personal reflection rather than a call to action. On 8 June 2020, the post explaining the "furazhka incident" framed the action as a moral response to police brutality: "I acted in an emotional outburst in response to what I believe was police brutality against peaceful citizens" (3,179 likes, 622 comments) that shows engagement has more than doubled, indicating that direct repression and Assiya's subsequent explanation has increased audience attention rather than weakened it. The message content moved from any call to action toward a moral self-explanation. On 17 December 2020, the message announcing the PROGRESS party: "Our way to celebrate independence is to defend it!" (1,676 likes) framed political activity in institutional rather than mobilising language. On 6 January 2021, her last significant mobilisation message called to vote against Nur Otan and to spoil ballots (468 likes); the engagement decline marked the end of this register. On 6 January 2022, the message content shifted from political demands to questions and uncertainty: "What reforms do we need? What to do next?" After her thirteen-month silence, her return post on 7 February 2023 contained an institutional message. She announced her candidacy for the Almaty Maslikhat: "We all need an independent, transparent, and accountable Maslikhat" (1,708 likes). When the election commission restricted her right to Run in March 2023, her message announced an online petition rather than a rally (729 likes). Her last documented personal post on 13 June 2023 was a photo from a concert with no caption (84 likes) personal message rather than a political claim. This pattern is confirmed for Tulesova.

Jurttyn Balasy's message content does not develop in the same direction as that of Oyan, Qazaqstan or Tulesova. It stays within the framework of analytical political commentary. In the first period, his videos combined political topics (elections, deputies, the security certificate) with civic-analytical content, with the highest reach for the 2020 video "Isn't it time to get out of Kazakhstan?" In the second period, during Qantar and the Russian-Ukraine war, the message content remained analytical and explanatory rather than mobilising: the video on the referendum (1 June 2022, 222,538 views) analysed the constitutional amendments in detail but did not call for a boycott. The one documented break from this analytical message format occurred on 4 October 2024 with the video "I vote against the NPP, and that's why...", in which the message contained an explicit personal political position. Eighteen days later, on 22 October 2024, Murat Daniyar received a police call regarding Article 247.2 of the Criminal Code (spreading "deliberately false information") and was invited to the police station. After this incident, the message content returned to analytical framing in the video "A criminal case for satire? 15 days of arrest for a single picket" on 21 January 2025 (93,821 views). This pattern is confirmed for Jurttyn Balasy through sustained analytical framing of message content rather than through periodic shifts.

Textual self-censorship signals. Jurttyn Balasy is the only case in this study with a documented textual self-censorship signal. The video of 27 April 2019 opens with a disclaimer: "the author of the video expresses his personal opinion" and the channel "is not responsible for the perception of the content or comments on it." This disclaimer does not reappear in any subsequent video over more than five years of political commentary, including videos with hundreds of thousands of views and direct criticism of the state. The disclaimer was therefore a targeted response to the specific risk associated with the Tulesova banner case in April 2019, rather than an ongoing practice. This pattern is confirmed for Jurttyn Balasy in one documented post. Oyan, Qazaqstan does not use disclaimers, coded formulations, or pseudonyms in the message text. The movement continues to name specific officials, including Nazarbayev, Toqayev, and individual ministers, to identify criminal cases by article, and to mention international human rights organisations directly,

including in the January 2025 trilingual post about Yensebek. This pattern is not confirmed for Oyan, Qazaqstan. Tulesova also does not use disclaimers, cryptic formulations, or pseudonyms in the message text. She continues to name specific government bodies and actors directly, such as the Election Commission, the tax authorities and Nur Otan. This pattern is not confirmed for Tulesova.

Hypothesis 1 is confirmed for all three actors through symbolic shift in message content. Oyan, Qazaqstan's message content moves from explicit calls to take to the streets toward documentation of repression, historical-moral framing, and targeted demands for the release of specific activists. Tulesova's message content moves from calls to action toward personal essays, moral self-explanations, institutional announcements, and finally symbolic and personal content. Jurttyn Balasy's message content stays within analytical framing rather than shifting periodically, and the October 2024 NPP case illustrates what happens when this analytical framing is abandoned. All three trajectories are consistent with the concept of recalibration of political agency proposed by Polese et al. (2026): activists do not abandon political content, but reformulate ways of expressing it in response to growing repression from the state. Textual self-censorship signals such as disclaimers, coded language, or pseudonyms is confirmed only in one documented case: the April 2019 disclaimer by Jurttyn Balasy. Oyan, Qazaqstan and Assiya Tulesova continue to name specific officials, ministries, and criminal cases directly throughout all three periods, without text-level concealment.

3.2 Avoiding the risk of losing audience - Hypothesis 2 Manipulating language

Table 3.2 Hypothesis 2 (manipulating language): Evidence by period and actor

Period	Actor	Date	Post	Languages	H2 Evidence
1. April-July 2019 election	Oyan, Qazaqstan	6 June 2019	"Hello everyone! Thank you for supporting..." - first Telegram post	In Kazakh first (2.4K views), then Russian (2.5K)	Confirms

Period	Actor	Date	Post	Languages	H2 Evidence
of Toqayev					
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	12 June 2019	"Urma! Atpa!" (Don't hit! Don't shoot!) addressed to police	Kazakh photo (2.8K), Russian message (3.2K)	Confirms
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	25 July 2019	First IG post "Oyan!" with hashtags #qazaqkoktemi #menoyandym #ihaveachoice	Kazakh only	Confirms
	Tulesova	21 April 2019	Banner at Almaty marathon: "You can't Run from the truth"	Russian only	Does not confirm
	Jurttyn Balasy	27 April 2019	YouTube video on Tulesova's arrest, with disclaimer	Russian only	Does not confirm
2. 2019-2021	Oyan, Qazaqstan	5 August 2019	Post on the state-issued "safety certificate"	Post in Russian, Kazakh in comment	Confirms
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	22 August 2019	Post on multiple platforms	Russian 89 likes, Kazakh 74 likes	Confirms
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	19 September 2019	"100 days of Toqayev's illegitimate presidency"	Russian 506 likes, Kazakh 138 likes	Confirms
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	24 November 2021	Post on Apple Pegasus notification	Russian only (369 likes)	Partial - bilingualism

Period	Actor	Date	Post	Languages	H2 Evidence
					breaks for urgent reporting
	Tulesova	17 December 2019	"Banner in Russian: Kazakhstan without the Nazarbaevs"	Russian only	Does not confirm
	Tulesova	20 August 2020	"Don't close your eyes - freedom is at stake" (after release from SIZO)	text in Russian (next photo in slide in kazakh)	Partial - KAZAKH appears in visuals only
	Jurttyn Balasy	11 March 2020	"Is it time to get out of Kazakhstan?" (325,590 views)	Russian only	Does not confirm
	Jurttyn Balasy	April-May 2021	"Disgraceful deputies" three-video series	Russian only	Does not confirm
3. January 2022 unrest	Oyan, Qazaqstan	3 January 2022	"We support the peaceful protest in Mangystau"	Russian 1,009 likes, Kazakh 441 likes	Confirms
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	4 January 2022	Video about activists being detained	Russian only (930 likes, 30,679 views)	Partial
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	7 January 2022	Official Statement: "We are for peace and for the people of Kazakhstan"	Russian 1,287 likes, Kazakh 238 likes	Confirms
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	10 January 2022	"Day of national mourning"	Bilingual, 125 likes (lowest)	Confirms

Period	Actor	Date	Post	Languages	H2 Evidence
	Tulesova	6 January 2022	"We have never been so close to the fact that our country has become a country for us"	Russian only (per table)	Does not confirm
	Jurtty Balasy	19 January 2022	"Results of the protests: Is the Nazarbayev era finished?" (217,891 views)	Russian only	Does not confirm
4. 2022-2025	Oyan, Qazaqstan	24 February 2022	Video on anti-war protest detentions at Russian Consulate	Russian only (977 likes, 17,865 views)	Partial
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	5 June 2022	Darkhan Sharip's solo picket against the referendum	Russian only (868 likes)	Partial
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	25 October 2022	"Why do we need a parliamentary republic?"	Russian 480, Kazakh 218 likes	Confirms
	Assiya Tulesova	-	No posts in table - silence until Feb 2023	-	Does not confirm
	Jurtty Balasy	4 March 2022	"Russian attacked Ukraine: who is Kazakhstan for? / WAR" (372,459 views)	Russian only	Does not confirm
	Jurtty Balasy	1 June 2022	"THE REFERENDUM: are we being deceived?" (222,538 views)	Russian only	Does not confirm

Period	Actor	Date	Post	Languages	H2 Evidence
	Jurttyn Balasy	29 September 2022	"Russophobia / Mobilization / Housing issue" - explains Russian mobilisation arrivals (209,628 views)	Russian only	Does not confirm
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	29 November 2023	Solidarity post: "Marat Zhylyanbaev sentenced to 7 years" - hashtags #FreeMaratZhylyanbayev #Мартқабостандық	Bilingual post (447 likes)	Confirms
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	16 December 2023	"Police are on duty near our houses" (Independence Day)	Bilingual post (288 likes)	Confirms
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	5 January 2024	"Letter from activists from prison"	Bilingual post (348 likes)	Confirms
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	16 December 2024	"Umytylmas. 1986 2011 2022 Keshirilmes."	Bilingual (12,200 likes, 4,145 shares)	Confirms
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	17 January 2025	"Breaking news: search at home of satirist Temirlan Yensebek"	Russian breaking-news post (10.9k likes); "First English language content" in consequences	Confirms

Period	Actor	Date	Post	Languages	H2 Evidence
	Assiya Tulesova	7 February 2023	Post: candidacy for maslikhat membership (1,708 likes - return from silence)	Russian	Does not confirm
	Assiya Tulesova	13 June 2023	Last personal post (84 likes)	-	-
	Jurttyyn Balasy	4 October 2024	"I vote against nuclear power plants, and that's why" (173,694 views)	Russian only	Does not confirm
	Jurttyyn Balasy	21 January 2025	"A criminal case for satire? 15 days of arrest for a single picket" (93,821 views)	Russian only	Does not confirm

Since the first day of the telegram channel's creation on June 6, 2019, they have published a post in two languages. On Instagram, the very first one on July 25, 2019 is written entirely in Kazakh with the hashtags #qazaqkoktemi (The Kazakh Spring) #menoyandym (I woke up). Further, all posts on Instagram and the telegram channel were written in two languages. However, in times of urgent posts, for example, where activists documented arrests, the posts were written in Russian. Also, posts that were posted in two languages demonstrate different audience engagement, with posts in Russian gaining more likes and comments than posts in Kazakh of the same content. In January 2025, Oyan, Qazaqstan for the first time, posts in three languages: Russian, Kazakh, and English, in response to the arrest of satirist Temirlan Yensebek. In 2025, they used only one hashtag in Kazakh, #satirakylmysemes (satire is not a crime). This is different from 2021, when Oyan, Qazaqstan used hashtags demanding Temirlan's release (#FreeTima, #svobodaTime, #Timanybosat) and for Marat Zhylanbayev in November 2023. The activists requested support

from around the world to bring this repressive practice to the attention of international human rights organizations. This post is the empirical example of the boomerang effect (Keck and Sikkink, 1998) activation in this study. By adding English along with Russian and Kazakh, and mentioning international human rights organizations, Oyan, Qazaqstan attempted to circumvent the regime and mobilize external pressure, exactly as described by Keck and Sikkink (1998).

Assiya Tulesova's communication was in Russian across all three periods. She used Kazakh in hashtags and occasionally in visual posts, confirming that her choice of Kazakh is linked to cultural preferences.

The content of Jurtty Balasy is only in Russian in all three periods and on all platforms. The choice of language does not change with the intensification of repression, and it does not change in connection with the cultural turn of 2022 towards the Kazakh language, recorded by Kamalova (2025) and Kurmanov, Smith and Schenk (2025). Hypothesis 2 is not confirmed in the case of Jurtty Balasy. His case confirms the interpretation outlined in the section by Assiya Tulesova: for activists whose communication format depends on a wide audience, Russian remains the language of audience preservation regardless of repression, even though the cultural environment as a whole is shifting towards Kazakh. Combined with H4 (platform shifting) and H2 (content of messages) this suggests that the adaptation of Jurtty Balasy works within the framework of the platform and framing, keeping the language and identity of the audience stable. Unlike Oyan, Qazaqstan, the adaptation of which most noticeably affects the language (bilingual from 2019, English added in 2025).

Hypothesis 2 is confirmed for Oyan, Qazaqstan. Oyan, Qazaqstan has been bilingual since day one, which is consistent with the conclusions of Kamalova (2025) and Kurmanov, Smith and Schenk (2025) on the political and symbolic role of language choice in Kazakhstan. The most striking example of language adaptation that goes beyond the bilingual text is a trilingual post published in January 2025 about the arrest of Yensebek, in which English was added along with Russian and Kazakh, and international human rights organizations were mentioned. Tulesova and

Jurttyn Balasy, on the other hand, communicate mostly in Russian. Tulesova uses Kazakh only in hashtags and visuals, while Jurttyn Balasy remains fully Russian-speaking on all three periods and platforms. This suggests that bilingualism is not an adaptive reaction, but depends on the strategy and identity of the activist's audience: a movement aimed at broad ideological reach (Oyan, Qazaqstan) operates in two languages, while individual activists who prefer the size of the audience to the Russian-speaking digital space of Kazakhstan remain monolingual.

3.3 Avoiding the risk of repression - Hypothesis 3 – Suspending online activism

Table 3.3 Hypothesis 3 (suspending online activism): Evidence by period and actor

Period	Actor	Date	Post	Engagement	H3 Evidence
1. April-July 2019 election of Toqayev	Oyan, Qazaqstan	25 July 2019	First Instagram post "Oyan!" - created after first wave of post-election detentions	332 likes, 1 comment	Does not confirm
	Assiya Tulesova	21 April 2019	Banner at marathon, court speech	(offline action)	Does not confirm
	Jurttyn Balasy	27 April 2019	"15 days of arrest for calling for fair elections" - first politically significant video	80,954 views	Does not confirm
2. 2019-2021	Oyan, Qazaqstan	15 May 2021	Search at the apartment of Oyan, Qazaqstan activist Yensebek (criminal case opened)	Instagram 1,159 likes, Telegram 4,200 views - highest	Does not confirm

Period	Actor	Date	Post	Engagement	H3 Evidence
				engagement of 2021	
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	24 November 2021	Apple Pegasus notification - confirmed digital surveillance	369 likes	Does not confirm
	Assiya Tulesova	8 June 2020	Explanation of the "furazhka" incident (during arrest)	3,179 likes - highest engagement post	Does not confirm
	Assiya Tulesova	6 January 2021	Post #elections2021	468 likes	Partial
	Assiya Tulesova	31 March 2021	"Assiya Trial: Part 3 Parole"	280 likes - your table notes (compared to 2020, engagement is low)	Partial
	Jurttyn Balasy	11 March 2020	"Is it time to get out of Kazakhstan?"	325,590 views	Does not confirm
	Jurttyn Balasy	April–May 2021	"Disgraceful deputies" three-video series	320 / 234 / 164K views	Does not confirm
3. January 2022 unrest	Oyan, Qazaqstan	7 January 2022	"Official Statement: We are for peace and for the people of Kazakhstan"	Russian 1,287 likes, Kazakh 238 likes	Does not confirm

Period	Actor	Date	Post	Engagement	H3 Evidence
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	10 January 2022	"Day of national mourning"	125 likes - lowest engagement of period	Does not confirm
	Assiya Tulesova	6 January 2022	"We have never been so close to the fact that our country has become a country for us"	558 likes	Confirms - start of silence
	Jurttyn Balasy	19 January 2022	"Results of the protests: Is the Nazarbayev era finished?"	217,891 views	Does not confirm
4. 2022-2025	Oyan, Qazaqstan	24 February 2022	Video: activists detained for anti-war protest at Russian Consulate	977 likes, 17,865 views	Does not confirm
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	5 June 2022	Darkhan Sharip's solo picket against the referendum	868 likes	Does not confirm
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	25 October 2022	"Why do we need a parliamentary republic?"	Russian 480, Kazakh 218 likes	Does not confirm
	Assiya Tulesova	-	"Silence till February 2023"	-	Confirms
	Jurttyn Balasy	4 March 2022	"Russian attacked Ukraine: who is	372,459 views - highest of the period	Does not confirm

Period	Actor	Date	Post	Engagement	H3 Evidence
			Kazakhstan for? / WAR"		
	Jurttyn Balasy	1 June 2022	"THE REFERENDUM: are we being deceived?"	222,538 views	Does not confirm
	Jurttyn Balasy	29 Septemb er 2022	"Russophobia / Mobilization / Housing issue"	209,628 views	Does not confirm
	Oyan, Qazaqsta n	29 Novemb er 2023	Solidarity post on Marat Zhylanbayev's 7-year sentence	447 likes	Does not confirm
	Oyan, Qazaqsta n	5 January 2024	"Letter from activists from prison"	348 likes	Does not confirm
	Oyan, Qazaqsta n	16 Decemb er 2024	"Umytylmas. 1986 2011 2022 Keshirilmes."	12,200 likes, 4,145 shares - major engagement spike	Does not confirm
	Oyan, Qazaqsta n	17 January 2025	"Breaking news: search at home of satirist Temirlan Yensebek"	10,900 likes, 769 comments	Does not confirm
	Assiya Tulesova	7 Februar y 2023	Candidacy for maslikhat membership	1,708 likes - high engagement after silence	Confirms - return after suspension

Period	Actor	Date	Post	Engagement	H3 Evidence
	Assiya Tulesova	13 June 2023	Last personal post	84 likes	Confirms - continued reduction of visibility
	Jurttyn Balasy	19 July 2023	"Democracy without elections: Almaty vs Akim Dosayev" - published despite ongoing media monitoring of his channel by Dosayev's team	263,809 views	Does not confirm
	Jurttyn Balasy	4 October 2024	"I vote against nuclear power plants" - 18 days later police visit and Article 247.2 charge	173,694 views	Does not confirm
	Jurttyn Balasy	21 January 2025	"A criminal case for satire? 15 days of arrest for a single picket"	93,821 views - Lower engagement	Does not confirm

Oyan, Qazaqstan did not reduce their public visibility in any of the three periods. The publications continue during the nationwide Internet blackout in January 2022, during the most intense months of repression in 2022, and during the arrests of individual activists in 2023-2025. Audience engagement was falling (from 1,287 likes on January 7, 2022 to 125 likes on January 10, 2022), but the publication activity did not stop.

Tulesova's case is the most striking empirical example of silence as an adaptation in this study. Between her release on January 6, 2022, and her return on February 7, 2023, she posted only one unsigned video, a 13-month silence that followed four years of increasing repressive pressure: administrative arrest in April 2019, 50 days of pre-trial detention in 2020, a 1.5-year prison sentence on restriction of liberty, and that her party was blocked and the shock of the events in Qantar. Her silence fits into Davenport's "Punishment Puzzle" (2007): the same type of repressive pressure that leads to constant publications in Oyan, Qazaqstan, leads to Tulesova's silence. The difference is organizational in nature: as an individual activist, she bears all the costs of continuing public communication, while Oyan, Qazaqstan distributes them among the members of the organization. In an interview with Azattyk in 2025, she explains this silence as a postponement rather than a departure. Hypothesis 5 is confirmed in the case of Tulesova.

Tulesova's trajectory Runs in the opposite direction to that of Oyan, Qazaqstan: offline action → repression → online activism → institutional politics (party, maslikhat) → repression → silence → partial return to narrative. Its adaptation manifests itself in content (H1) and silencing (H3), but not in platform change (H4), or bilingualism (H2). Her case shows that for personalized activism, adapting choices in the face of constant repression means abandoning public communicative presence, which is consistent with Davenport (2007) and Glazunova (2022).

Based on the videos presented in the tables 6-8, Jurttyyn Balasy constantly publishes video on YouTube during all three periods. After the publication of the media monitoring report in 2023, the police visit in October 2024, or the Instagram complaint attack in 2026, there was no prolonged silence. In each case, his response was to create a video explaining what happened. Hypothesis 3 is not confirmed for Jurttyyn Balasy. This is consistent with the stRussianctural features of his case: a teamwork format, a large audience, and a communicative identity based on analytical comments rather than personal presence. All this reduces the likelihood of silence as an adaptation on an individual level.

Hypothesis 3 is confirmed only for Assiya Tulesova. Tulesova's thirteen-month silence between January 2022 and February 2023 is the most striking empirical example of silence as an adaptation in this study. Oyan, QazaQstan continues to publish posts throughout all three periods, including during the nationwide Internet blackout in January 2022 and during the most intense months of the subsequent repression. Jurttyyn Balasy also continues its work, responding to every case of pressure with video explanations rather than reducing visibility. This contrast confirms Davenport's "punishment puzzle" (2007): the same repressive context causes silence in some participants and persistence in others. Since Oyan, Qazaqstan, is a horizontal collective, and not a single-person activist, the continuation of publications is distributed among the participants, which reduces the likelihood of "silence" as a form of individual adaptation. (Davenport, 2007), and the team format of Jurttyyn Balasy production and analytical communication identity reduces the personal vulnerability of any individual. Tulesova, on the other hand, bears all the legal and emotional costs associated with each public statement alone.

The content of messages is changing in all three periods, but the political pro-democracy content is not decreasing. All three actors expose repression, albeit Assiya Tulesova stops exposing it after the court blocked the registration of her PROGRESS party in December 2020 and her nomination as a candidate for membership of the Maslikhat in February 2023, after which she refused to make public political comments at all.

Following King, Pan, and Roberts (2013), two categories of political content can be distinguished: calls to action (posts that mobilize the audience to do something, such as protest, vote, or spoil the ballot) and demands (posts that ask the state to do something, such as reform, release a specific activist). Oyan, Qazaqstan are not reducing political content, but are moving from direct calls to voters (to spoil ballots in the 9 June 2019 elections), followers (to join the "Seruen", to attend rallies "We will protest!" 25 September, 2019), and police officers (Urma!Atpa! 12 June 2019) action to demands such as constitutional/political reform ("Why do we need a parliamentary republic?" 25 October 2022), release of prisoners (Marat Zhylanbayev, Temirlan Yensebek).

3.4 Avoiding the risk of platform blocking - H4 – Platform Switching

Table 3.4. Hypothesis 4 (platform switching): Evidence by period and actor

Period	Actor	Date	Platform	Post (brief)	H4 Evidence
1. April-July 2019 election of Toqayev	Oyan, Qazaqstan	6 June 2019	Telegram opened first	First post, 3 days before elections	Does not confirm
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	25 July 2019	Instagram	"Oyan!" first IG post, hashtags #qazaqkoktemi #menoyandym	Does not confirm
	Assiya Tulesova	April 2019	Offline action	Banner in Russian: "You can't Run away from the truth."	-
	Assiya Tulesova	17 December 2019	Instagram , single platform	Photo: "banner in Russian: Kazakhstan without the Nazarbaevs". Long essay	Does not confirm
	Jurttyyn Balasy	27 April 2019	YouTube as starting platform	Video with explicit disclaimer	Does not confirm

				("personal opinion") «15 days of arrest for calling for fair elections»	
2. 2019-2021	Oyan, Qazaqstan	5 August 2019	Instagram, Telegram	Post on the state-issued security certificate (surveillance)	Does not confirm
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	22 August 2019	Instagram, Telegram	Post listing all platforms (IG, Tg, YT, FB, Twitter, VK),	Does not confirm
	Assiya Tulesova	8 June 2020	Instagram	Explain about “furazhka incident.”	Does not confirm
	Jurttyn Balasy	11 march 2020	YouTube	"Isn't it time to get out of Kazakhstan?"	Does not confirm
3. January 2022 unrest	Oyan, Qazaqstan	7 January 2022	Instagram, Telegram	"We are for peace and for the people of Kazakhstan" (1,287 likes Russian / 238 Kazakh)	Does not confirm (even at repression peak activists did not switch)

	Oyan, Qazaqstan	10 January 2022	Instagram, Telegram	"Day of National Mourning" (125 likes - lowest of the period)	Does not confirm
	Tulesova	6 January 2022	Instagram	"What reforms do we need?" followed by 13-month silence	Does not confirm
	Jurttyn Balasy	19 January 2022	YouTube	"Results of the protests" (217,891 views)	Does not confirm
4. 2022-2025	Oyan, Qazaqstan	June 5, 2022	Instagram,Telegram	A post about Darkhan Sharip's (Oyan, Qazaqstan's activist) solo picket in Almaty against referendum	Does not confirm
	Assiya Tulesova	-	-	-	-
	Jurttyn Balasy	1 June 2022	Youtube	Video about THE REFERENDUM	Does not confirm
	Oyan, Qazaqstan	17 January 2025	Instagram ,Telegram	Post on Temirlan Yensebek's arrest	Does not confirm

	Assiya Tulesova	February 2023	Instagram	Return post after 13-month silence (1,708 likes)	Does not confirm
	Jurttyn Balasy	4 October 2024	Instagram, YouTube, Telegram	NPP referendum case, police visit	Partial
	Jurttyn Balasy	2024	YouTube (comments)	calls Telegram as renaissance of freedom, asks viewers to follow Telegram	Does not confirm (He still stay on Youtube)

In all five periods Oyan, Qazaqstan did not shift from more censored to less censored platforms, as suggested by Gohdes (2020) and Roberts (2018). In this case, the sequence is reversed. The activists created a Telegram channel three days before the elections on June 6, 2019, and after the first wave of detentions after the elections on July 25, the activists created an Instagram account. Since the creation of the Instagram account, activists have been duplicating content on two platforms simultaneously in the first period, during Bloody January and in the third period. On election day, June 9, 2019, Oyan, Qazaqstan only had a Telegram channel. The first posts on the Telegram channel included instructions for spoiling ballots and later an emergency message about "Urma!, Atpa!" (Don't hit! Don't shoot!) when police used force against protesters, and activists asked "past this (message) on to friends and relatives in the police". In July, when the first post appeared on the Instagram channel, the coordination content was on the Telegram channel, while Instagram was used for visual posts. For example, on July 4-5, activists launched the "Seruen" campaign on the Telegram channel, which took place in six cities across Kazakhstan. The platforms were also used as a way to circumvent restrictions on public gatherings in the form of the "Seruen" campaign, when Oyan, Qazaqstan, in the first period mobilized supporters not to

protest, but to walk. This campaign similar with Navalny's tactics in Russian in March 2017, when he urged supporters to "come to Tverskaya and take a walk." Like Navalny's "гулянья," the word "Seruen" itself meant "walk," implying that the activists weren't making a harsh call to action, but they were still maintaining a political function: they were going for a walk to demonstrate their right to a peaceful assembly. However, Navalny's "гулянья" was a one-time rally in 100 cities disguised as a walk with posters, and the authorities on the same day detained more than 900 people only in Moscow, in Kazakhstan, Seruen was really close to a literal walk (small regular meetings): the authorities reacted on a smaller scale, since the walks were in 5 cities and 7 citizens were detained in Aktobe and Shymkent, there was no news in other cities that arrests had been made. During the January events, the Internet was blocked across the country, despite this, activists continued to post on Instagram and Telegram, but engagement dropped. On January 7, 2022, activists posted a post about the official statement "We are for peace and for the people of Kazakhstan" (1,287 likes; the Kazakh version received 238 likes), hoping for a peaceful outcome and the punishment of criminals (looters), not civilians and peaceful protesters. The January 10th post, "Day of National Mourning," without any political demands, received the lowest number of likes (125) for the entire period. Within a few days, audience engagement dropped from 1,287 likes to 125 likes. On August 7, 2019, "Oyan, Qazaqstan" posted on Telegram that they had accounts on several platforms and asked their followers to follow them too. On August 22, they posted the same message on Instagram, calling their followers "Oyanites" and warning about fake accounts. From the very beginning of the movement, activists have pointed to several platforms that are not associated with repression.

Thus, the adaptation of Oyan, Qazaqstan is not a shift to another platform, but multiplatform duplication, which increases visibility despite the growth of repression, surveillance and censorship. This corresponds to Kurmanov's argument (2024), when the state cannot block all platforms at the same time, and this creates a space for activists to be visible. This shows that the idea of Gohdes (2020) and Roberts (2018) does not fully work, as Oyan, Qazaqstan consciously

remains on Instagram, realizing all the costs of repression and simultaneously uses the Telegram channel as a safer space.

Assiya Tulesova didn't change the platform due to increased censorship, surveillance, repression. The news about her persecution: her arrest, 15 days of administrative punishment, her speech in the trial rapidly spread of on Instagram. She created an Instagram account on June 1 2013 and continued using it.

In contrast to Oyan, Qazaqstan she started with offline activities, goes through repeated repressions (administrative arrest in 2019, pre-trial detention and restriction of freedom in 2020), and only after that moves on to online activism and institutional politics.

On January 6, 2022, Assiya Tulesova's post content contained no visible political demands or direct calls to action. She asked, "What reforms do we need?" and the post was filled with uncertainty, asking, "What to do next?" She was still on probation for her 2020 sentence, and after this post, she went silent for 13 months. When she returned to Instagram in February 2023, her post received 1,708 likes, demonstrating that her audience had not disappeared during her silence.

Jurttyn Balasy's main platform is YouTube, which he considers as the main channel for hosting edited analytical content aimed at a wide audience. Instagram and Telegram are used as additional channels: Telegram - for quick unedited comments (reaction to Toqayev's "Twitter post" in 2019, immediate documentation of the police visit in 2024), and Instagram - for emergency updates and more like a life account. The case of the nuclear power plant in October 2024 illustrates this division: first, he notified subscribers about the police visit on Instagram, then posted a full video explanation on YouTube and duplicated it on Telegram. Starting in 2024, he publicly calls Telegram a low-censorship platform, using the phrase "renaissance of freedom" in the comments under his YouTube videos and asking subscribers to follow his telegram channel. However, he doesn't leave YouTube: the most popular videos for 2022-2024 remain on YouTube. In 2022, despite the increased repression, YouTube remains the main channel where it continues to release

videos, for example, a video about the "Results of the protests" was released on January 19, 2022 (217 891 views).

Hypothesis 4 in its standard formulation by Gohdes (2020) and Roberts (2018): the transition from more censored platforms to less censored ones was not confirmed for any of the three participants. Instead, Oyan, Qazaqstan and Jurtty Balasy – both activists are collective actors with greater resources and journalistic backgrounds - adapt through multiplatform duplication. They maintain a presence on multiple platforms at the same time, rather than switching from one to another. Tulesova as a single-person actor, on the contrary, remains on a single platform throughout all three periods. This model supports Kurmanov's argument (2024) that the state cannot block all platforms at the same time, which creates space for activists to remain visible, but also suggests that adaptation through platform switching depends on the resources of activists.

Chapter 4 Conclusion

This thesis examined how opposition activists in Kazakhstan are changing their communication strategies in the face of increased surveillance, censorship, and repression. For this purpose, three actors (Almaty based) were investigated: the movement based Oyan, Qazaqstan, individual activist Assiya Tulesova and online – only political commentator Jurtty Balasy. Their public posts on Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube were documented in four focal points: April-July 2019, 2019-2021, January 2022, and 2022-2025. Four hypotheses were analyzed: about self-censorship of the content of messages, about choosing a language, about suspending activity, and about changing the platform. The results showed that only the first hypothesis was confirmed for all three actors. Hypothesis 1 (self-censorship of message content) seems to confirm for all three participants by symbolic shift in message content. Today, Kazakhstan has moved from calls to take to the streets to documenting repression, historical and moral documentation, and purposeful demands (but not in the form of street protests) for the release of specific activists. Tulesova's content moved from

offline protest to personal essays, then to moral self-revelations, then to statements from institutions, and finally to symbolic and personal content. Jurtty Balasy has adapted due to constant analytical design, rather than periodic changes in content. Textual signals of self-censorship, such as disclaimers, encrypted formulations and pseudonyms is confirmed only in one documented case - the statement of Jurtty Balasy dated April 2019. Oyan, Qazaqstan, and Assiya Tulesova continue to directly name specific officials, ministries, and criminal cases throughout all four periods.

The second hypothesis about language manipulation was confirmed for Oyan, Qazaqstan and not confirmed for Assiya Tulesova and Jurtty Balasy. Oyan, Qazaqstan have been bilingual since their very first post and added English for the first time in January 2025, appealing to international human rights organizations. This is the only documented case of attempting the boomerang effect activation in this study. Tulesova communicated mainly in Russian, using Kazakh only in hashtags. Jurtty Balasy remained fully Russian-speaking throughout all three periods. This suggests that the choice of language is determined not by the intensification of repression, but by the strategy of working with the audience.

The third hypothesis about the suspension of online activism seems to be supported only for Tulesova's communication. Her thirteen-month silence from January 2022 to February 2023 was the most striking example of silence as an adaptation in this study. Oyan, Qazaqstan continued to post even during the Internet shutdown in January 2022. Jurtty Balasy also did not stop working and responded to every pressure from the authorities with a new video. This corresponds to the "puzzle punishment" by Davenport (2007): the same pressure leads to different outcomes for different actors.

The fourth hypothesis about the platform change was not confirmed for any of the three actors. Instead of switching from more censored platforms to less censored ones, Oyan, Qazaqstan, and Jurtty Balasy duplicated content on multiple platforms simultaneously. Tulesova remained on the

same platform throughout the entire period. This confirms Kurmanov's argument (2024) that the state is not able to block all platforms at the same time, and activists are using this space.

The main conclusion of the study is that the nature of communicative adaptation is determined primarily by the type of actor. The collective structure of Oyan, Qazaqstan, and the Jurttyñ Balasy team format made it possible to distribute the personal costs of publicity among several people. Therefore, they continued to communicate even during the most acute periods of repression. Assiya Tulesova, as an individual activist, bore all the legal and personal risks alone, which eventually led to silence.

This thesis contributes to the literature by integrating bilingualism as a central dimension of communicative adaptation. In a postcolonial context, language choice is not merely a cultural marker but a strategic decision involving audience building, decolonial positioning, and the activation of the boomerang effect (Keck and Sikkink, 1998) through trilingualism in moments of crisis. By adding English to reach international observers, activists attempted to mobilize external pressure against the regime. This study shows that while movement-based actors can manage these multiple roles, single-person and team-based actors remain constrained by the need to preserve their primary Russian-speaking audience. The literature on information autocracy (Roberts, 2018; Earl, Maher and Pan, 2022) mainly describes how regimes manage information and how activists are pushed to self-censorship, withdrawal or platform migration at the level of the entire activist field. This thesis contributes to this literature by showing that within the same information autocracy, three pro-democracy actors facing the same regime adapt in different ways, depending on their organizational form. Communicative adaptation in information autocracies was not the same for all participants, and structural differences are explained by those who bear the personal costs of public visibility. Following the Poell (2014) and the public formulation of “red lines” by State Councilor Yerlan Karin (2024), this thesis documents how the state and activists adapt to each other in a continuous cycle. The state defines acceptable boundaries of political speech and signals them through public statements and coercive actions, while activists adjust their

communication practices to address political issues without crossing these boundaries. The episode of Jurtty Balasy, which occurred at the NPP referendum campaign in October 2024, most clearly illustrates this cycle: his direct political position made public in contrast to his routine educational framing triggered a call to the police station eighteen days later, after which he returned to his usual educational framing. Thus, each cycle of repression encourages activists to reconsider the ways of political communication, rather than stop it.

There are several limitations to this research. All three cases are located in Almaty, so the results may not reflect the situation in other cities and regions of Kazakhstan. In addition, the analysis is based only on publicly available posts on social networks, which does not allow to see the private or personal communication of activists. Future research can develop this work in three directions. First, it is worth comparing more individual activists to understand whether prolonged silence is a typical reaction for individual activism under authoritarianism, or whether this is a feature of Tulesova's case. Secondly, the observation that the audience is more willing to share symbolic and historical posts of activists than their direct calls to action needs to be tested on broader data. Thirdly, it is important to study what happens to activist networks when one participant becomes silent. This study showed that other activists are becoming more active at this point as in the case of Oyan, Qazaqstan's February-January 2025 campaign in support Yensebek Temirlan, Assem Zhapisheva and Akmaral Zhakibayeva. Tracking such shifts within the network will help to better understand how communicative adaptation persists in the long term.

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I used AI tool, Chatgpt in a limited way during the preparation of the thesis. It was used for language assistance, improving clarity and helping organize chapter structure. The main arguments, research design or theoretical direction was formed without the use of AI tool.

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