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PUBLIC INTEREST AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN ASTANA: A COMPARATIVE
STUDY OF CONTENTIOUS PROJECTS

АСТАНАДАҒЫ ҚОҒАМДЫҚ МҮДДЕ ЖӘНЕ ҚАЛАЛЫҚ ДАМУ: ДАУЛЫ
ЖОБАЛАРДЫ САЛЫСТЫРМАЛЫ ЗЕРТТЕУ

ОБЩЕСТВЕННЫЙ ИНТЕРЕС И ГОРОДСКОЕ РАЗВИТИЕ В АСТАНЕ:
СРАВНИТЕЛЬНОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ СПОРНЫХ ПРОЕКТОВ

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF MA PROGRAMS AT NAZARBAYEV UNIVERSITY:
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Abstract

This study explores how the concept of "public interest" is constructed in land-related conflicts in Astana, Kazakhstan. Using Growth Machine Theory (Logan & Molotch, 2007) as interpretative framework and Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as methodological tool, this study examines two conflicts over green spaces: the drainage and development of the Malyi Taldykol lake group (the main case, 2020–present) and the Linear Park conflict (the contrasting case, 2022–2023). Both cases take place in the same city, at overlapping time period, and involve the same types of actors — the Akimat of Astana (the municipal administration of Astana), developers, activists, and local residents — but have divergent outcomes.

The central argument is that public interest in Astana is not a neutral or objective norm. It is actively constructed through language and institutional practice. The Akimat and affiliated structures consistently defined public interest in terms of urban development and housing. Activists and experts perceive it as ecological and recreational value of the urban space for people who already live there.

The empirical analysis identifies four main discursive strategies used by the “growth coalition”, adapted from Growth Machine Theory to the Kazakhstani context, where the state plays a more dominant role than in the original American model and where the language of "state necessity" replaces the typical market arguments about jobs creation and tax revenues.

The key finding is that although in both cases civic counter-discourse was strong, but institutional context has more significant role. In Malyi Taldykol case, a complex configuration of institutions including the Land Commission, the General Plan, the courts, and public hearings — created a “path dependency” effect that allowed the growth coalition

to promote compromise solutions without changing the development trajectory. In the Linear Park case, the absence of such complex institutional actors allowed activists successfully challenged the official discourse, which led to the restoration of the park's natural status.

The study contributes to research on authoritarian urbanism, post-Soviet urban politics, and the discursive strategies of the Growth Machine Theory, demonstrating that urban conflicts in undemocratic contexts are not only about space but also about the very meaning of public interest, and that discourse matters, but only within the constraints imposed by institutional context.

Keywords: public interest, critical discourse analysis, urban conflicts, Astana, Growth Machine Theory

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Background and context of the study

Astana is an interesting urban project, where, on the one hand, the ambitious plans of the authorities to turn the city into a “world-class capital” collide, and on the other hand, the desires of the residents to preserve recreational areas and participate in decision-making. The transfer of the capital from Almaty in 1997 was a deliberate act of state: the new city was intended to embody the image of a modern, sovereign, and ambitious Kazakhstan. In order to meet the status of a new modern capital in the post-Soviet space, a comprehensive plan was developed for the development of new areas, and it was decided to develop the left bank of the city, which had previously been largely undeveloped (the Ishim River effectively divides Astana into two parts). Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa designed a new master plan with a focus on harmony between nature and the city. Spectacular futuristic buildings designed by international architects appeared, such a shopping mall in the form of a giant tent and a pyramid hosting a conference and a concert hall, both designed by renowned British architect Norman Foster. The Left Bank, with its futuristic skyscrapers and monumental avenues, was built not so much for the convenience of its residents, but rather for the outside view of investors, diplomats, and the state itself.

As Scott (1998) argues such projects follow a special logic: the state sees the territory and the population through simplified, “readable” schemes that are convenient for management, but often ignore the real needs of the people living in this territory. Astana is a clear example of how the state’s “readability” of space is embodied in grandiose architectural forms: straight avenues, geometrically correct buildings, and ceremonial squares create a city that looks good on a master plan and from a bird’s-eye view but does not always work on a daily basis. But good aesthetics do not necessarily translate into practicality. Rapid development of new areas can

inevitably lead to problems such as the displacement of residents, the destruction of old neighborhoods, and environmental problems.

In Astana, one of the most problematic features of this rapid urban development is the drainage of a group of lakes called Malyi Taldykol. I remember this lake when Astana was not yet the capital. We went to my grandfather's summer country house, which was not far from one of the lakes. A few decades later, in 2020 I heard in an interview on YouTube that the lakes were being drained in order to develop the area. Activists from the lake protection movement reported that flamingos, which are rare in this region, were visiting the lake. Despite the constant pumping of water and the filling of the lake with construction and household waste, many birds continued to live there. Astana is a city built on the steppe, and the fact that there are lakes with birds in the city can be considered a stroke of luck. The lakes could be used to attract tourists, which aligns with Kisho Kurokawa's concept of the symbiosis between nature and the city. In addition to their aesthetic value, the lakes are also important because they act as regulators of groundwater levels, and if they were completely drained, it could disrupt the balance and lead to flooding. Despite the public protests, the authorities continue to drain this group of lakes. The authorities' insistence on developing this particular area is surprising, given that there is a significant amount of vacant land surrounding the lakes that could be developed and utilized. Activists have raised concerns about the human right to nature. However, the authorities have argued that the lakes did not exist before the relocation of the capital and are merely result from precipitation, which is not entirely accurate. This clash of interpretations made me think about the concept of "public interest" in urban politics. Different actors have their own interpretation of the public interest. In most cases, the public interest is constructed by those with decision-making power and is used as a rhetorical tool to promote projects that benefit the elites.

However, as some examples show (such as the conflict over the Malyi Taldykol group of lakes), the rhetoric of the authorities can be challenged by activists and civil society, who offer

an alternative understanding of the public interest through the preservation of nature and accessibility to urban spaces. This discursive struggle is at the center of this study.

1.2 Research Question

The main research question is further developed through three sub-questions. First, what discursive strategies are used by coalitions of the Akimat of Astana, construction companies, and affiliated structures to legitimize their definitions of the public interest? Second, what alternative definitions of public interest are proposed by activists and experts, and how do they interpret the use value of urban space? Third, what differences in discursive strategies can be observed across the two cases, and how do they relate to their divergent outcomes?

1.3 A brief justification of the relevance

In the existing literature on the significance and symbolic of Astana, research focuses on the symbolic and representative role of Astana as the capital and the role of the First President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, in creating the image of the city as a showcase of Kazakhstan's development and modernization. Researchers analyze how urban planning reflects grandiose and ambitious plans to create a showcase image of the capital. These studies touch upon the interests of citizens but do not explore it in depth, and do not analyze the public interest as a clash between different actors in urban politics. Moreover, there is a lack of research on the discursive mechanisms that legitimize the exclusion of citizens from planning processes. A discursive analysis would allow us to explore the hidden mechanisms that promote the economic interests of the authorities.

Therefore, this study fills these gaps by shifting the focus from analyzing the creation of a showcase image of the city to the discursive struggle surrounding the public interest and the mechanisms of legitimizing decisions in Astana.

1.4 Brief description of the theoretical framework and methodology

This study uses the of Growth Machine Theory (Logan & Molotch, 2007) as an interpretative theoretical framework. This theory provides a tool for studying the conflict between the use value and the economic value of urban spaces. Although this theory is usually applied for economic analysis of class struggles in cities, it can also be applied for analyzing discursive strategies of legitimation. According to this theory, urban growth does not occur automatically; it is promoted by growth coalitions (property owners, local authorities, developers, and the media), but to gain the support of citizens, growth coalitions attempt to disguise their economic interests as public interests. To achieve this, they develop discursive strategies that are later expanded into an adapted version (Cox, 1999; Molotch, 1976; Boyle, 1999; Cox & Mair, 1999).

This theory has not yet been applied to the analysis of urban conflicts in non-democratic settings, but its application should be adapted to the Kazakhstani context with caution. First, unlike the American theory, which emphasizes private land ownership and landholders as key actors, the Kazakhstani context should emphasize the dominant role of the state as the landowner, and accordingly, state structures become the key initiator of urban processes. Secondly, the motivation of key players is different for Kazakhstani coalition actors - the Akimat (the municipal administration of Astana), developers, and pro-government structures - may not be maximizing the exchange value of land but rather demonstrating political loyalty and gaining access to administrative resources. In accordance with these limitations, the discursive strategies used in the adapted version of the growth machine theory study (Cox, 1999; Molotch, 1976; Boyle, 1999; Cox & Mair, 1999) are also used in a limited sense. In contrast to the classical interpretation, where the key discursive strategies are an appeal to tax revenues, competition between cities, and job growth, this study used the discursive ideologies of "redemptive ideologies" (the frame of "sacrifice for a higher purpose") (Cox & Mair, 1999), "value-free growth" (the frame of "growth as a benefit for all") (Molotch, 1976), the strategy of

"demobilizing the opposition" (Cox, 1999), which are more aimed at promoting the idea of "good for all" and replacing the discussion of the real costs of growth (for example, environmental degradation) with symbolic benefits.

The definition of public interest in this study is understood as the long-term benefits for citizens from the use of urban space, including accessibility to it, as well as its environmental and social significance.

This study uses an interpretative comparative analysis of divergent cases. The analysis is based on a comparison of two urban conflicts in Astana: the development of the Malyi Taldykol lakes (the main case) and the Linear Park project (an additional contrasting case). Both cases unfold in the same city, during the same time period (2019–2023), involve the same types of actors, but have different outcomes (despite the high public resonance, the group of lakes Malyi Taldykol was almost completely filled in and drained as a result of manipulative actions by the authorities; whereas Linear Park was successfully defended and restored to its status as a recreational area after protests against its development), which allows us to compare their discursive strategies.

The method of analysis is Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992; 1995), which helps to study discourse as a social practice through which decisions are legitimized and alternative positions are marginalized. The analysis is conducted at three levels: textual analysis (analysis of vocabulary, metaphors, nominalization, and transitivity); analysis of discursive practice (production and dissemination of texts); and analysis of social practice (how discourse is reflected in urban politics, considering contextual conditions).

Textual and intertextual analyses of discursive strategies in the two cases revealed certain strategies that led to different outcomes. In the case of Malyi Taldykol, despite the

activists' successful efforts to restore the lake's status as a water body, various manipulative strategies employed by the authorities resulted in the almost complete drainage of all the lakes. In the case of the Linear Park, the activists successfully institutionalized a counter-discourse, forcing the authorities to restore the park's status as a recreational area. However, analysis of social practice revealed the importance of considering the institutional context. Unlike the Linear Park case, the Malyi Taldykol case involved a complex multi-level institutional configuration (the General Plan of Astana, land commission, and judicial system), which can hinder institutional change even if the civil counter-discourse is successful.

1.4 Thesis Structure

Chapter 1. The introduction provides background and context information, justifies the relevance, outlines the research question, and provides a brief description of the methodology and theoretical framework.

Chapter 2. The literature review analyzes the concepts of public interest in urban theory, provides a detailed exposition of the Growth Machine Theory and the theory of urban regimes, and analyzes the literature on authoritarian urbanism and Astana.

Chapter 3. The theoretical framework of the study provides a detailed exposition of the Growth Machine Theory as an interpretative theoretical framework, explains the key concepts (“use value”, “exchange value”, growth coalitions, and anti-growth movements), the definition of public interest in this study, the typology of discursive strategies used in the empirical analysis, and the adaptation of the theory to the Kazakhstani context.

Chapter 4. The research methodology provides a justification for the use of interpretative comparative analysis of divergent cases, provides a detailed description of the three-level model of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992; 1995), defines the

procedure for thematic coding and data analysis, the principles for selecting interview participants, and the limitations of the study.

Chapter 5. Empirical analysis of two cases: the chronology of the conflict, the construction of space (official discourse vs. civil counter-discourse), the struggle for expertise and participation, and the outcome of the conflict. The chapter concludes with a comparative analysis of two models of constructing “public interest”.

Chapter 6. The conclusion synthesizes the findings of the entire work and suggests directions for future research.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 From the question “who rules?” to the Growth Machine Theory

In the literature on urban politics and urban governance, there are several theories that have sought answers to questions about who holds power in the city and what their goals are. Elitists have argued that real power is concentrated in the hands of a small business elite, acting through informal networks rather than through public institutions (Lynd & Lynd, 1929; Hunter, 1953). The elite is small and stable in composition, and its members participate in urban politics primarily at the preliminary stage of decision-making, remaining in the shadows. Pluralists objected and argued that power is distributed among many competing groups, political institutions are the key actors, and business are not as determinant (Dahl, 1961). However, both approaches, while describing who makes decisions, did not explain why these decisions often benefit some and not others.

Marxist researchers shifted the focus from individual actors to structures. Space is produced in the interests of capital, land, housing, and culture are turned into commodities (Lefebvre, 2003). Harvey developed this logic: urban space becomes a tool of capitalism, but it

also becomes an arena for resistance, where alternative forms of "urban rights" can emerge (Harvey, 2009). At the same time, the Marxist approach, which explained everything through the logic of capital, left little room for specific actions by actors and could not explain why, in some cases, the interests of residents were taken into account and in others they were not.

In later theories, the central question is not "Who rules?" but "For what purpose?" The answer to this question is provided by the Growth Machine Theory by Molotch and Logan (2007) and "urban regimes" by Stone (1989). The works of Molotch and Logan (2007), Stone (1989), Elkin (1987), Pierre (1999), Stoker (1995), Harding (1995), Gelman (2011), and Ledyayev V. (2008/2012) represent significant contributions to the study of theories of "growth machines" and "urban regimes". These theories emerged as an alternative to elitist, pluralistic, and neo-Marxist approaches that overemphasized the class factor and the power of capital, while overlooking the specific activities of participants in urban politics. According to Growth Machine theory (Molotch and Logan, 2007), the growth of the city does not happen by itself, it happens because of the influential groups, the so-called "growth machines". The main goal of growth is to extract maximum profit from urban land by investing capital in it. Often, the costs of such growth are environmental degradation and displacement of residents (gentrification) from their neighborhoods (Molotch and Logan, 2007).

2.2 Political urbanism in authoritarian regimes

2.2.1 Exclusion of citizens from the urban agenda

The construction of new capitals from scratch as political projects is not unique to the post-Soviet space. Brasília, built in the late 1950s, is one of the most studied examples of a capital city constructed as a deliberate act of state ideology. Holston (1989) shows that Brasília was designed not for the people who would live there, but for the image of a modernizing nation.

The city looked perfect on the master plan, but it was not convenient for everyday life: the streets were not suitable for pedestrians, there were huge spaces and monumental squares, and informal settlements of workers who built the city but were not allowed to live in it were rapidly growing around the center. Scott (1998) asserts that such projects consistently disappoint their residents; the state sees the city through simplified schemes that are easy to manage from above but ignore the real life from below. It is this understanding that the city is designed to be viewed from the outside, rather than lived from the inside, that unites Brasilia and Astana.

Post-Soviet studies of urbanism also examine the exclusion of ordinary people from the urban planning agenda. With this method of management, all important decisions are made from above. The authorities and developers decide for themselves where, how and what to build, without asking people's opinions. In such cities, beautiful and expensive projects are most often built - administrative buildings, exhibition halls, fountains and embankments to show the success of the country, making the city absolutely facade. Although studies by various authors such as Staletović (2024), Bekus (2017), Mascaro (2024), Čamprag (2024), Zhu (1999), and Zhao et al. (2024) cover different geographical regions (North Macedonia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, China and the countries of the former Yugoslavia), but all agree that urban space can be used as a tool to strengthen state power, promote ideological narratives and achieve economic goals, often bypassing the interests of citizens.

The general theme of the study is the topic of inequality and exclusion of people from the urban agenda. Ordinary people can be excluded on religious grounds (the exclusion of large Muslim and Albanian populations from cultural companies in North Macedonia) (Staletović, 2024), displaced from their homes due to the transformation of historical areas into middle-class consumption facilities (Mascaro, 2024). Inequality in the urban environment can lead to conflicts between the state and the people, and then the people begin to resist. This resistance can take many forms: it can manifest itself in a silent form, when residents refuse to move to the

"non-native old town" (Mascaro, 2024), as well as in the form of the emergence of network coalitions of activists and residents in the struggle for the "right to the city"(Zhao et al., 2024).

2.2.2 Astana as an example of authoritarian urbanism

The topic of inequality in the urban environment can be traced back to the literature on Astana. By creating a facade and grandiose city with large-scale and ambitious projects in the form of the light rail transport (LRT), which was supposed to relieve the city's roads but was built with years-long delays, and the international exhibition EXPO-2017, for which a whole complex of buildings and infrastructure was constructed, urban planners lose sight of the real city: "the represented Astana denies the material, social, and even temporal conditions of the city 'on the ground'" (Laszczkowski, 2011, p.85). The division of the city into the "grandiose" Left Bank and the "Soviet" Right Bank creates a "spatial dichotomy" of the city, which exists in two dimensions: for ordinary residents and foreign observers and guests (Koch, 2010; Thompson, 2014). The utopian appearance of the city is another cross-cutting theme for urban space research in Astana. The authors believe that an almost theatrical version of the city of the future can mask existing social inequalities (Laszczkowski, 2015). Exploring the links between the city and various actors, the authors also analyze the practice of excluding ordinary citizens from city life (Bissenova, 2015; Thompson, 2014; Koch, 2010; Laszczkowski, 2011, 2015; Fauve, 2015). This exclusion is made by dividing the city into an old and a new one, the inconvenience of an urban environment where there is no place for walking, and high prices in new shopping malls. In turn, ordinary citizens respond to the city by rejecting it, considering it too inconvenient, "futuristic and unrealistic," giving various nicknames to urban objects (for example, "lighter" or "chupa-chups" for Baiterek), as well as mockingly evaluating Nazarbayev's monuments (Fauve, 2015, p. 11). Analyzing the exclusion of ordinary people and activists from the urban agenda, O'Connor (2025) notes the adaptive activity of civic

participation in urban protests in Astana and notes the possibility of interaction with the authorities, which allows activists to remain protected from government repression (O'Connor, 2025).

2.2.3 The state and business in Kazakhstan's construction sector

In Kazakhstan, the boundary between public and private interests in urban development is virtually nonexistent. Sanghera and Satybaldieva (2021) describe the alliance between political elites, banks, and developers that focused on extracting rent and usually neglects needs of people. Large construction companies are often owned by people who are personally connected to political leadership, and access to lucrative government contracts and resources from quasi-governmental structures (such as the Samruk-Kazyna holding company) is distributed through loyalty (Franke et al., 2009).

In this case, the government plays an active rather than a passive role. Local authorities transfer land plots to private developers for commercial development. Meanwhile the housing of low-income residents is demolished without adequate compensation (Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2021).

The case of Astana clearly shows this dynamic. The government prioritizes mega-projects. For example, the construction of the EXPO-2017 facilities cost an estimated three to five billion dollars, while affordable housing remains in short supply (Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2021). The current state housing programs are focused primarily on the middle class and officials, leaving most of working citizens without options.

This context is crucial for this study. It explains why the growth coalition in Astana is not a horizontal alliance of independent players, but a vertical structure where access to land and building permits is determined by proximity to the state. This is why the public interest can easily become a rhetorical cover for the interests of a narrow, politically connected elite, which

is the central focus of this analysis. The structural conditions for a strong growth coalition in Astana are also reinforced by the city's demographic and economic dynamics. There are 100,000 new residents who come to Astana annually¹, creating massive demand for housing. Construction has become the economic driver of the city, making it difficult to slow down development process. In this context, the rhetoric of "solving the housing crisis" becomes a powerful discursive strategy for the growth coalition.

2.4 Gaps in Literature

There are several omissions in the literature on Astana. Most research focuses on Nazarbayev as the driving force behind the city's creation (Fauve, 2015; Koch 2013; Laruelle, 2016; Laszczkowski, 2011, 2018; Bissenova, 2017; O'Connor, 2025), on architects and foreign designers who shaped the appearance of the city (Shelekpayev, 2020), or on urban development in Astana (Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2021). The existing literature recognizes the exclusion citizens from decisions. But does not analyze discursive mechanisms that lead to the exclusion. Researchers describe architectural representations, but they ignore the rhetoric of public interest that growth coalitions use to justify their decisions.

In this study, the Growth Machine Theory is used as an interpretive framework to analyze the conflict between use value and exchange value. Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992) is used to identify the discursive strategies that allow various actors (the Akimat, developers, activists) to construct their versions of the public interest.

The analysis of the literature allows us to draw several key conclusions that are significant for the study of the construction of public interest in the urban conflicts of Astana.

¹ <https://astanatimes.com/2025/09/kazakhstans-migration-flows-lean-strongly-toward-cities/>

First, public interest is not an objective norm, but a constructed concept. Public interest can serve as a rhetorical tool for elites to legitimize their decisions.

Second, the Growth Machine Theory (Logan & Molotch, 2007) provides an effective analytical framework for studying how different definitions of public interest collide in urban conflicts. The central distinction between use value and exchange value, as well as discourse strategies in this theory help to explain how the public interest becomes a tool for legitimizing the private goals of growth coalitions.

Third, the literature on authoritarian urbanism and, in particular, on Astana (Laszczkowski, 2011, 2015; Koch, 2010; Thompson, 2014; Bissenova, 2015; Fauve, 2015; O'Connor, 2025) examines in detail the architectural and ideological aspects of the capital but says little about how exactly decisions in the field of urban policy are made and legitimized, who is involved in shaping the agenda, and why some projects are publicly approved and others are protested. This study aims to fill these gaps.

Chapter 3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Growth Machine Theory as an analytical tool

This study uses Growth Machine Theory (Molotch, 1976; Logan & Molotch, 2007) as an interpretative framework. According to this theory, the city is not seen as a neutral space serving the interests of all citizens, but rather as an arena of struggle between different groups of actors. At the same time, urban space acts both as a place of living for residents (“use value”) and as an economic asset for those who profit from it (“exchange value”).

Unlike neo-Marxist approaches (Lefebvre, 2003; Harvey, 2009), which focus on capital as an abstract structure, the Growth Machine Theory allows to explore specific coalitions of actors and their strategies for advancing their interests. Unlike existing studies of Astana, which

often view the city primarily as a symbol of national identity (Laszczkowski, 2012; Koch, 2013), this approach focuses on urban conflicts and how different groups articulate and defend their interests.

Key to this study is the emphasis of Growth Machine Theory on the public rhetoric of development coalitions. As Logan and Moloch (2007) emphasize, urban projects are rarely presented as expressions of private interests. On the contrary, they are legitimized through the discourses of “modernization,” “development,” and “unconditional good.” The private interests of a narrow group of developers and their affiliated structures are disguised as the “interests of the city as a whole” through language and specific rhetoric. Therefore, analyzing the public statements of actors allows us to identify how different groups attempt to present their interests as an expression of public interest in urban politics.

The Growth Machine Theory (Logan & Molotch, 2007) provides analytical concepts for this purpose, which will be explored in the following sections. First, it is the distinction between use value and exchange value, which allows us to identify the values that different actors are advocating for. Second, it is the concept of growth coalition, which helps us to identify the actors who are promoting urban development for their own interests. Third, it is the analysis of the discursive strategies that growth coalitions use to legitimize their projects and neutralize opposition (Molotch, 1976; Cox, 1999; Cox & Mair, 1999).

3.2 Key concepts

Use value and exchange value

The Growth Machine Theory is based on a simple but important observation: the same place means different things to different actors. (Logan & Molotch, 2007). For developers and local authorities, land is viewed as commodity that can be bought, sold, or rented for profit. This is what Logan and Molotch call exchange value (Logan & Molotch, 2007). The main way to

increase the exchange value of land is through intensive use of the territory (building on vacant land, replacing low-rise buildings with high-rise office buildings).

For ordinary residents, the same place means something different: it is a place where they live, socialize, and go to parks and schools. A familiar environment helps people to feel psychological and physical security (Molotch & Logan, 2007). This everyday relationship with urban space is what the theory calls use value.

These forms of value often oppose each other. Especially when the same territory is simultaneously viewed as an investment resource and as a daily living environment. The pursuit for exchange value often leads to social costs, including the demolition of old buildings, the destruction of local communities, and the "obvious problems of increased air and water pollution, traffic congestion, and overuse of natural resources" (Molotch, 1976, p. 318).

For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that the conflict between use value and exchange value is not only a matter of material interests, but also a matter of public rhetoric. Different actors seek to present their interpretations of development and the public good as the most legitimate expression of public interest. At the same time, use value and exchange value are not "objective" and neutral economic categories, but discursive constructs that help different actors to articulate their versions of the public interest.

Growth coalitions

The key mechanism of urban growth in Logan and Molotch's theory (2007) is the association of actors most interested in increasing the exchange value of land and in promoting projects that increase its economic value (Logan & Molotch, 2007). The most influential members of such coalitions typically include landowners, developers, investors, financial actors, and representatives of the construction sector. In addition, growth coalitions may include a broader range of auxiliary players, including media outlets, universities, sports organizations,

and other institutions that are interested in or dependent on urban growth (Logan & Molotch, 2007).

Local governments are also often part of a growth coalition. Urban growth is not only associated with increased tax revenue, it also gives local authorities a way to justify their decisions and present urban projects as being in public interest. As Jonas and Wilson note, growth machines shape “what public values should be” (Jonas & Wilson, 1999, p. 8). It is important to note that the growth coalition in this study is not necessarily a formal alliance, but rather a group of actors whose interests converge around the growth of the exchange value.

A significant characteristic of growth coalitions is their ability to construct public discourse that presents private interests as the “common good” (Cox, 1999). Through ideological strategies growth coalitions seek to present their projects as socially beneficial and neutralize opposition.

Anti-growth coalition

Anti-growth coalition is a set of actors challenging the dominant view of development and appealing to the use value of urban space. Anti-growth coalition includes local residents, environmental groups, homeowner associations, and socially oriented actors (Logan & Molotch, 2007; Levine, 2021). Through participation in public hearings, legal actions and public campaigns and using discursive strategies this group appeals to environmental safety, and the preservation of green spaces.

Anti-growth movements face lack of significant resources whereas growth coalitions have greater financial, political, and informational capabilities to control major media channels (DeFilippis, Mollenkopf & Rodriguez, 2018). As Boyle points out, the growth coalition’s

discourse sometimes can lead to the "cognitive disability"² of the anti-growth coalition, undermining its ability to formulate an alternative agenda (Boyle, 1999).

3.3 Definition of public interest in this study

Despite the central role of the concept of public interest in urban planning theories, researchers emphasize its uncertainty and ambiguity. The concept of public interest has a dual role in urban planning: it both legitimizes specific decisions and provides a criterion for evaluating them. This is why it is so important, and why it is so vulnerable. The more significant a concept becomes in political discourse, the more it is appropriated by those who want to present their interests as universal.

Three main approaches exist in the literature for defining public interest, and each has its own limitations. The utilitarian approach offers a simple solution: add up individual preferences and accept what is beneficial to the majority (Zhao et al., 2024). In practice, however, this means that the interests of residents of a particular neighborhood, users of a particular park can be legally ignored in the name of the “majority.” The unitary approach, which is characteristic of socialist and post-socialist systems, goes even further: the public interest is not formed from below, but is imposed from above as a single “common value” formulated by the state (Čolić & Nedović-Budić, 2021). This makes the concept a particularly convenient tool for power, as it is almost impossible to challenge it, as the state itself is the only legitimate interpreter of public interest. The communicative approach seems more democratic, as the public interest emerges through dialogue between competing parties (Zhao et al., 2024). This approach defines public interest as a result of a dialogue between participants. It also assumes that participants are equal, which is rare in urban conflicts. Developers and authorities have more resources and power than

² Cognitive disability describes a process by which growth coalitions undermine the ability of anti-growth groups to formulate coherent opposition to dominant urban development discourses. The result is that resistance becomes depoliticized before it can gain real traction (Boyle, 1999).

ordinary people. Thus, planning institutions like zoning are used by authorities to legitimize their decisions.

In this study, the public interest is understood as long-term benefit from the use of urban space, including accessibility, environmental and social significance for the residents (Nourian & Dayarian, 2023). This concept serves as an analytical framework. The study assumes that the concept of public interest is not predetermined but becomes as subject of discursive struggle between different actors.

3.4 Discourse strategies of growth coalition

In Growth Machine Theory, the public interest is not considered as a neutral or objective category. Instead, it is shaped through a struggle of various actors to present their interests as a common good (Logan & Molotch, 2007). Growth coalitions use specific strategies to mobilize support and neutralize opposition (Molotch, 1976; Cox, 1999; Cox & Mair, 1988; Boyle, 1999). Based on theoretical sources, several strategies can be identified that will be used in this study.

“Value-free growth” strategy

This is a fundamental strategy described by Harvey Molotch and John Logan (Molotch, 1976; Logan & Molotch, 2007), which attempts to “deemphasize the connection between growth and exchange values and to reinforce the link between growth goals and better lives for the majority” (Logan & Molotch, 1987, p. 62). Urban development is presented as an unconditional good necessary for the “better lives of the majority.” The key arguments are job creation and tax base expansion, although in reality growth often redistributes resources without increasing overall welfare. Within this ideology growth is portrayed as a natural and progressive process that does not require critical reflection.

Redemptive strategy

This strategy is used when traditional community bonds have been disrupted and residents are experiencing a crisis of identity (Cox & Mair, 1988). Growth is presented as the only way to “save” the city from decline. Residents are convinced that they must make sacrifices (agree to the demolition of their homes and the deterioration of the environment) in order for their city to simply “survive” in global competition. “They must accept new airports and free-way pollution...if the cause is worthy and so is the sacrifice on its behalf” (Cox & Mair, 1988, p.318).

The ideologies of the local community and civic boosterism

In this theory, boosterism is not seen as an independent ideology, but rather as a discursive strategy. This strategy appeals to the pride and sense of belonging of residents towards their city: “government funds support ‘boosterism’ of various sorts: locality-promotion ads in business journals and travel publications, city-sponsored parade” (Molotch, 1976, p.314). Boostering creates a "pseudo-community" by offering residents "the hope of living in a major league or world-class city" (Cox & Mair, 1988; Boyle, 1999). Culture, sports events, flagship projects become tools for diverting attention from the redistribution of resources in favor of a narrow group of developers. Thus, boosting is a tool used by elites to create a sense of pride among residents and their willingness to support development projects. In Astana, this strategy takes on a particularly explicit form. The entire image of Astana is built as a world-class city, through iconic large-scale architectural projects such as the international specialized exhibition Expo-2017 or Astana LRT (light rail transport) project. This narrative creates a specific discursive framework: development is not just acceptable, but a source of pride, it helps to attract investors and tourists.

Discursive neutralization of opposition

To suppress resistance, "growth machines" use tactics of stigmatization and depoliticization. Opponents of growth are portrayed as "romantics" or "irrational" individuals who do not understand the laws of economics (Molotch, 1976, p.327). The dominant discourse of boosterism permeates the public space so much that protesters are unable to articulate an alternative and are presented by the authorities as "cognitively disabled" (Boyle, 1999, p.69). Critics of growth can be labeled as "selfish" and detrimental to the city's future.

Thus, the growth machine discursive strategies are a complex set of strategies that involve both the positive representation of growth and the marginalization of opposition. Depending on the context, growth coalitions may use different combinations of these strategies.

3.5 Adaptation of the theory to the Kazakhstani context

Despite the fact that Growth Machine Theory was created to study American cities, Molotch (1999) argued that "the growth machine approach is still relevant for understanding cities in different cultures and countries, "as long as land and buildings are commodities" (Molotch, 1999, p. 251). The theory has been applied to other capitalist countries, as well as to authoritarian China (Lin, 2002). Applying the Growth Machine Theory to the post-Soviet context requires a certain adaptation.

In the classical American model, the growth coalition is a horizontal alliance between private developers and local governments. Local municipalities have their own tax base and a degree of political autonomy, which means they can genuinely negotiate with developers or resist pressure from above. In Kazakhstan, the picture looks different. The Akimat (the municipal administration of Astana) is not an independent political actor. Power in Kazakhstan is centralized, and key decisions about land, budgets and development priorities are ultimately shaped by the national government (Thibault & Insebayeva, 2024). The Akimat does not have the kind of fiscal and political autonomy that American or Western European municipalities

enjoy. This means that in the Kazakhstani context, it is more accurate to describe the growth coalition not as a horizontal partnership between equals, but as a vertically organized structure in which the state — at both national and municipal levels — sets the terms, and private developers operate within those terms. Access to land and construction permits flows through the state, which makes political alignment a precondition for participation in urban development.

In these conditions, the increasing exchange value mechanisms include both market and administrative tools. This, in turn, affects the nature of discursive strategies: the rhetoric of "state necessity" and "public good" become particularly important. Thus, in the post-Soviet context, discourse is associated not only with the market logic of growth, but also with the logic of public administration and political coordination.

The adapted typology of discursive strategies of “growth machines” presented in the previous section (“value-free growth”, local community and boosterism ideologies, redemptive ideologies, and discursive neutralization of the opposition) allows us to better understand how certain interpretations of development and public interest gain institutional advantage in urban conflicts, while others are marginalized.

Since the public interest is not considered an objectively defined category in this theoretical framework, but rather the result of a struggle between competing interpretations of urban development, it becomes particularly important for empirical analysis to examine how these interpretations are formulated and legitimized in the public sphere. In this work, the analytical tool used is Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992; 1995), which allows us to consider discourse as a form of social practice related to power, legitimacy, and the consolidation of dominant ideas about urban development. CDA is used in this study as a methodological approach that will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Thus, the Growth Machine Theory allows us to view urban politics as a battleground over the use of land and the right to determine the direction of urban development. Within this logic, the public interest is understood as a discursively contested category through which various actors seek to legitimize their visions of urban development. In this study, these ideas are used as an interpretive framework for analyzing urban conflicts in Astana.

Chapter 4. Research methodology

This study uses an interpretative comparative analysis of contrasting cases with divergent outcomes, based on the comparison of two urban cases in Astana: the project of development of the territory of the group of lakes of Malyi Taldykol and the Linear Park project. This approach allows to focus not only on formal institutional decisions, but mostly on the discursive mechanisms of power, through which certain interpretations of public interest begin to dominate in urban policy, while alternative positions are silenced. The methodological approach is directly derived from the theoretical framework of the study, which is based on the Growth Machine Theory (Logan & Molotch, 2007), where the city is viewed as a place where the commodity value of land and the consumer value of urban space collide. The theory is used as an interpretative framework that allows for the categorization of discursive strategies.

The main method of analysis is Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992; 1995), which views language as a social practice through which power is produced and reproduced, decisions are legitimized, and alternative positions are marginalized.

4.1 Comparative case study

For this study, an interpretative comparative analysis of contrasting cases with divergent outcomes is used. The logic of this design is based on contrastive comparison. The selected cases are similar in their key contextual characteristics (one city, overlapping time period, the same types of actors, and a similar type of conflict), but lead to different outcomes. Both cases

take place within the same jurisdiction (the city of Astana), in a comparable time period (the conflict over the drainage and development of the Malyi Taldykol group of lakes began in 2020 and is still ongoing; the conflict over the Linear Park spans from 2022 to 2023), involving similar actors (the Akimat of the city of Astana, affiliated entities, construction companies, activists, and experts), and under the same political regime. Additionally, both projects have been accompanied by public disputes and citizen mobilization. At the same time, the cases demonstrate different outcomes in terms of considering the public interest. In interpretive CDA, the criterion for selecting cases is their analytical relevance to the social issue under study, rather than statistical representativeness (Fairclough, 1992).

The cases are analyzed not as static points, but as processes unfolding in time. This allows to track how the nomination of space changed during each conflict ("group of lakes" or "plot No. 5"; "park" or "apartment complex"), how the public interest was redefined, and how the discursive strategies of the authorities and activists interacted and fit into the institutional context (the General Plan of Astana, court decisions, and public hearings).

Unlike causal studies that aim to find universal cause-and-effect relationships, this work focuses on creating a “thick description” (Rubin, 2021). In interpretive research, a “thick description” allows a comprehensive understanding significance of the phenomena being studied (Rubin, 2021, p. 148).

4.2 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Methodologically, the study is based on critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992; 1995). The choice of this approach is based on the fact that the public interest in urban policy is not an objective norm; it is much more often manifested in the form of rhetoric of "development" or "the public good." CDA allows to explore language not as a neutral reflection of reality, but as a social practice through which power is produced, decisions are legitimized,

and alternative positions are marginalized (Fairclough, 1992; 1995). The purpose of critical analysis is to identify how language can serve an ideology, and contribute to “the creation, legitimization and reproduction of unequal distribution of power between social groups” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 67).

Theoretically, CDA relies on the ideas of social constructionism and poststructuralism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Foucault, 1972). According to these approaches, knowledge about the world is not objective, but is formed by historically and culturally specific discourses. In this sense, language should be considered as a set of tools with which this world is continuously being created and rebuilt. This approach does not pretend to be politically neutral, but openly focuses on the analysis of power, ideology and inequality. Ideology in the framework of the CDA is understood as "meaning in the service of power" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 67), that is, as ways of representing private interests as universal and natural.

In this study interviews are analyzed in three dimensions: as a text, as a discursive practice, and as a social practice (Jorgensen, 2002, p.122).

Textual analysis involves examining the lexical and grammatical characteristics of a text. At this stage, it is important to understand how the interviewee sees the problem and what solutions he proposes, as well as to identify alternative interpretations that the interviewee has disguised. Studying metaphors and epithets helps to analyze how certain words can legitimize some interests (for example, referring to a lake as a "puddle" to minimize its importance).

The following methods are used for textual analysis:

Nominalizations, the transformation of a verb into a noun ("renovation") contribute to a shift in emphasis and the blurring of responsibility, shifting attention from actors to abstract processes.

Modality (the assessment of the speaker's degree of certainty) allows to identify how agency and responsibility are distributed. The presence of boosters, for example, confidence amplifiers ("undoubtedly", "obviously") indicates the speaker's degree of certainty (Fairclough, 1992). Such constructions reinforce the authority of the government and consolidate the idea of growth as the only possible option for the development of the city.

Transitivity (the way in which events and processes are linked to subjects) shows how the use of the passive voice can intentionally conceal the agent of action, such as who gave permission to fill in the lake. An analysis of transitivity reveals that the negative consequences of urban projects are often presented as natural or inevitable, without specifying the decision-makers.

At the second level, it was analyzed how the text is created and how it is interpreted by the audience, including the analysis of intertextuality and interdiscursivity (how texts rely on other texts and combine different discourses and genres) (Jorgensen, 2002, p.128). "The blending of different types of discourse can be a sign of social change, while the adherence to strict boundaries indicates the reproduction of the existing order" (Fairclough, 1992). Intertextual analysis of the text allows us to study the sources of information that the authors refer to. Intertextual analysis helps us to identify which voices were included, which were excluded, and what was missing. It is important to understand how the citations relate to the original source that the actors are quoting, as well as how the actors interpret the original source and how accurately they are quoting it. The discourse of growth coalitions masks the environmental costs by appealing to experts. They may present urban changes as rational, technologically sound, and inevitable.

At the third level of CDA, discourse is examined as a social practice, the relationship between discourse and ideology, power, and the institutional structure of society is identified.

"Discursive practice not only reflects but also actively contributes to social and cultural change" (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 136). The relationship between discourse and social reality is not linear causality but as "dialectical" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 113). This means that the third stage of analysis allows us to understand how institutional context makes discursive strategies explicable. In this study, historical institutionalism is used for the analysis of the third level (Sorensen, 2015). The key concepts are "critical junctures" ("moments of major change when new institutions are established") and "path dependence," where previously made decisions become increasingly difficult to change due to positive feedback (Sorensen, 2015, pp. 7–11). In other words, rules are difficult to change because they have vested beneficiaries. In urban politics, this creates "path dependence": it is easier to continue along the old path than to rebuild everything from scratch. Therefore, in this study, even successful activism does not guarantee that changes will be institutionalized, as the government and developers always have ways to circumvent new rules.

The practical implementation of the three-level analysis is carried out through the thematic coding procedure described in Section 4.3, where the discourses and frames of the "growth machine" theory help in the systematic processing of texts.

4.3 Coding procedure

Manual thematic coding is used for the systematic processing of empirical material (interviews, official documents, media publications and social network materials). The procedure is iterative and includes the following steps.

Data selection and preparation

Based on the principle of theoretical sampling, a corpus of texts is formed for each individual case. The corpus covers different types of discourse (official and protest) and time

stages of conflicts (beginning of the conflict, escalation, and potential outcome). All texts are imported into two separate Word documents (one for each case) for manual coding.

Open coding

At this stage, the texts are repeatedly read for each case to identify significant fragments. Everything that is potentially important is encoded: metaphors, epithets, nominalizations, modality markers, active/passive constructions, and intertextual references. As a result, a lot of codes were collected, short labels were assigned to the codes for convenience (for example, in the Malyi Taldykol case document, the following codes were created: "inevitable_transformation", "biodegradation", "public_good", "natural_disappearance", "sewage", "status", "corruption_and_illiteracy", "passive_citizens", "neutralization_opposition", "ecological_value", "natural_object", "site").

For Linear Park: "public_property", "natural_object", "technical_object", "passive_citizens", "neutralization_opposition").

From the preliminary list of codes, the most relevant ones for the research question are selected, leaving only those that help answer the research question. For each code, a specific example from the data is provided that illustrates the code. For example, for the code "plot", the quote "Today, we are only talking about one small plot that is drying up" (Uranhaev 2021) is used.

Grouping codes into frames

Repetitive codes are grouped and combined into larger semantic categories (frames). For example, the codes "plot number 5" and "only one lake" belong to the "fragmentation" category.

Closed coding

At the next stage, a codebook is created that includes codes corresponding to the discourses of the Growth Machine Theory (an interpretive framework): for example, "value_free_growth", "boosterism_ideology", "demobilization_of_opposition", "redemptive_ideology", "pseudo_community."

After that the frames extracted from the studied cases ("fragmentation", "natural disappearance", "demobilization of the opposition", "social welfare"), are analyzed for compliance with adapted frames and ideologies of the Growth Machine Theory (Molotch & Logan, 1987; Cox & Mair, 1997; Boyle, 1999).

Frames are empirical signs by which one or another discourse can be identified. For example, if a lake is referred to as "drying up" in a text, it is defined as a "natural disappearance" frame, which is related to the "sacrifice" frame of "redemptive ideologies" (Cox, 1999). This helps to link theory to specific data.

Iterative refinement

Since the analysis is iterative, when new texts are analyzed and previously unseen discursive patterns (new frames) are identified, the codebook is updated, and the encoded texts are reviewed again. The process continues until new sources no longer contribute fundamentally new codes or categories (saturation process).

Throughout the coding process, the researcher keeps analytical notes that outline new connections between codes, findings and reflections.

Comparative analysis

The coding process results in structured lists of quotes organized into frames. These lists serve as a basis for a comparative analysis of the two cases (Malyi Taldykol and Linear Park).

The analysis identifies which discourses and frames are present in both cases, which are unique to one of them, and how they relate to the different outcomes of the conflicts.

4.3.1 Using artificial intelligence disclosure

In the process of conducting an empirical analysis for the systematization of discursive strategies within the framework of the Growth Machine Theory (Molotch, 1976; Logan & Molotch, 1987; Cox, 1999), the author used an artificial intelligence tool, namely DeepSeek (model DeepSeek-V3, DeepSeek company, 2024). AI was used to clarify the typology of the discourse strategies of Growth Machine Theory and to match codes extracted from analyzed data with the discourses of the Growth Machine Theory (“value-free growth”, “redemptive ideology”, “boosterism ideology”, “demobilization of the opposition”).

Procedure. The author of the study provided the AI with short text fragments (quotes from interviews, official documents, and residents’ chats) with a request in Russian: “Assign this fragment to one or more of the following discursive strategies of the Growth Machine Theory. DeepSeek returned a preliminary classification based on the classical Growth Machine Theory.

Each sentence generated by DeepSeek was manually reviewed by the author. In cases where there was a discrepancy between the AI's classification and the author's understanding of the context (for example, when irony or an intertextual reference could be misinterpreted), the author's decision was prioritized. The final typology presented in sections 5.2 and 5.3 of the empirical analysis of this study, as well as all the conclusions about the dominance of certain frames, were fully formulated by the author.

Limitations. Like other large language models, DeepSeek may generate non-existent links and quotes, as well as make errors in analysis and conclusions. Therefore, the links to the materials were rechecked.

Ethical Declaration. DeepSeek was used only as a technical assistant to reduce the routine work of sorting data. The author is fully responsible for all theoretical generalizations, comparative analysis, and conclusions presented in the work. No personal data or confidential materials (including transcripts of anonymous interviews) were uploaded to public cloud servers.

4.4 Empirical research base

Collecting materials in interpretative discourse analysis is an iterative process in which the researcher strives not just to record facts, but to achieve a “thick description” that will help reveal the significance of events for their participants (Rubin, 2015, p.162).

The use of different types of data ensures the triangulation of sources, which increases the reliability and validity of the analysis (Rubin, 2015). Comparing official documents, media discourse, materials of civic participation and interviews allow to identify the differences between institutionally entrenched and alternative interpretations of public interest. In this study, the principle of theoretical saturation is used to determine the sufficiency of the empirical material. The analysis continues until new sources no longer provide fundamentally new interpretations. Thus, the criterion for completing the selection of material is the repeatability of the identified discursive strategies, rather than the quantitative volume per se (Rubin, 2015, p.150).

The specific composition of the empirical database includes:

- Semi-structured interviews (N = 5) with representatives of initiative groups (activists), urban experts, affiliated structures of urban planning. The interviews were conducted in February 2026, in online and offline format, each lasted from 40 to 90 minutes. All interviews were transcribed and anonymized. The interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis.

Interviews allow us to find out how different actors perceive urban conflicts and define public interest in urban space.

– Official documents and urban planning documents (produced between 2020–2025), including the General Plan of Astana, environmental reports, protocols, press releases from the Akimat, and official statements from government agencies and affiliated organizations. The general plan of the city is the main urban planning document that determines the functional purpose of city areas. These documents reflect the official discourse, legal decisions, and the formal position of the government.

– Materials of public discourse and media: media publications, public interviews and speeches of officials on state channels, interviews of activists and experts on YouTube channels. Public interviews of officials allow to restore the official discourse, due to their refusal to give an interview.

– Social media materials: petitions (petitions were launched for Malyi Taldykol in 2020 and again in 2021; petitions were launched for Linear Park in February and March 2022), appeals from environmental and civil movements (appeals from the SOS Taldykol environmental movement in 2021–2022), comments from protest participants in chat rooms (Telegram channel). They allow us to reconstruct the civic counter-discourse and alternative versions of the public interest.

- Field notes taken by the author during a public hearing (Astana, February 2026). Ethnographic observation as part of triangulation helps to see what remains invisible when using only interviews (Rubin, 2015). Field notes helped to capture non-discursive elements (the atmosphere in the room, reaction of public and violations of procedures) that are not visible in texts but are critical for analyzing social practices.

4.5 Sampling and recruitment

The selection of participants for the interviews was carried out using purposive sampling (Widner, 2022). Unlike quantitative studies, the goal of the selection was not statistical representativeness, but rather the selection of people whose discursive positions are represented in the urban conflicts under consideration.

Respondents were selected based on their involvement in the cases and their ability to reflect different interpretations of public interest. Participants with different positions were included in the sample. To reflect the official discourse, interviews and public speeches were conducted with employees of affiliated organizations (Department of Architecture, Urban Planning and Land Relations; Astana Genplan Research and Design Institute LLP) who made decisions regarding the status of the Malyi Taldykol lakes and Linear Park. To analyze the counter-discourse, representatives of civil initiatives and activist movements, experts in the fields of ecology and urban studies, as well as members of the professional community, were selected.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, which ensured a balance between the comparability of the responses and the opportunity for respondents to develop their own interpretations. The questions were aimed at identifying how participants understand the public interest, what arguments they consider legitimate, and how they evaluate the actions of other actors (see Appendix A).

4.6 Positionality and reflexivity

This study is based on an interpretive paradigm, which recognizes that the researcher is not a neutral observer and that their position inevitably affects the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

The author of this study lives in Astana which means observing urban conflicts as a resident of the city. This provides a deep understanding of the context, but it also creates a risk of a particular position. During the interviews, activists and environmentalists provided a more detailed and emotional description of the issue. In contrast to the short and dry responses from affiliated organizations, the activists may have unconsciously used arguments that inevitably evoked an emotional response (for example, in an anonymous interview, activists described how construction workers were killing swans that were preventing them from filling a lake, which certainly evoked strong emotions). The use of the theoretical framework of the Growth Machine Theory and critical discourse analysis (CDA) also forms a certain angle of view, making the researcher more sensitive to discursive strategies of power and inequality.

4.7 Ethics

All interviews were conducted based on voluntariness and consent. Before the interview, the participants were explained the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation, the intended use of data, as well as the right to refuse to answer any question or to stop participating at any stage without any consequences. Depending on the format of interaction (online or offline), oral or written consent was used.

The names of the respondents, as well as any identifying details (such as positions or specific organizations, if this could reveal their identity), have been removed. This paper uses anonymized designations (such as "interview with an expert"), which helps to protect the privacy of the study participants.

According to the principles of security, the audio recordings and interview transcripts are used only for research purposes. After the study is completed, the materials will be deleted in accordance with the university's requirements.

The study was conducted in accordance with the approval of the relevant ethics committee of the university (IREC).

4.8 Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. The first one is the unevenness of the volume of the materials found and used. The conflict surrounding Malyi Taldykol lasted longer, resulting in the production of a lot more documents, sources, and discussions available for analysis. This limitation affects the depth of the comparison but does not hinder the achievement of the research objective. Since the analysis is aimed at identifying discourses and recurring rhetorical strategies, rather than a quantitative comparison of the volume of data.

Second, access to various actors was limited. The Akimat of Astana and construction companies refused to give interviews. As a result, their rhetoric is reconstructed based on official documents and public statements. To reduce this limitation, triangulation of sources is used, allowing to compare different types of data and minimizing one-sided interpretation.

Third, the limitation is related to the interpretive nature of the study. Interpretation of arguments and statements is inevitably associated with the researcher's subjectivity (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). The results of the study do not claim to be completely objective but rather represent a reasonable interpretation of the discourse.

Fourth, the study focuses on public discourse, which means that not all decision-making processes occurring in informal interactions can be analyzed. Informal negotiations between government agencies and developers remain inaccessible to analysis and are reconstructed indirectly through public media.

Finally, the results of the study do not claim to be widely generalized beyond the cases under consideration. The goal of the work is not to derive universal patterns, but rather to

provide an in-depth analysis of specific cases and identify the ways in which public interest is formed and legitimized in a particular urban context.

Chapter 5. Results

5.1 The logic of empirical analysis

This research aims to answer the research question of how public interest was constructed and reflected in the urban conflicts around Malyi Taldykol and Linear Park. While in the case of Malyi Taldykol, the official discourse controlled the interpretation of the space and partially assimilated the language of protest, in the case of Linear Park, the civil counter-discourse was included in the final official decision.

The empirical base of the study consists of several types of qualitative data. Due to the difference in duration and resonance of the two cases, more data is used to analyze the Malyi Taldykol case. Therefore, the conflict surrounding Malyi Taldykol is considered the main case, while Linear Park is considered an additional contrasting case.

Analytical framework

The analytical framework of the chapter draws on an adapted use of Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992) (see section 3.4) and on the interpretative frame of the Growth Machine Theory (Molotch, 2007). From critical analysis (CDA), the understanding of discourse as a social practice is borrowed. Texts are viewed as a way of constructing reality. This means that it is not only important to ask what happened, but also to ask how it was named in different discourses. The Growth Machine Theory introduces the distinction between the exchange value of space and its use value.

Empirical analysis shows that the transition from use value to exchange value of space is achieved through discursive strategies, such as fragmentation, moral justification for

development, or appeals to ecology and the right to participation. This does not claim causal determination but rather identifies how discursive strategies are related to the broader context of authoritarian urbanism in Astana. The analytical framework combines micro-analysis of text with contextual explanation.

The structure of the analysis

Structurally, each case is analyzed using the same framework. First, the course of the conflict is briefly outlined, then the official discourse is analyzed (how the conflict is described in official documents, responses from the Akimat of Astana and the Architecture Department); after that, the civil discourse is studied (through interviews with activists, environmentalists, chats, petitions, and media). Then, both discourses are compared, and finally, the outcome of the case is described (whether the counter-discourse was suppressed or recognized). This structure allows for the comparison of cases using the same analytical parameters.

Analysis questions

Four interrelated questions were selected for analysis. The first question concerns how the space is constructed in both cases, i.e., whether it is designated as a lake/park or transformed into a technical site for development. The second important question is how public interest is defined. This involves determining who speaks on behalf of society and which version takes precedence. The third question focuses on who is considered competent to determine the public interest. The fourth question explores how discourse relates to the outcome of the conflict. Taken together, these questions help identify the frames that shape the discourses of various actors.

The procedure for coding and identifying frames, as well as the disclosure on the use of artificial intelligence for typologizing frames, is described in sections 4.3. and 4.3.1. of the

Methodology section. This analysis uses discourses from the typology of the "growth machines" theory.

5.2 Malyi Taldykol: administrative fragmentation to neutralize protest

The Malyi Taldykol conflict is a textbook case of competing constructions of public interest. The official discourse, represented by the Akimat, affiliated quasi-state structures, and the land commission, defines public interest primarily in terms of state interests: housing provision, urban development and administrative order. In this version, the lakes are an obstacle to growth, not a resource for it. The civil counter-discourse, by contrast, constructs public interest as the use value of space for the residents who already live there. The analysis below traces how these two versions were articulated and contested.

5.2.1 A brief timeline of the conflict

The early stage of the Malyi Taldykol conflict (2012–2019). During this time, Malyi Taldykol was defined as a group of lakes, which is an integrated ecosystem. There was even a proposal of the Akimat of Astana to establish a natural wilderness park in this area (interview with activist, Astana, 2026).

The escalation of the conflict (2020–2021). In 2020, the Land Fund Commission of Astana decided to transfer the territory of Malyi Taldykol from the lands of the water fund to the lands of the settlement, which further allowed for the active drainage and development of this object. This period was also marked by the activity of civil initiatives, and the creation of the SOS Taldykol association, which played a crucial role in the conflict. In September 2021, activists and environmentalists managed to draw attention to the lake through art performances (a shaman and a group of female artists were invited to block the road for construction companies' trucks).

The next stage (2022–2023) is characterized by the escalation of the conflict. Activists continuously documented the artificial pumping of water from the lakes, the filling of the lake with construction debris, and alleged connection between the Akimat and construction companies. In 2023, the Presidential Administration decided to keep Malyi Taldykol as a water body and establish a park zone. In 2023, the Administrative Court of the Supreme Court of Astana City also ruled that the Akimat had changed the status of the lakes in violation of the law. As a result, construction was banned in the area. The Aqiqat Coalition of Corporate Lawyers claims that the construction company Sat-NS LLP filled in the lakes of Malyi Taldykol despite the lack of design and estimate documentation and technical supervision³. Despite the order of the State Architectural and Construction Inspectorate (GASK) dated October 20, 2021, which not only required the company to suspend construction work on the site but also to restore it to its original form, Sat-NS LLP has failed to comply with any of the requirements.

Finally, the period from 2023 can be described as a "bureaucratic compromise." The main strategy of the official discourse is to divide the lake into several parts, which allows for the preservation of only two lakes and the draining of the rest. In 2025, during discussions on amendments to the General Plan of Astana, Astana Genplan Research and Design Institute LLP proposed the creation of the "ecopark" on one of the lakes, but activists expressed concerns that an artificial park would be built, while the remaining lakes would be completely drained and used for residential development.

Corporate actors in the case of Malyi Taldykol

Analysis of land allocation and registration documents allows us to identify specific corporate actors who received plots in the territory of the lake group, as well as the nature of their relations with government agencies.

³ https://inbusiness.kz/ru/news/sud-po-malomu-taldykolyu-kakie-fakty-i-protivorechiya-vskrylis-vo-vremya-processa?utm_source=chatgpt.com

The Special Economic Zone Astana-Technopolis became the key institutional mechanism through which the lakes were transferred for development. Most of the lakes' territory, covering 333 hectares, was transferred to this zone. The sole shareholder of the Special Economic Zone Astana-Technopolis is SPK Astana JSC, which is 100% owned by the Akimat. The area is planned to include a shopping and entertainment center, an aqua park, hotels, office space, and housing. The development of this area is presented as part of the State Program for the Development of the Tourism Industry for 2019-2025⁴. Thus, even at this first level, it can be seen that the state acts as both the owner of the territory, the regulator of a special development regime, and the organizer of the transfer of land to private developers, while presenting it as the implementation of a government program in the public interest.

The largest project in the territory of the lakes is a tourist quarter worth over 1 trillion tenge⁵, which is being invested by the Arab company Ellington Properties Development LLC. In order to implement the project, in 2019, a subsidiary of Ellington Group KAZ Ltd was established in cooperation with Kazakhstan Investment Development Fund (KIDF) Management Company as one of its founders. This organization, in turn, is established by the Committee of State Property and Privatization of the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

SAT NS LLP was found guilty by the Ministry of Ecology of filling in a fragment of the lake without project documentation⁶ (see Appendix B). Its affiliated structures (SAT Group Construction LLP and SAT Group Project LLP) have also received 21 plots of land for the construction of residential buildings. The heads of these companies are Gabit Satvaldiev and Sunkar Satvaldiev, who are also the brothers of the current Akim of Almaty, Darkhan

⁴ <https://vlast.kz/obsshestvo/47300-kto-zastraivaet-malyj-taldykol.html>

⁵ <https://inbusiness.kz/ru/news/kak-podelili-malyj-taldykol-pod-zastrojku>

⁶ <https://www.inbusiness.kz/ru/news/sud-priostanovil-zastrojku-malogo-taldykolya>

Satybaldy⁷. This makes them the most obvious example of a direct link between developers and the political elite.

NAK Holding is represented in the case by several affiliated entities: Affix LLP, Viento LLP, and Mualit LLP, which received land plots for the construction of a park and residential complexes. The founder of NAK Holding is Salamat Akhmetov, who was also a member of the Astana city maslikhat (the local representative council) and its construction committee. This means that the same person was involved in both the decision-making process regarding urban construction and the implementation of development projects in the disputed area.

Finally, some of the plots are owned by direct subsidiaries of the Akimat, such as SPK Astana JSC, Yelorda Construction Company LLP, and Yelorda Damu LLP. It is noteworthy that the founder of Yelorda Construction LLP is the Capital department of control and quality, which is authorized to issue construction licenses. According to General Plan of Astana, Yelorda Damu LLP will build the school on the territory of one of the lakes. Thus, the organization that regulates construction activities is also the founder of the development company that received the land plot in the disputed area.

Although authorities claim that territory of the lakes is used for public good like constructing public schools and kindergartens, according to General Plan there are only two developers (Yelorda Damu LLP and Vinograd Capital LLP) which officially will construct two schools. It is worth noting that activists argue that these schools will be private not public (interview with activist, Astana, 2026).

Based on this information, several conclusions can be drawn. First, the growth coalition in this case is a vertically organized structure in which the state is present in several roles simultaneously: as a regulator (the Akimat of Astana), as an investor (KIDF), as a developer

⁷ <https://vlast.kz/obsshestvo/47300-kto-zastravaet-malyj-taldykol.html>

(subsidiaries of the Akimat), and as a licensing authority. Second, access to land in the disputed territory is mediated by personal and institutional ties with political leadership. Third, the line between public and private interest is blurred: those who make decisions about development and those who benefit from it are often the same individuals or affiliated entities. This supports the theoretical argument that public interest in this case functions as a rhetorical cover for the interests of the powerful coalition.

5.2.2 Constructing the space

The case of the conflict around the Malyi Taldykol records the struggle between different definitions of what this object is for the city and the residents. Residents and activists attribute recreational value to the lake, calling it a “place of recreation” (interviews with SOS Taldykol activists, 2021–2025). In the official discourse, on the contrary, the territory is constructed predominantly as a technical object (Kasymbek 2023; Abaev 2021; Uranhaev 2021).

5.2.2.1 Official discourse: “technification” of the object

While until 2019, Malyi Taldykol was discussed as part of a system of lakes, since 2021, the official discourse has been characterized by a deliberate “technification” of the object, which aims to diminish its value as a natural and recreational space. This “technification” involves the redefinition of the natural object through engineering, technical, or administrative categories. The authorities engage the public in discussions about what the object is, using a range of discursive techniques.

Textual analysis has shown that the authorities use a variety of strategies to devalue the value of lakes. First, they use vivid epithets and metaphors to create a persistent negative perception of the lake among people. For this purpose, the authorities and affiliated structures in

official documents and public statements use both official definitions ("storage reservoir" and "water body") and various epithets and metaphors to describe Malyi Taldykol, which belittle the significance of the natural value of the group of lakes ("puddle," "sewage and fecal water," "dirty," "breeding ground for infections and harmful substances"). Lexemes are also used to indicate the "natural disappearance" of the lake: "dries up", "disappears naturally", "impossible to save", "no natural replenishment". The high frequency of administrative nominalizations ("drainage", "construction") hides the agent of the action. Officials use passive transitivity to present the disappearance of the lake as a passive, "natural" process: "there is no water supply", "the reservoir has no natural replenishment". As Dauren Abaev, First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Kazakhstan, stated: "The lake is drying up on its own, and this is a natural process that has nothing to do with human activities" (Abaev 2021). At the same time, the "benefit for all" frame is reinforced, suggesting that if there are no lakes or they are drying up, then this area should be developed for the construction of public schools and kindergartens. That is, the development of the territory is presented as an unconditional benefit for the majority of the city's residents, which can be related to the "value-free growth" discourse (Molotch, 1976; Logan, 1987).

Intertextuality and manipulation of sources

To substantiate its arguments, the Akimat refers to official sources: Protocol No. 38 of the meeting of the Land Commission of the Akimat of the city of Nur-Sultan (previous name of Astana city) dated 15.12.2020 and the Water Code. Protocol No. 38 refers to a report by the "Vernadsky Non-Governmental Environmental Foundation in the Republic of Kazakhstan," which allegedly indicates the "natural disappearance" of the lakes. However, the report itself does not mention this fact. Instead, it states: "As a result of the construction of residential buildings and engineering structures, the catchment area of Lake Malyi Taldykol has decreased by more than three times... It should be noted that the area of the Malyi Taldykol group of lakes

has not been designated as a water body until now. 91.2% of the population supports the granting of this status to the Taldykol lake system" (Environmental Impact Assessment Report, 2021, pp. 52; 254). Analysis reveals a discrepancy between the cited source and its interpretation by the authorities. This highlights the selective use of expert knowledge. However, pro-government structures disregard expert opinions that do not align with their agenda. Engineer-hydrogeologist Vyacheslav Petukhov asserts that filling in the lakes could lead to "further rise of groundwater on the left bank of the capital, which would have a negative impact on the city's underground engineering infrastructure and that the city could "literally float away" (Petukhov 2021). In several interviews, this expert has also pointed out that the lakes of Malyi Taldykol are drying up due to anthropogenic interference.

The "fragmentation" frame as a redemptive ideology

Another mechanism of technification is fragmentation, a discursive strategy in which a natural object (a lake or a park) is artificially divided into isolated parts ("plots"). Each of these parts is given an independent status, which allows for different treatment. This strategy allowed authorities to treat Malyi Taldykol not as a whole group of lakes but isolated parts. This also allows for the separation of "dirty" lakes (plots) from "clean" lakes that are supposedly protected. Head of the Department of Architecture, Urban Planning and Land Relations of the city of Nur-Sultan (the name of the city of Astana from 2019 to 2022) Nurlan Uranhaev at a briefing on 08.09.2021 stated: "Today, we are talking only about one small area, which is currently drying up." Fragmentation is enhanced by the frame of "spontaneous disappearance." It is claimed that the destruction of one part does not harm the entire system, and the disappearance of water occurs naturally, without the direct involvement of the government and developers. This technique corresponds to redemptive ideologies (Cox, 1999), where development can be presented as a "salvation" of the area from decline. According to this

discourse, residents are forced to accept sacrifices (environmental consequences of growth) for the sake of the city's prosperity.

The fragmentation frame is reinforced by the discussion that only two lakes of the lake group, namely lakes № 5 and № 7 (according to the 2025 adjustments to the General Plan of Astana), will be included in the General Plan (see Appendix C). To appear to be in a compromise with the public, the discussion of adjustments was announced in July 2025 to develop a plan for the construction of an "ecopark", however, the details of this project have not yet been announced. Activists, however, point out that this will be an artificially created park, which will lead to the final drainage of the remaining areas of the lake system. In a public interview, Ruslan Urazaliev, a researcher at the Association for Biodiversity Conservation, discussed the "ecopark" project in detail (Urazaliev 2021). The plan for the construction of an "ecopark" has been discussed with the Akimat since 2012. After a joint trip with "Astana General Plan" LLP to Urban Wetland Parks in the UK in 2019 to study the development of a wild park, activists learned that the original project of the Akimat included the construction of an artificial island with a monuments, a revolving restaurant, and yachts on the lakes. Given their previous experience with the authorities, activists are skeptical about the development of the ecopark in 2026. This strategy of disguising private interests under the compromise (ecopark) can be defined as a manifestation of the frames of boosterism and local community. These frames aim to promote the status of a "world-class city" to instill a sense of pride in its residents (Molotch & Logan, 1987; Cox & Mair, 1997; Boyle, 1999). Projects like ecopark can make residents to believe that their interests align with those of the developers.

5.2.2.2 Civilian counter-discourse

Frames of environmental value and active transitivity

In contrast to the official discourse, the civilian counter-discourse consistently endows the lake with the value of a natural and recreational object. Activists describe the lakes using epithets and metaphors: “recreational area”, “the pearl of the district”, “a unique ecosystem”, “the most magnificent territory”, “a unique world”, “the energy of life”. They use active transitivity, clearly identifying the agents of action: “the Akimat is polluting,” “government agencies are deliberately destroying,” “residents are trying to protect.” The actions of the authorities are given a moral assessment (“barbaric filling,” “killing the ecosystem”). Activists define the lakes as a single object, rejecting the fragmentation frame of authorities. “You can’t treat an arm when the whole body is in pain” (interview with activist, Astana, 2026). In response to the current Akim of Astana, Zhenis Kasymbek’s claim that the lake “didn’t exist at all,” Ruslan Urazaliev emphasized that the lake is a natural feature: “This lake has existed here for thousands of years and is part of the natural landscape, not the result of human activity” (Urazaliev 2021). This argument is supported by a 1913 map of Western Siberia (see Appendix E).

The rhetoric of the Baitak party

Within the civic bloc, the environmental party Baytak stands out as a dissenting voice through its self-positioning as an opposition force. However, their position on Malyi Taldykol aligns with the official one. The head of the party, Azamatkhan Amirtai, referred to the site as “place for rapists” during a briefing at the Akimat in 2021. In an interview, a party representative repeatedly claimed that “this natural object can no longer be saved,” reproducing the frame of “natural extinction” and “redemptive ideologies” used by the authorities (interview with party representative 2026). Although this party does not have much political influence in Kazakhstan, it can be said that it repeats the official rhetoric and contributes to the marginalization of the activists’ protest.

Thus, in the case of Malyi Taldykol, the official discourse relies on the frames of the value-free growth ideology (“benefit for all”), redemptive ideologies (“fragmentation”, “saving the territory”), and boosterism (promoting the concept of the “ecopark”). Civil counter-discourse, by contrast, constructs the lake as a holistic natural object, using frames of ecological value and active transitivity.

5.2.3. Expertise, participation, and the simulation of dialogue

In the conflict around Malyi Taldykol, the struggle for the right to determine who has the legitimate knowledge to make decisions becomes very important. This confrontation reveals two opposing discursive strategies that are related to the ideology of Growth Machine Theory (Molotch & Logan, 1987).

Official discourse: monopoly on expertise and the simulation of participation

The government positions itself as the sole bearer of "qualified" knowledge. Altai Kulginov former Akim of Astana states: “Residents do not have enough understanding; they need to be explained” (Kulginov 2022). Citizens are described through metaphors of “non-sensical” and “naïve” people, whose role is to listen to the “explanations” of the authorities, rather than to participate in decision-making.

Activists refer to the formal channels of participation created by the authorities as “imitation of dialogue” (interview with activist, Astana, 2026). Public hearings, meetings, and promises are described as "anesthesia of the protest movement," which is a "mechanism for delaying time and reducing tension without actually revising the decisions made." Activists have reported that the same paid individuals always attend public hearings and vote in favor of the Akimat (interview with activist, Astana, 2026).

To analyze the social practice, the author of this study employed an immersive approach by attending the public hearings on the environmental assessment to the city's general plan adjustments held by Akimat in February 2026. Regarding the repeated questions of activists about the responsibility for violating court orders to cancel the draining of the lakes, none of the pro-government actors (the Akimat of Astana, “Astana General Plan” LLP, and the Center for Urban Studies) were able to respond.

Attending the hearings allowed the researcher not only to record the rhetoric of the different parties, but also to observe non-discursive elements of the public hearings. For instance, the atmosphere in the hall (people were quite aggressive, accusing the authorities of corruption), and physical actions (there were cases of microphones being turned off for citizens who asked “uncomfortable questions” about the development of certain areas). These observations indicate the formalized nature of the discussion process. Turning off microphones is a violation of the very idea of a public hearing. From a social practice perspective, it can be said that public hearings in Astana function more as a simulation of dialogue between the authorities and the people. Such practices (turning off the microphone) are not visible in the texts of official documents, but they are important for understanding how the government constructs the public interest.

The frame of “demobilization of the opposition”

To marginalize activists, the authorities use frames of denigration, which are part of the demobilization of the opposition discourse (Cox, 1999). Activists are described with derogatory terms, such as “Soros kid”⁸, “anti-vaxxers,” “city crazies who tied a flamingo to a lake,” and “crazy people.” This technique corresponds to the demobilization of the opposition discourse, where opponents are portrayed as “cowtowns,” (hinterland) “hicksvilles,” and “the boonies”

⁸ A derogatory label derived from the surname Soros, the founder of Open Society. This term is used in post-Soviet countries to stigmatize activists who are suspected of receiving foreign funding.

(the middle of nowhere) implying that they are incapable of understanding technological and economic progress (Cox, 1999). Additionally, there are also claims that activists receive monetary compensation from construction companies to promote specific interests (interview with activists, Astana, 2026). Furthermore, there are instances of “preventive intimidation.” Activists report surveillance by the National Security Committee, phone tapping, and bot attacks (interview with activists, Astana, 2026).

The "dialogue simulation" frame creates a deep crisis of trust in formal institutions. The Coalition of Corporate Lawyers Aqiqat claims that developer SAT NS LLP at the end of 2021 was fined 1.2 million tenge for conducting construction without estimate documentation. However, the developer claimed that they only conducted geological surveys, which do not require the presence of relevant documentation (Representative of SAT NS LLP 2022). This was a violation of the order which required the company to not only suspend all construction and installation work but also restore the site to its original state within 30 days (State Architectural and Construction Inspectorate (GASK) order, 2021). The company failed to comply with all the requirements. This discrepancy between legal norms and their implementation is also considered as an element of practice, in which official procedures serve to "imitate dialogue."

Civilian counter-discourse: demonstrating expertise

Having lost trust in official institutions, activists use similar frames of "expertise" and "vilifying opponents" to shape their own discourse. They accuse the authorities of professional incompetence, corruption, and fraud. Metaphors and epithets are used to add emotional color: “gypsies and bears” (about the authorities’ actions to divert attention), “the cuckoo praises the rooster” (about useless meetings), “oil ministers,” and “the talker” (about Nurkenov, the deputy akim of Astana, who promised to suspend the filling of lakes) (interview with activists, Astana,

2026). These techniques mirror the official discourse of “demobilizing the opposition,” but they are directed against the government.

Activists consistently present the coalition of the government and developers as a “tangle of interests”: “the government and developers have become Siamese twins with a common bloodstream of money” (Boreiko 2021). Journalistic investigations have revealed affiliation between the government and developers (the fact that SAT NS LLP company’s leaders are brothers of the current akim of Almaty Darkhan Satybaldy). This allows activists to construct an image of a coalition of authorities and developers that only promotes its economic interests.

At the same time, activists use all discursive strategies to demonstrate their own expertise while denigrating the authorities. They cite the Constitution, the Aarhus and Ramsar Conventions⁹, and the concept of Kisho Kurokawa (who developed the concept of the General Plan for Astana back in 1998). They combine scientific terminology (“protected areas,” “grass-root movement,” “decision-making”) with emotional and everyday language (“talking head,” “hype”) and moral and political discourse (“betrayal of the authorities,” “violence against nature”). Activists actively use nominalizations (“meritocracy”, “participatory design”) to position themselves as a “ready-made akimat” whose level of expertise exceeds that of officials (interview with activists, Astana, 2026). This corresponds to the discourse of neutralizing the opposition, but in an inverted form. Activists try to discredit the authorities in the eyes of the public. Activists use hybrid genres (press releases, Instagram and Telegram posts, and public events like “birdwatching”) to translate dry legal language into a language that the public can understand. In this way, they are trying to democratize discourse and involve citizens in the decision-making process.

⁹ The purpose of these conventions is the rational use of wetlands and the preservation of biodiversity.

An intertextual analysis showed that the activists' rhetoric, including references to the Constitution, environmental conventions, and the Water Code, allowed the activists of the SOS Taldykol movement and the Aqiqat Coalition of Corporate Lawyers to prove that the Akimat's decision to change the status of the lake was unlawful. This was reflected in the President's Administration's decision to keep the group of lakes as a water object citing the same documents as activists. The authorities are starting to include environmental requirements in their reports to "soothe" their opponents.

Elements of "booster" discourse among activists

Interestingly, some activists (Sabdenova 2021; Sadykova 2021; Urazaliev 2021–2023; Malikova 2021) also use elements of the discourse of “pseudo-community” and “boosterism” (usually associated with growth coalitions), referring to the lake as the “calling card of the capital” and “the city's brand.” When discussing the status of the capital, they use metaphors such as “image-worthy,” “branded,” and “the most environmentally integrated city.” They appeal to attracting tourists and improving the city's image, which aligns with the "world-class city" frame. This indicates that the civic discourse is not limited to "anti-growth rhetoric" but rather borrows from the discourse of growth coalitions to expand its influence.

In the conflict surrounding Malyi Taldykol, the official discourse constructs an image of citizens and activists as "irrational." Activists, on the other hand, mirror the frames of discrediting and expertise, aiming to present themselves as more competent. At the same time, the civic discourse paradoxically borrows elements of boosterism that are typically associated with growth coalitions. This observation aligns with the notion that discourse is an active tool for the struggle for legitimacy, accessible to both sides of the conflict.

The identified discursive strategies of fragmentation (into separate areas), the natural disappearance frame, and the demobilization of activists are understandable in the context of

Astana's authoritarian urbanism. The closed nature of decision-making, in which public hearings are symbolic (microphones are turned off and questions are ignored), and court orders are not enforced, allows the growth coalition to maintain control over the definition of the public interest. In this context, the fragmentation and natural disappearance frames become a tool that makes the physical destruction of the lake legally possible. If an object does not exist or exists in a fragmented form, its exchange value becomes rational. Thus, the third stage of analysis shows how discursive strategies and the institutional context mutually constitute a version of the public interest as urban growth.

5.2.4 Outcome of the case

The conflict was influenced by a whole range of discursive strategies that allowed the official discourse to become dominant.

Activists and environmentalists consider Malyi Taldykol to be a single group of lakes that cannot be divided and fragmented. All the lakes in this group are important to the activists, and they have always advocated for the entire group to be included in the General Plan of Astana. The official discourse, on the contrary, uses the fragmentation frame by dividing the Malyi Taldykol into separate "plots," which allows the authorities to refer to the Malyi Taldykol as only two of a group of lakes, while the others are declared "disappearing" and eventually filled in for further development of the area.

The next strategy employed by the official discourse is to frame disappearance of the lakes as a natural occurrence. Protocol No. 38 states that the lake is not drained by humans, but rather "dries up on its own." Official documents use the passive voice ("the water surface ceased to exist"), which absorbs developers of responsibility for the physical destruction of the object. Active filling is described as a necessary infrastructure preparation of the territory for the construction of social facilities, such as public schools and kindergartens.

These techniques belong to the value-free growth ideology, where the growth process is presented as a natural phenomenon that will necessarily bring good for all (Molotch, 1976); and to the redemptive ideologies frame about the necessary sacrifice of the natural object in favor of the development of the city (Cox & Mair, 1999). The effectiveness of this depoliticizing discourse can be measured by the complete absence of legal accountability: despite verified evidence that water fund land was transferred without mandatory environmental impact assessments and that regulatory agencies like State Architectural and Construction Inspectorate (GASK) illegally refused to conduct inspections, no criminal case was ever pursued, no official was sanctioned, and the single administrative fine issued was negligible in scale. The discourse of unavoidable growth thus successfully shielded institutional actors from any punitive consequence.

Activists demand a complete stop of development on all lakes, and their cleaning from construction and household garbage. Activists ask to improve the cleaned area and make it a recreational wild park. The authorities are proposing a compromise solution in the form of the construction of an "ecopark" on the territory of one of the lakes. However, activists are confident that instead of preserving the lake, an artificial park will be built, followed by the complete drainage of the remaining lakes. Given that the "ecopark" project has not yet been presented to the public, activists are skeptical about the preservation of the natural site in its original form. It can be said that the authorities are trying to assimilate the elements of the protest (activists demand to preserve all the lakes as a wildlife park) by transforming them into a form that is convenient for them (promising to create the "ecopark" on the territory of one of the lakes). This strategy corresponds to the local community and boosterism discourse (Cox, 1999; Molotch, 1976), where so-called "symbolic concessions" mask the preservation of the interests of the growth coalition.

Despite the success of the activists' counter-discourse, which led to the cancellation of the decision to transfer the lakes from the water fund to the settlement fund, as well as the inclusion of Malyi Taldykol in the General Plan discussions, the authorities managed to create the appearance of a compromise by using their discursive strategies. By using a strategy of dividing the unified lake system into separate sections and simulating a dialogue (public hearings where uncomfortable questions can be "drowned out"), the growth coalition created the appearance of compromise while maintaining *de facto* control over the territory.

The outcome of the Malyi Taldykol conflict reveals that when the state's version of public interest becomes institutionally entrenched through prior administrative decisions, discursive challenges cannot alone reverse the trajectory. Public interest, in this case, was effectively defined by state interests, and the growth coalition's ability to control the institutional environment made that definition durable.

5.3. Linear Park

The case of Linear Park developed in a similar way, but with a different outcome. The official discourse initially presented the development as a solution to a social problem, thereby linking the interests of the state and developers with the public good. Activists verified the facts and showed that the alleged problem with social housing had no evidence to support it. When the official argument was refuted, there was no institutional inertia left to maintain the decision. Ultimately, the civil discourse based on the needs of the people already living there prevailed. If the official version of public interest is not supported by real facts and institutional decisions, it can be challenged.

5.3.1. The context of the conflict and a brief timeline of Linear Park

The early stage of the conflict (beginning of February 2022). At this stage, the official discourse begins to define the park's territory as the construction of a "multi-apartment residential complex." The response from the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning of the City of Astana states that the construction is planned "in order to resolve the situation with the 'frozen' construction of problematic shared-equity buildings (“Khazar”, “Comfort territory”, “Syganak” and “Royal Expo”)" (Response from the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, 2022). The document simply stated the fact that there is a situation with the "frozen" construction of problematic shared-investment projects. The reason for this situation was not analyzed, and the perpetrators were not named.

The stage of mobilization of activists (mid-February 2022). Activists conduct their own verification. They establish that the residential complexes mentioned in the official discourse are not "frozen."

The final stage (March 2022). Due to public attention, the purpose of the site changes from "apartment complex" to "square".

Corporate actors in the case of Linear Park

Among the potential developers who were supposed to develop the Linear Park, the media publications mentioned Yelorda Construction Company LLP¹⁰, which is owned by the Capital's Department of Urban Environment Control and Quality, responsible for issuing licenses for construction and installation work, and is currently developing two plots in Maly Takldykol.

A notable example is the Nur Astana Kurylys LLP (NAK) company, which serves as a link between several controversial projects. According to the Akimat's response, this company

¹⁰ <https://vlast.kz/novosti/48895-ziteli-esilskogo-rajona-stolicy-vnov-protestuut-protiv-zastrojki-linejnogo-parka.html>

was offered a land plot in the Linear Park. The authorities explained this decision by the need to complete the construction of several "problematic" residential complexes. NAK company was also involved in the development of Malyi Taldykol lakes, where the company was also building residential complexes (including the Eco Park residential complex).

5.3.2 Constructing space and public interest

5.3.2.1 Official discourse

In the case of Linear Park, we can also observe the clash of discursive strategies. Importantly to note that this plot is located in the very center of Astana, which means its development value is enormous (see the Appendix F). While the General Plan of the city still reflected the value of the park through the metaphors of "the green lungs of the city" and "the ecological spine," official documents dated early February 2022 define the park's territory as a "land plot", "territory for implementing government programs," "multi-apartment residential complex" (response letters from the Architecture Department, 2022). The park is no longer envisioned as a recreational area but rather as a solution to administrative challenges. After the protests of activists (representatives of the Baitak environmental party) and residents of the city, the object is already referred to as a "square" at the press release of the Akimat dated March 10, 2022.

The official documents use nominalizations ("improvement," "formation") and passive voice ("planned," "offered a plot"), which conceal the actual agents of action. The modality ("there will be no construction," "a square will be built") is intended to emphasize the authority of the authorities.

The reference to the state program "Nurly Zher"¹¹ in the official response gives the object the status of fulfilling a state task (response of the Department of Architecture, 17.02.2022). Authorities claim that construction on the territory of the park could "solve the problem of 1,250 families of shareholders" (official response of the Department of Architecture, 2022). This technique aligns with the sacrifice frame of redemptive ideologies (Cox & Mair, 1988). The authors point out that within this discourse, citizens are persuaded to accept the negative consequences of growth, and they should perceive the prosperity of the city as a higher, worthy goal for which it is necessary to make sacrifices. "The cause is worthy and so is sacrifice on its behalf" (Cox & Mair, 1988, p.318).

5.3.2.2. Civilian counter-discourse

In contrast to the official discourse, residents and activists construct the significance of the park through metaphors and epithets: "a natural oasis", "the pearl of Astana", "the hallmark of the capital", "a green zone".

As in the case of Malyi Taldykol, residents and activists of Linear Park not only appeal to the use value of the space but also use vocabulary that is more typical of the "booster discourse" of growth coalitions as they refer to the park as the "calling card of the capital." This technique aims to create a sense of pride in the area. It also shows that the activists are addressing the authorities and trying to communicate with them on their own terms.

Deconstructing the official frame of sacrifices for social needs

Intertextual analysis reveals that the activists are challenging the sacrifices for social needs frame by conducting their own investigation. They checked open sources and found that the residential complexes mentioned in the official documents are not "frozen". By the beginning of 2022, some complexes that the Akimat referred to as problematic had already been

¹¹ The housing and communal development program of Kazakhstan.

completed. Royal Expo complex had already been completed, and Turan Syganak complex was in the active construction phase. Activists and residents claimed that the argument of “deceived investors” was an excuse for seizing land for commercial development (Interview with activist, Astana, 2026).

In the case of Linear Park, the official discourse uses the sacrifice frame of the redemptive ideologies (Cox & Mair, 1998). The civil counter-discourse, on the other hand, defines the object as valuable and borrows elements of boosterism.

5.3.3. Expertise as a political promotion

Official discourse: expertise as a tool of control

In official discourse, officials present themselves as defenders of the common good, who hear everyone, but make the final decisions. In official texts, the subjects of action are impersonal structures ("Management", "Working Group"), who "control the process." Meanwhile, residents are described as weak-willed participants ("may not understand"). “Social housing” and “deceived families” are used to construct the image of the government not only as a competent expert, but also as a defender of the interests of ordinary people.

Civil counter-discourse

The activists' discourse is aimed at the demobilization of official expertise. They challenge technical solutions, accusing the authorities of professional incompetence and corruption. In the case of Linear Park, residents and representatives of the Baitak environmental party are the most active in using various sources and mixing genres (interdiscursivity). Activists combine the political genre with harsh metaphors ("predatory power", "the smell of corruption", "slaves") and ironic criticism (the term "listening state" is put in quotation marks to emphasize its fictitiousness¹²). They rely on various sources in their texts. To correspondence

¹² The term “hearing state” is an official political concept in Kazakhstan, proposed by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in 2019. It describes a model of a state that actively engages in dialogue with society.

with the Akimat of Astana, where the unreliability of the government's arguments is revealed, to quotes from the President and the norms of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan. This mixing of genres and sources marks an attempt to democratize discourse and challenge the monopoly of authority on expertise.

The role of the Baitak party in the discursive struggle

In this case, the Baitak party discursively positions itself as an opposition to the government and a defender of the interests of the residents. In chats and interviews, the party's representatives actively promote their interests by recruiting new members. The party interprets the positive outcome of the conflict as their own victory: "the people turned to us," "this is a victory for the Baitak party in Kazakhstan." One of the party's representatives claims that the party leader has "classmates in high positions close to the President, and that they have brought the video messages from the park's opponents to the President, who has "watched the videos and recognized our interests" (interview with the party representative, 2026). Although this claim cannot be verified, such argument could be used to enhance the party's expertise in the public sphere.

The Baitak party takes an intermediate position, simultaneously criticizing the government and asserting its own expert legitimacy, which may indicate a part of the discursive struggle to define the public interest.

5.3.4 Outcome of the case

In March 2022, the official documents of the Akimat record a change in the designation of the territory from "apartment residential complex" to "square". What was previously described as a solution to social problems (helping the deceived shareholders) has become officially recognized as a space that has a natural value for the residents. Unlike the case of

Malyi Taldykol, where the protest language was assimilated without changing the logic of development, the Linear Park recognizes civil counter-argumentation.

In the Linear Park case, the civil counter-discourse succeeded in redefining public interest — shifting it from the state's framing of "social housing needs" to a community-based understanding of the park's long-term value. This redefinition was institutionalized precisely because it was not competing against a pre-existing path of decisions but challenging a newly proposed one before it could take root.

5.4 Comparative analysis

A comparison of the cases shows that both urban conflicts involved active civic actors, expert arguments, moral and environmental frames. However, discourse alone could not redefine the outcome in the cases, it is important to fix the context of the analyzed cases.

The two conflicts constructed the space of natural objects and their value for residents in different ways. In Malyi Taldykol's case, the official discourse fragmented the territory into scattered areas. The nominal recognition of only two of the several existing lakes creates conditions for the drainage and development of almost the entire area, ultimately leading to the destruction of the lake system. In Linear Park, the official discourse also began with an administrative nomination ("multi-apartment residential complex"), but this nomination was not implemented. Residents and experts opposed it with the image of a natural object that has value and significance for everyday life. Thus, in both cases authorities used same discourse strategies (technification frame, demobilization of opponent's frame).

Public interest was also constructed differently in these cases. In Malyi Taldykol, the official discourse reduced it to social needs (schools, kindergartens), i.e. the frame of "benefits for all" was used within the value-free growth ideology. Activists appeal more to the beauty of the natural object, healthy environment and the right to participate in the decision-making

process. In the Linear Park, the public interest was redefined from below but not completely changed. Activists expanded the focus to the infrastructure issue for those who already lived in that area, which essentially kept the public interest within the framework of a socially oriented logic, making it understandable to the population and more difficult for the authorities to challenge.

The institutional configuration in the two cases differed significantly. The conflict surrounding Malyi Taldykol involved a larger number of institutional actors (the land commission of the Akimat of Astana, the judicial system, and the General Plan of Astana), making decision-making more complex and less transparent. The absence of complex legal processes in Linear Park case allowed the civil discourse to gain institutional recognition more quickly.

A comparison of the two cases through the lens of the third level of the CDA (social practice) shows that the same discursive strategies can lead to different outcomes depending on the institutional context. A comparison of the two cases through the prism of historical institutionalism (Sorensen, 2015) shows that the outcome of an urban conflict is determined not so much by the power of discourse, but rather by the presence of critical junctures, path dependence, and opportunities to block changes (Sorensen, 2015, p.13).

Sorensen (2015) defines critical junctures as “moments of major change when new institutions are established” (Sorensen, 2015, p.13). In Malyi Taldykol, the decision of the land commission in 2020 became a critical turning point, launching positive feedback effects, that is, a mechanism when an institution creates its own beneficiaries who are interested in its preservation (Sorensen, 2015). The interest of developers and officials has made the development institution resistant to changes. Even court orders to establish water protection zones and suspend development pending final review have failed to break this process, because

"every step along a particular path increases the likelihood of further steps along the same path and increases the cost of returning to a previously available option" (Sorensen, 2015, p.7). In the case of Malyi Taldykol, the development had already gained too much momentum before public opposition emerged. Land had been transferred and construction was already underway. By that point, even rather successful legal challenges could not reverse the process, they only produced minor adjustments. The project continued, just with some modifications along the way. In addition, Sorensen (2015) emphasizes that the complexity of "interlocking institutions" is often seen as an obstacle to adjustments and further changes (Sorensen, 2015, p.11). In the case of Malyi Taldykol, we can observe this complexity of interlocking institutions, such as the land commission, the General Plan of Astana and public hearings. Reforming one institution requires reforming others, which makes the system inert. In Linear Park, this effect did not occur because the institutional environment was simpler. The authorities attempted to introduce a new policy (changing the purpose of the facility) but faced a rapid refutation of the facts. The lack of interconnected institutions could lead to restoration of the park's status as a recreational object.

Thus, discourse is important, but its effectiveness is mediated by the institutional context. In the context of Astana's authoritarian urbanism, characterized by many interconnected institutions and the ability of authorities to maneuver, even the most successful discourse can be neutralized if it attempts to break the established effect of past-dependent decision-making.

Conclusion

The analysis of two cases of urban conflicts in Astana allows us to draw several key conclusions. First, discourse remains an important tool for constructing public interests in the city, even in authoritarian settings where opposition tend to be weaker. The authorities' discursive strategies allowed them to divide a single group of lakes into isolated areas, which

made it possible to drain some and nominally "preserve" others. The natural disappearance frame allowed them to shift responsibility for the artificial drainage of the lakes. It can be said that the authorities' discourse not only accompanied the development but also constructed and justified it.

Secondly, it is important to note the institutional context. Without considering the context, we could have concluded that the success of the activists' discourse in Linear Park was solely due to the strength of the arguments, while in Malyi Taldykol arguments of activists were not strong enough. However, this would be incorrect. In Malyi Taldykol, the activists achieved significant progress, but their rhetoric faced institutional challenges. Therefore, discourse is important, but it is not self-sufficient. Its ability to lead to institutional change is influenced by the context.

In addition to the findings on the main research question, the empirical analysis revealed a clearer picture of the interaction between various actors in urban politics in Astana. The composition of different coalitions is not homogeneous, and in different conflict situations, the same actors may take different positions, either agreeing with or rejecting the official discourse. The study of who has the right to make decisions in urban politics in Astana has shown the evolutionary development of civil mobilization. The analysis of civil discourse allows us to identify a wide range of strategies employed by activists who do not only limit themselves to anti-growth rhetoric. It was revealed that they also use "booster discourses", which is mainly characteristic of growth coalitions. This indicates the evolution of civil mobilization in Astana and the complex and controversial urban planning policies in general.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

This study aimed to identify how the concept of public interest is constructed and legitimized in urban conflicts in Astana. Using the Growth Machine Theory (Logan & Molotch,

2007) as an interpretative framework and Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992; 1995) as a methodology, this study identified the mechanisms of discursive struggle between official actors (akimat, developers, and affiliated structures) and civil counter-coalitions (activists, local residents, and experts) based on two case studies of the Malyi Taldykol and Linear Park. The first assumption is that the concept of public interest is not an objective given but is constructed discursively. Although there are only two of developers that claim to build schools in the area (activists claim that schools are not public but private), in the case of Malyi Taldykol and Linear Park, the authorities and developers present development as a natural and inevitable process, and public interest is interpreted as the construction of social facilities such as public schools, kindergartens, and social housing. There is a slight difference in the counter-discourses of both cases: in Malyi Taldykol, activists and environmentalists focus more on nature protection, while in the Linear Park, in addition to ecology, they also talk about things that could be more understandable to broader public (overloaded infrastructure).

The second observation concerns the importance of discourse in constructing public interest in each case. To neutralize the value of Malyi Taldykol as a natural object, various discursive strategies were used, which helped the authorities to imitate a compromise solution by including Malyi Taldykol in the discussion of the General Plan, but only two of the five lakes, thereby depriving it of its integrity. In the case of the Linear Park, the civil counter-discourse managed to prove the inadequacy of the authorities' argument about "social needs," thereby restoring the park's status as a recreational facility. However, it should be noted that discourse alone is not sufficient. The third stage of the analysis showed that it is also important to take into account the institutional context. In Malyi Taldykol, the high density of interconnected institutions (land commission, the General plan of Astana, judicial system, public hearings) allowed the authorities to maneuver and eventually present a compromise solution with the possible inclusion of two lakes in the General plan of Astana. In contrast, in Linear Park, the

simplicity of the institutional configuration left the authorities with little room for maneuver, allowing the civil counter-discourse to quickly achieve its goal.

The third observation concerns the way different parties (activists, experts, and affiliated structures) see civil society. Different actors claimed that one of the reasons why the authorities were able to drain the lakes was the passive role of the citizens. Activists and affiliated structures believe that most people do not want to get involved in issues that do not directly affect them. For most people, the environmental demand for the preservation of a natural site remains within the realm of "unclear concern for birds and frogs." One of the activists also suggested that the passivity of citizens may stem from the fact that most of the Astana city's population is made up of newcomers who have not yet developed a sense of belonging to Astana and its environment.

The next observation concerns the adaptation of the Growth Machine Theory to the Kazakhstani context. In the original theory, growth coalitions are formed through "horizontal" alliances between local businesses and municipal authorities. In Astana, the state, represented by the Akimat and quasi-state structures, plays a dominant role, which changes the nature of the coalition's motivation and the typology of the discursive strategies employed. Instead of convincing voters to increase the tax base and compete with other cities, the central strategies revolve around the rhetoric of "state necessity". This notion performs the same function as the arguments of "increasing taxes and creating jobs" that were used in the American model. It presents decisions that serve narrow elite interests as serving the public good. In both contexts, the appeal to public interest is a way of making choices appear inevitable, rational, and beneficial for everyone. The difference lies in the specific vocabulary used to construct that claim. At the same time, the basic distinction between exchange value and use value retains its explanatory power, and adapted types of discursive strategies (neutralization of opposition, redemptive ideologies, and boosterism) are used in empirical analysis of this study.

Another observation concerns the evolution of the activist movement in Astana. Interdiscursive and intertextual analysis revealed the full range of genres used and sources cited in the activists' rhetoric. They skillfully cite different types of documents, demonstrating their expertise. The use of strategic discourse typology revealed that activists have begun to employ discourses (for example booster discourse) previously associated with the authorities, suggesting an expansion of their target audience.

In line with the interpretive nature of the study, this work does not establish causal relationships between discursive strategies and conflict outcomes. Various discursive strategies were identified that may have contributed to institutional changes in both cases. Future research is open to establishing causal relationships between discourse and institutional outcomes, which may consider factors such as the political value of the territory, the extent of intervention by higher authorities, the material resources of activists, and non-discursive practices (e.g., corruption schemes). Other limitations include the asymmetry of the empirical source base (this study has more data on Malyi Taldykol; developers' refusal to be interviewed), the interpretive nature of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (which leads to inevitable subjectivity), and the impossibility of a full-fledged analysis of informal negotiations between the government and business. The results do not claim to be generalized beyond the cases examined, however, the discursive mechanisms identified can serve as hypotheses for the study of other post-Soviet cities.

The study opens up several prospects for future research. A comparative analysis with other post-Soviet cities (Almaty and Shymkent) would allow to test the extent to which the identified discursive patterns are specific to Astana. The role of the judicial system in urban conflicts deserves special attention. As the case of Malyi Taldykol demonstrates, court decisions can be ignored by the executive branch, and analyzing the non-enforcement of court orders in the field of urban planning is an interesting topic.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that before conducting the analysis, I was confident that the authoritarian nature of Astana's urban policy, characterized by the lack of transparency in decision-making and the appearance of public hearings, would determine the outcomes of the cases. It seemed that in a system where decisions are made from “top to bottom”, the authorities were able to impose and enforce any decision. But the results of the analysis showed that with the right organization and a qualified approach, which was demonstrated by the activists from the SOS Taldykol and other civil movements, it is possible, if not to completely change the outcome of the conflict, then at least to force the authorities to make concessions. This shows that even in an authoritarian regime, there is space for struggle and the protection of public interests.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions List – English Version

- 1 Could you describe your involvement in the project (Malyi Taldykol or Linear Park)?
- 2 When did you first hear of the project?
- 3 What were the main goals of this project?
- 4 What does “public interest” mean to you?
- 5 Do you believe the project reflected public interest?
- 6 What groups were most affected by this project?
- 7 How would you describe the interaction between government, developers and activists?
8. What arguments were used to justify the project?
9. Do you know what the counterarguments were?
10. How would you evaluate the project’s outcome?

Appendix B: Transformation of Lake № 3. Developer: Sat Group Project

(Photos by Ruslan Urazaliev, SOS Taldykol)



Appendix C: Satellite Image of the Taldykol Lake System with Numbered Water Bodies

Source: Kazakhstan Chamber of Environmental Auditors et al. 2021, 9.



Appendix D: Satellite Image of the Taldykol Lake System

Source: Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan 2021.



Рис. 2. Трансформация Талдыкольской системы озер в XXI веке.

Appendix E: Historical Map Fragment Showing the Taldy-Kul Lake Group near Akmolinsk, 1913

Source: Special Map of Western Siberia, fragment. Reproduced in the author's empirical materials.



Специальная карта Западной Сибири (М 1:420 000)
Ряд 10, лист 9. Фрагмент
Нанесена группа озер с общим названием "Талды-куль"
Составлял в 1913 году военный топограф Елистьяев.

Appendix F: Location of Linear Park in the center of Astana

Source: Yandex Maps, screenshot by author, accessed April 27,2026.

