

# **The Language of Legitimation in Authoritarian Regimes: A Multiple-case Study of Kazakhstan and Russia.**

Synopsis of Ph.D. Dissertation

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## **Introduction.**

In spite of different interpretations of democratization in recent years, all political scientists confirm the backsliding of democratic processes by now.

The world today observes a rise of authoritarian leaders who claim to be legitimated by their own citizens and, moreover, at least at some point in time have been widely popular. Russian president, V.Putin, and Kazakhstan's first president Nazarbayev are stark examples of such leaders.

Political scientists insist on the role of legitimacy in the functioning of the state, specifically, legitimate rule leads to enhanced order, stability, and effectiveness – as stated by Beetham (1991).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the impact is mutual. Effectiveness of government, stability and order are used as legitimating factors by political leaders.

Essentially, securing legitimacy for the political elites is a central issue to solve. The success will determine the longevity and resilience of the regime.

The main object of my research is legitimation in authoritarian regimes. Popular support for autocratic regime at least at the initial stages of presidency may imply that rulers use successful legitimation strategies or perform effectively by producing economic growth and social conditions. I approach legitimation in Kazakhstan and Russia from the public communication or language used by the main shapers of public discourse – presidents. One of the reasons is that the discourse propounded by a leader in autocracies is obviously broadcasted by state-controlled media, political actors subservient or just loyal to the ruling elites and further disseminated to the public masses. Essentially, a personalist dictator defines legitimation strategies.

My study represents an attempt to capture the features of contemporary authoritarianism and specifically how authoritarian rulers legitimate their authority by drawing upon case studies of Kazakhstan and Russia. Time frame for analysis is the period 2000-2021.

## **Research questions and structure.**

The thesis consists of four chapters.

**Chapter 1. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks: how to think of contemporary authoritarianism? Kazakhstan and Russia.**

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<sup>1</sup> (Beetham 1991, 25–37)

Chapter 1 of the dissertation starts with the description of contemporary authoritarianism and typologies of political regimes. First of all, I operationalize theoretical frameworks to determine the type of political regime in the analyzed countries. The overview of political regimes in Kazakhstan and Russia are based on studies of Geddes (2014), Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010), Levitsky and Way (2010), Howard & Roessler (2006), V-Dem Democracy Score, Global Freedom Score by Freedom House, and Polity5 project.

My research question in the first chapter was to investigate if different theoretical frameworks produce similar results in defining political regimes in Kazakhstan and Russia. So, case studies are used to illustrate the logic and plausibility of the theoretical frameworks for the analysis of authoritarian regimes.

The large-scale measurement and categorization of political regimes has been popular since recently. The advantage of this work is the use of operationizable definitions. As such, I summarize and conclude that authoritarian regime represents *a political regime with or without competitive, multiparty elections where the principle of checks and balances is not fulfilled, alternation of power does not take place (one leader or a group stay in power for more than two consecutive periods, various reasons can be discussed), no uncertainty regarding the outcome of the elections.* This concept implies that liberal political rights are a requirement for public contestation and competition in democracies as opposed to authoritarian regimes. In other words, uncertainty and real competition in choosing leaders is a must. Hybrid regimes with real competition and some uncertainty cannot be referred to as authoritarian. Consequently, not all hybrid regimes are authoritarian.

I conclude that Russia and Kazakhstan are categorized as personal dictatorships by the typology of Geddes (2014), hegemonic authoritarian regimes by Levitsky & Way (2010), Howard & Roessler (2006), as consolidated autocracy by the Freedom House. That said, they make the largest geographical region with autocratic ruling. The similarity of the two states are supported by multiple statistical indicators on institutional quality, economic development, oil and gas and mineral resource export. Besides, political events in these countries represent the same pattern which is analyzed in chapter two on authoritarian institutionalization and governance. In spite of the fact that these states are far from exemplary in terms of governance quality, according to the

2018 UN cross-national study, Russia and Kazakhstan appeared in the list of countries with *very high* E-governance development index.<sup>2</sup>

## **Chapter 2. Authoritarian institutions and the personalization of power in Kazakhstan and Russia.**

Undoubtedly, the state activity towards autocratization in Kazakhstan and Russia is obvious. As I cited Slater (2003), authoritarian institutions are engineered in such a way as to create “infrastructural power” to control or eradicate any potential opposition and alternative views.<sup>3</sup> In reality, it is manifested in multiple ways. On the one hand, democratic institutions are “reduced to façade status in practice.”<sup>4</sup> For example, parliament acquires large shares of appointed deputies. On the other hand, in addition to these facade institutes, new bodies and institutes are created to insert direct control over the state apparatus (like it happened with the special envoys to regional governors in Russia, or the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan which directly selects its representatives to the parliament).

The analysis of Kazakhstani legal codes and norms reveals features of authoritarian governance in Kazakhstan. Insurmountable powers of the executive branch in Kazakhstan has become the cause of particular discontent in the recent years. Unsurprisingly, the grip of the first president has tightened so much that reached the level of personality cult and the increase in the number of political prisoners.

First of all, the analysis shows that Kazakhstan and Russia are very close according to their democracy-autocracy and quality of institutions indicators. Institutionalization processes have been very similar in Kazakhstan and Russia.

I argue that along with ranking close on the indicators of governance effectiveness, Russia and Kazakhstan have been undergoing similar political changes. To be precise, the adoption of amendments extending presidential tenure for Putin till 2036 corresponds to the circumstances when Nazarbayev gained the status of the Leader of the Nation and, thus, unrestricted number of times to run for presidency. Subsequently, Nazarbayev gained the positions of lifelong chairman of the Security Council, the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, etc.

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<sup>2</sup> (UNITED NATIONS E-GOVERNMENT SURVEY 2018 2018, 89)

<sup>3</sup> (Slater 2003, 82)

<sup>4</sup> (Levitsky and Way 2010, 7)

Kazakh political system possesses features of sultanism and the Russian system exhibits neopatrimonial features. First and foremost characteristics of neopatrimonial and sultanistic regimes is that the executive power rests upon a network of close associates and loyal circles to the level that the lines between state and regime are blurred meaning the perversion of legal and rational norms, rampant corruption.

Empirical categorizing between different forms of political regimes of the first two chapters leaves out cultural dimensions. That is why I attempt elaborate on them in this section.

Central Asian political development represents a fusion of traditional patrimonial relations, Tsarist administrative rule, Soviet bureaucracy, and more recently with new formal constitutional and legal-rational institutions. Kazakh people's lifestyle was nomadic, pastoralist, migratory and mobile, livestock-breeding society, kinship and genealogy linked individuals shaped clans. The impact of Tsarist Russia period on the nomadic people is seriously questioned. Colonization took place with serious hurdles. Throughout 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries multiple protests and riots erupted in the steppe. The geographical distance complicated infrastructure and communications in the steppe. However, the negative side of the nomadic lifestyle was fragmentation and disunity which basically came to be the reason of accession into the Russian Empire.

The nomadic culture contrasted with the culture of the Russian peasantry which constituted the overwhelming majority even up to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. "Russian idea" emphasized equality of outcomes, equality instead of freedom and individualism. "Russian slave soul" meaning submissiveness and self-destructiveness of the Russian slave mentality was described by almost all Russian writers and philosophers. In spite of multiple attempts towards Westernization, Russian people have never experienced rule of law, a government able to create and protect property rights and to enforce contracts.

Serfdom and communes became the source of authoritarian personality when hostility toward outsiders, dogmatism and banality also revealed themselves towards social rejects, inorodtsy (non-Russian and non-Christian minorities). I suggest that imperial consciousness and authoritarian personality traits of the Russian peasantry mentioned in the second chapter result in the emphasis on the ideas of defense against external threats. Defense issues including hostility towards the US and Ukraine became one of the most important topics in the discourse of Vladimir Putin which is discussed in chapter four.

### **Chapter 3. Governance and language style of modern authoritarian regimes: cases of Kazakhstan and Russia.**

As a result of tracing the evolution of governance concept, I concluded that governance styles reflect the mainstream developmentalist approach towards governance. International institutes dealing with development issues emphasize the importance of network and market styles of governance. I incorporated market and network styles of governance into the category of decentralized governance in the Autocratic Speech Index. Similarly, I constructed and calculated Illiberal Speech Index for all the analyzed years for the political texts from presidents of Kazakhstan and Russia.

My original purpose was to observe governance styles and styles of language in the official public discourse of hegemonic authoritarian leaders of Kazakhstan and Russia.

In my empirical analysis I combine two approaches: on styles of language (as in Maerz (2019)) and styles of governance (as in Olsen et.al.(2021)).

As a result, I attempt to answer two main research questions:

1. What style of governance dominates in the discourse of political leaders of authoritarian Kazakhstan and Russia?
2. What style of language do the presidents of Kazakhstan and Russia demonstrate?

### **Chapter 4. The politics of legitimation in the language of authoritarian rulers: Kazakhstan and Russia.**

While legitimation is a standard and universal process for democratic systems, it is not so for non-democracies. It puts national context to the forefront of legitimacy issues in authoritarian regimes. Political communication in authoritarian regimes is based on different model. Undoubtedly, the maker and the shaper of public discourse there is a personalist ruler or president for the cases of hegemonic Kazakhstan and Russia. Obviously, the autocratic ruler's purpose is to maintain power which means shaping the mentality of his citizens in a needed direction. However, it does not exclude the need to know wishes of the electorate. On the one hand, president's speeches should correspond to the popular beliefs. On the other hand, authoritarian leader shapes public beliefs.

In legitimacy, political speeches and the role of political leaders become of utmost importance. For example, Beetham (1991) claims that: "If people believe in the legitimacy of power, is this not because the powerful have been successful in the public relations campaign, because they have managed to *convince people that they are legitimate*, because their legitimations' have been

accepted?”<sup>5</sup> Language or political speeches turn out to be one of the best sources of legitimation claims of authoritarian leaders. Moreover, although, mostly in closed autocracies and sultanistic regimes, the discourse of a leader is presented as ultimate truth. Multiple books, monographs and speeches are studied at schools. Excerpts and quotes of an autocrat are put on the walls of public offices as slogans. They are massively discussed by propagandist media, journalists and in talk shows.

In chapter four I draw a comprehensive picture of legitimation claims of the leaders of Kazakhstan and Russia:

Research hypothesis 1: Economic performance based legitimacy play the most important role in the rhetoric of Russian and Kazakhstani leaders.

Research hypothesis 2: Russian legitimacy is based on defence and military discourses more than in Kazakhstan.

The history of Imperial Russia on the one hand and authoritarian personality traits of the Russian peasantry (aggressiveness towards those different) mentioned in the second chapter should result in the emphasis on the ideas of defense against external threats. In view of Putin’s aggressive behavior on the international arena I suggest that he must legitimate his actions in front of his own people, that is why defence issues should be of high importance to him.

### **Methodology.**

In chapters 3 and 4 I use dictionary-based content analysis on textual data which is a supervised quantitative analysis. It is based on bag-of-words approach. First, dictionary is constructed by pre-define key words. Multiple categories (or variables) are created within a dictionary. Words are counted per each category so the category is measured by the total frequency of key words and phrases. All analyses were made in WordStat9 software. Advantage of automated text analysis is the capacity to analyze large volumes of text.

Dictionary construction involves contextual interpretation and qualitative judgment of an author. However, reliability is achieved because there is no human decision making as part of the text analysis procedure.

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<sup>5</sup> (Beetham 1991, 9)



To create a representative database of political texts for analysis I collected all speeches addressed to the general public, parliament (who are representatives of the general public), and other broadcasted live or televised speeches. For texts from Kazakhstani leader, priority was given to the speeches addressed at the citizens in general, then the speeches to the Parliament, the speeches to the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, speeches to the newly created body National Council of Social Trust which includes social activists, civil society representatives, finally to the Extended Meetings with government. In total, I collected 98 political speeches of the president of Kazakhstan. Speeches by N. Nazarbayev were made during the period 2000 - June 2019. Speeches by K. Tokayev were made during the period June 2019 – 2021.

The textual data for the president of Russia includes annual national addresses to the Federal Council, Direct line with president, speeches made at the United Russia political party congresses, annual press-conferences of the president, inauguration speeches. In total, I collected 70 speeches of the Russian president. Texts are attributed to the institute of president not specific persona.

The full description of the corpus of speeches is provided in the Appendices section of the chapter 3. The same corpus of speeches were used for analysis in chapter 3 and 4. The textual data due to large volume can be provided upon request.

First, I implement a supervised technique, dictionary-based textual analysis, to scale autocratic features in the discourse of the president of Kazakhstan and the president of Russia. Based on validated key terms I measure whether their rhetoric is more democratic or more autocratic. The special structure of dictionary allows me to construct the Illiberalness index and Autocratization Index.

In **chapter four** I investigate recurring patterns and strategies of the presidents. I used a dictionary-based content analysis for extracting legitimation claims in the public discourses of the presidents. Developing the category structure of legitimation dictionary in my case is both theory and data driven. I elaborated legitimation claims into 7 categories: economic performance, social provision, governance, defence, democracy and liberalism, identity-based legitimation and international engagement categories.

Building on theories of von Soest and Grauvogel (2017), Tannenberget al. (2021), and Guriev & Treisman (2019), I elaborate the following research hypotheses:

*Research hypothesis 1:* Economic performance based legitimacy plays the most important role in the rhetoric of Russian and Kazakhstani leaders.

*Research hypothesis 2:* Russian legitimacy is based on defence and military discourses more than in Kazakhstan.

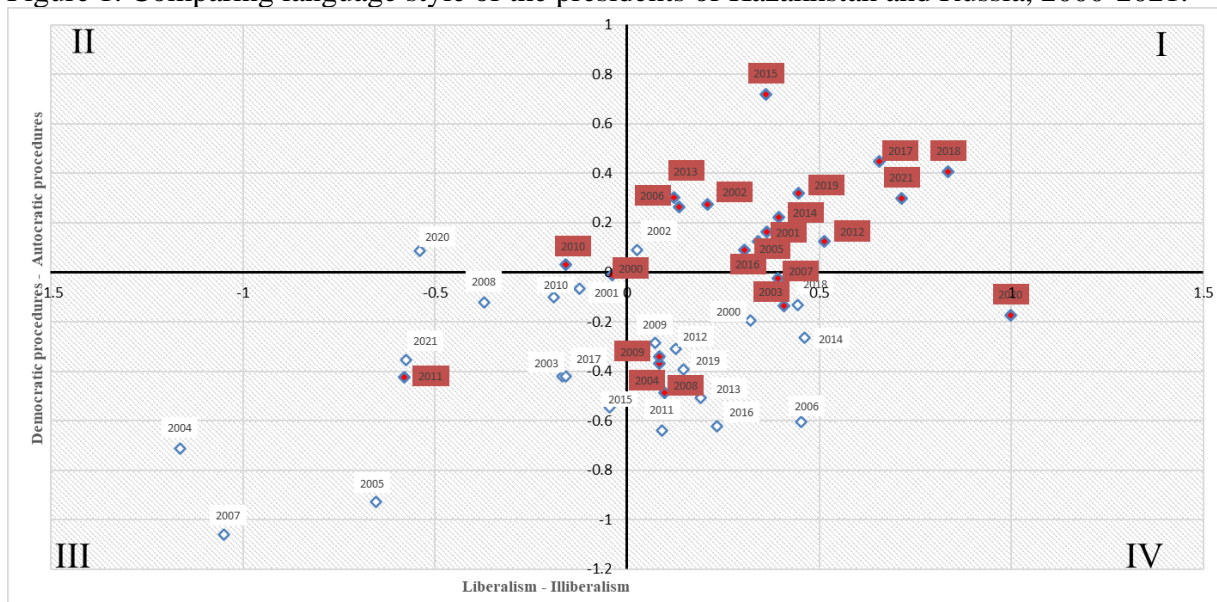
I suggest that the history of Imperial Russia on the one hand and authoritarian personality traits of the Russian peasantry mentioned in the second chapter should result in the emphasis on the ideas of defense against external threats. Also, in view of Putin’s aggressive behavior on the international arena he must legitimate his actions in front of his own people, that is why defense issues should be of high importance to him.

I add qualitative analysis to further illustrate the difference in legitimation strategies between Kazakh and Russian presidents. In addition, within my study I investigate how legitimacy claims change over time.

### Discussion of results for Chapter 3.

As a result of the analysis of the language style and governance style of two heads of state, I conclude that the language of authoritarian political leaders is misleading. Long-standing autocracy like Kazakhstan has a leader portraying himself as the one who was successful in building a democratic society - a demonstrative democratic image. In particular, the summarized data for all 22 years show that Kazakh president supports liberal ideas and exhibits focus on democratic procedures.

Figure 1. Comparing language style of the presidents of Kazakhstan and Russia, 2000-2021.



Legend: red diamonds are the speeches of the president of Russia, white diamonds are the speeches of the president of Kazakhstan.

Source: Author.

Figure 1 above shows prevalence of autocratic procedures over democratic ones and prevalence of illiberalism over liberal values. Russian president's speeches are largely situated in this quadrant. Kazakhstani president spoke in autocratic and illiberal style only in 2002.

In contrast to Kazakhstani leader, the Russian president had only one fully democratic and liberal year in the history of political speeches - 2011, during Medvedev's term.

However, Russian president's share of illiberal vocabulary almost always was stronger than liberal. Also, Russia's newly hegemonic authoritarian regime has clearly demonstrated strengthening autocratic discourse during 2000-2021. The Russian president accentuated illiberalness and autocratic procedures during all the years except for the year 2002.

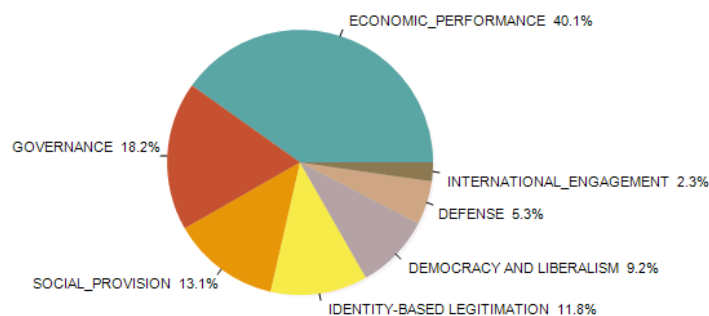
In addition, hierarchic style of governance prevails in the language of the Russian political leader. Kazakhstani leader exhibits more decentralized style of governance than hierarchic most of the years (19 out of 22 years) in his addresses to the public. Kazakh president's usage of decentralized governance key words is almost three times higher than the Russian's president.

However, president of Kazakhstan likes to use expressions "instruct the government" and 'instruct' all other state bodies and even regional legislatures thus reasserting authority and attempting to exhibit effective governance.

#### **Discussion of results for Chapter 4.**

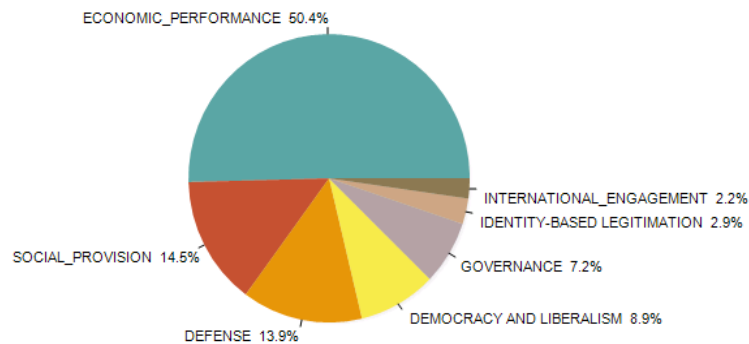
To provide a nuanced analysis, I combine quantitative and qualitative analyses of legitimation strategies in Kazakhstan. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate legitimation efforts of the presidents of Kazakhstan and Russia.

Figure 2. Legitimacy claims in the public discourse of the President of Kazakhstan, 2000-2021.



Source: Author

Figure 3. Legitimacy claims in the public discourse of the President of Russia, 2000-2021.



Source: Author.

Both leaders focus the majority of their legitimation efforts towards economic performance. In comparison to Kazakhstan's leader, president of Russia accent on economic performance is stronger: 50% of all legitimacy claims. Both autocrats in relation to high economic indicators like to highlight that such indicators have never been achieved before.

Governance issues are second most important topic in Kazakhstan's president texts. President underscores the efforts of government and state bodies in implementing state programs. Devising state programs of socio-economic development, setting goal indicators have been a distinctive feature of president Nazarbayev and his follower president Tokayev: strategy "Kazakhstan-2030", strategy "Kazakhstan-2050", Business Roadmap, etc.

Identity-based legitimation discourse hovers around the same ideas through all the last 29 years of president Nazarbayev: tolerance, multiethnic peace and stability, friendship and unity, multi-confessional and multinational peace. Furthermore, political discourse of president Nazarbayev on multiethnic and interreligious peace has grown and evolved into 'a Kazakhstani way' of democracy. As a result, the discourse on democratic mechanisms of legitimation of the president of Kazakhstan is quite different from the traditional understanding of democracy.

Russian president's legitimation rhetoric is substantially different from his Kazakh counterpart. The largest difference between the Russian president and Kazakhstani legitimation strategies lies in defence category: it constitutes only 5.3% in the speeches of the Kazakh leader, it is 13.9% of total legitimation claims in the speeches of the Russian leader. Defence notion constitutes first of all missiles and weapons, army and other military forces. Interestingly enough, in his discussion

of defence issues Russian president pays a decent amount of attention to the United States and Ukraine. 'United States' is the second most frequent phrase in president's speeches. To conclude, the discourse on defence category can be regarded as second most important after economic performance for the president of Russia.

To conclude, there are crucial variations among autocratic leaders of Kazakhstan and Russia in their claims to legitimacy.

Stark differences in culture and history are the factors that explain the difference in legitimization claims of the presidents of Kazakhstan and Russia. Historico-cultural factors represent the only possible explanatory variable of the difference in the discourse of two presidents.

I suggest that demonstratively democratic language of Kazakh president and his focus on governance and democratic procedures is congruent with the inclination towards riots and protests of the historically nomadic people. So, president is trying to convince people in his democratic rule by distorting the essence of democracy.

At the same time, the focus on defense and family is justified in the discourse of the Russian president. Long history of the "Russian slave soul" and imperial consciousness impacted current situation in Russia: hostility towards others and creating external threats correspond to the traits of authoritarian personality of the long-lived Russian peasantry. President Putin's lamentations about the breakdown of the Soviet Union are famous and supported by the older generations of the Russians.

### **Contribution.**

My novice contribution is extending the toolkit of computational tools of data analysis to measuring authoritarian legitimization. Discourse of political leaders and political communication turn out to be one of the best sources of legitimization claims of authoritarian leaders.

Second novice contribution is the analysis of governance styles (hierarchical and decentralized) and the illiberalness and autocratization using indices ISI and ASI in the long-term.

Thus, my research is devoted to uncovering common patterns of and explanations for the developments of authoritarianism in post-Soviet regimes. On the one hand, my research will add value to comparative politics by quantifying authoritarian discourse. On the other hand, it will produce thorough understanding of the largest region with a persistent authoritarian governance (Russia and Kazakhstan).

### List of publications.

1. Kalkamanova, Assem. 2020. "Social Media As the Platform for Political Mobilization: Case Study of Kazakhstan". *Central and Eastern European EDem and EGov Days* 338 (July): 431-42. <https://doi.org/10.24989/ocg.338.34>.
2. Kalkamanova, Assem. 2021. "E-governance Development as a Legitimation Strategy: a Content Analysis." *Kazakhstan-Spectrum* 4 (100): 34-51. <https://doi.org/10.52536/2415-8216.2021-4.03>
3. Kalkamanova, Assem. 2021. "Legitimacy Claims in Public Communication: Automated Text analysis of Speeches of Heads of Government in Kazakhstan and Russia." *Eurasian Journal of Leadership*, 3(1), pp.18-27.
4. Kalkamanova, Assem. 2022. Legitimacy Claims and E-Governance in Authoritarian Regimes: a Content Analysis." *De Iurisprudencia Et Iure Publico*, 2022/3. (pending)
5. Kalkamanova, Assem. 2022. "Comparing Governance Style and Language Style: Quantitative Text Analysis of Speeches by Heads of States." *Kazakhstan-Spectrum* 2 (102): 39-58. <https://doi.org/10.52536/2415-8216.2022-2.02>
6. Cay, Furkan, Kalkamanova, Assem. 2022. "Measuring Populist Discourse of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: A Quantitative Content Analysis." *Politikon* 49 (3). (pending)
7. Kalkamanova, Assem. 2022. "E-Governance Development As a Successful Legitimation Strategy: a Content Analysis." *Az állam és jog digitális környezete a 21 században*. Szegedi Tudományegyetem Állam- és Jogtudományi Doktori Iskola.

### List of conferences.

1. Kalkamanova A. (14 February 2020) *Social Media As the Platform for Political Mobilization: Case Study of Kazakhstan*. Presented at Second Annual IRSI IDSA Szeged Conference on International Affairs. Szeged, Hungary.
2. Kalkamanova A. (16 October, 2020) *Social Media and Contentious Politics: a Case Study of Kazakhstan*. Presented at the XXIII Spring Wind Conference. Association of Hungarian Ph.D. an DLA Candidates. Budapest, Hungary.
3. Kalkamanova A. (3-4 December, 2020) *Governance and E-governance in Authoritarian Regimes*. Presented at The Smart Cities International Conference, 8<sup>th</sup> Edition. The National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania.

4. Kalkamanova A. (11-14 May, 2021) Digitally Networked Social Movements in Authoritarian Regimes: a Case Study of Kazakhstan. Presented at The International Association for Political Science Students 2021 World Congress “Democracy, Identity, and Power”.
5. Kalkamanova A. (23-25 September, 2020) *Political Activism and Social Media: a Case Study of Kazakhstan*. Presented at 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Eurasian Politics & Society by CESRAN International. Lisbon, Portugal.
6. Kalkamanova A. (12 December, 2020) Digitally Networked Social Movements in Authoritarian Regimes: a Case Study of Kazakhstan. International Online Conference “Security and Sovereignty in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”. Institute for Cultural Relations Policy. Budapest, Hungary.
7. Cay F., Kalkamanova A. (16-17 September, 2021) Populist Evolution of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: a Quantitative Content Analysis of Political Campaign Speeches.” Presented at the International Conference “After the Summer of Migration: Right-Wing Populism, Media and Affect.” The Peace Institute, Ljubljana, Slovenia.
8. Kalkamanova A. (19 February, 2021) *Governance and E-governance in Authoritarian Regimes*. Presented at The Third Annual IRSI IDSA Szeged Conference on International Affairs. International Diplomatic Student Association, Szeged, Hungary.
9. Kalkamanova, A. (13 May, 2022) *E-Governance Development As a Successful Legitimation Strategy: a Content Analysis*. Digital Environment Of The State And Law in the 21st Century Conference. Doctoral School of Law and Political Sciences, University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary.