

**REPRESSION INTENSITY IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES:  
CASE STUDY OF KAZAKHSTAN**

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Submitted to  
Central European University  
Department of Political Science

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Vienna, Austria  
2021

## **Abstract**

The thesis analyzes the influence of coercive state's capacity and the predictiveness of conflict on the intensity of repression. The state capacity is examined through the scope and cohesion variables. Based on the level of scope and cohesion of the security apparatus and on the degree of predictiveness of the conflict, the resulting repression is categorized as high and low. To test for this relationship, Kazakhstan is taken as a macro regime case and 2011 Zhanaozen protests and 2019 post-presidential elections demonstrations are taken as micro cases. The research concludes that Kazakhstan has both high scope and high cohesion that allow the state to use both intensity types of repression. The difference in chosen repression during two micro cases is explained with the third variable of the predictiveness of conflict. The findings of the master thesis are relevant for contemporary research on repressions, opposition and civil society in soft authoritarian regimes.

# Table of Contents

<i>Introduction.....</i>	<i>1</i>
<b>2 Chapter 1 - Theoretical background .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2.1 Conceptualization of repression .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2.2 Explaining causes of repression .....</b>	<b>6</b>
2.2.1 Structural factors .....	6
2.2.2 External factors .....	9
2.2.3 Domestic factors .....	12
<b>3 Chapter 2 - Research Design and Case Selection.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>3.1 Dependent Variable .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>3.2 Independent Variable 1 .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>3.3 Independent Variable 2 .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>3.4 Independent Variable 3 .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>3.5 Hypothesis.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>3.6 Methodology .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3.7 Case selection.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3.8 Data sources.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>4 Chapter 3 - Empirical Analysis .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>4.1 Background .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>4.2 Testing for Scope.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>4.3 Testing for Cohesion .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>4.4 Testing for predictiveness of conflict.....</b>	<b>32</b>
4.4.1 2011 Zhanaozen massacre .....	32
4.4.2 2019 presidential elections.....	35
<b>5 Conclusion.....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>6 Bibliography.....</b>	<b>40</b>

## List of Tables

Table 1 - Members of the Security Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan .....23

Table 2 - Organization of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan ....25

## List of Figures

Figure 1 - The structure and bodies of the National Security Committee .....24

Figure 2 - Family of Nursultan Nazarbayev .....29

## Introduction

After the independence, post-Soviet states were faced with a challenge of state building, an experience which none of the states had before. Although most structural elements of governance were inherited from the Soviet system, the realities of modern world required the states to adapt and modernize.<sup>1</sup> Kazakhstan, among other neighboring states in the region, chose to liberalize its economy and politics. With that, the existence of oppositional political parties and to some extent independent media became possible. However, permission to exist did not equal freedom of actions and opposition leaders, press, and individuals expressing anti-government ideas were tactically eliminated. For Kazakhstan, as for a soft authoritarian state, the presence of all those “free” parts of the society are crucial for keeping good international image. The national slogan of “First the economy, then politics” is particularly important since it shows the irony of the system in Kazakhstan (Satpayev & Umbetaliyeva 2015). The state initially decided to put main focus on the economy, while the political reforms and institutions lagged behind. While at the same time, the same economic system is tied to the political elite, who is controlling public wealth. This way, same few people who got control over economic resources were also sitting at top political positions. This tight connection between the economy and politics shaped the outcome of many domestic conflicts and protests. The state tactically used repression depending on the severity of the situation to keep both domestic peace and international image. After some major domestic conflicts, repression was intense, with hundreds of deaths, violence, beatings, and extreme violations of human rights. This was the case during 2011 Zhanaozen protests (Plenta 2015). Other times, the government used surveillance, monitoring and harassment not very visible to the general public well before the critical event. 2019 post-presidential elections can be an example of the second scenario. This

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<sup>1</sup> The parts of this MA thesis were taken from the Final Paper submitted to the course POLS5192 Hybrid Regimes in Modern Times. The use of text passages for MA thesis is approved by Inna Melnykovska.

thesis attempts to answer following research question: Why were repressions highly intensive in some cases and less intensive in others? The fact that the state opted for different levels of repression during those two important historical moments can be explained through the capacity of the coercive state, as well as the predictiveness of the conflict. This thesis focuses on the capacity of the state apparatus as a shaping factor of the intensity of repression during domestic conflicts and protests. The relationship between the state apparatus and the use of repressive techniques is well-studied, however, this research is focused on the intensity of the resulting repression as an outcome of the state capacity and predictiveness of conflict. To answer the research question, Kazakhstan will be looked as a macro-regime case to analyze the coercive capacity in general, and two micro cases of 2011 Zhanaozen and 2019 post-presidential elections protests will be studied to test for the relationship between the predictiveness of the event and the intensity of repression. This research does not trace causal mechanisms and the analysis is limited to the explanation of Way and Levitsky (2006), although other explanations of intensity of repression and underlying conditions exist.

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 1 gives theoretical background on repression and explanations of its causes in the literature. Chapter 2 presents the research design and case selection. Chapter 3 contains empirical analysis and testing of hypotheses for macro and micro cases. It is followed with the concluding remarks and implications for future research.

## **2 Chapter 1 - Theoretical background**

### **2.1 Conceptualization of repression**

Political repression in authoritarian regimes is used as an effective tool to maintain power and compliance. Be it in the form of violent suppression of opposition and state contenders, or mainly surveillance and restrictions, or the combination of both, repressive techniques are widely common among authoritarian rulers. The types of repression, its intensity, scope, and magnitude may vary depending on the context, time, as well as internal and external pressure. Before moving on to detailed discussion of repressive behavior, it is important to define what state repression is and is not. Davenport (2007) conceptualizes state repression as a variety of acts by political authorities in relation to people within the state's territorial jurisdiction that can take the form of coercive or non-coercive, covert or overt, successful or failed efforts by the state itself or by state-sponsored agencies. This definition is particularly useful for this thesis since the focus here will be on the types of repressive behavior used by the coercive agents. This research takes a similar conceptual focus on the actors of repression and the tools they use depending on the situation and underlying conditions that are discussed below. The author also highlights that the state apparatus, while frequently using harassment, intimidation, and direct violence, does not deal with all forms of coercion, like deterrence of crimes (Davenport 2007). Thus, defining what repression is not is also important here. The concept of state repression excludes the long-term consequences of structural conditions like the unequal distribution of resources, and the definition does not include the second and third-generation rights (Davenport 2007). That is, repressive situations that are the result of more structural and historical events rather than human-made actions are excluded from the focus.

While Davenport's (2007) conceptualization looks at the main actors and types of repressive techniques, Rogov (2018) offers another perspective on political repression by distinguishing between administrative, criminal, and informal persecution types.

Administrative persecution is argued to be the mildest form of repression in the form of fines and short-term detainment of the participants of mass demonstrations. Criminal persecution is more severe and used against organizers of politically-sensitive crimes. Informal persecution is the most harsh, including targeted political murders, violent attacks, and assassinations of opposition members. Such informal practices of persecution are significant in establishing the politics of fear, with the effect of discouraging political activism (Rogov 2018). The author categorizes repression with regards to its targets as well. Activity-centric repressions do not target specific groups of individuals, but rather are focused on certain activities like demonstrations, posting on social media, forming and participating in political organizations. People who are imprisoned are random and mostly they are not even active opposition members. The second type is person-centric and it particularly focused on political contenders and activists. Wrong accusations, usually not politically motivated, are used as a means to disrupt the organization of the opposition and explicitly show the costs of activism. Lastly, organization-centric persecution takes place against certain groups or organizations based on their religious, political, or economic motifs (Rogov 2018). The fact that repression has many types and also varies based on the actors, shows that civil society and opposition members are constantly challenged with systemic repulse from the state or state sponsored actors. In the mid-2000s, most authoritarian regimes became more creative in the use of repressive techniques with creating false accusations (Rogov 2018). For example, charges like “socially dangerous” and “extremist” are used not against threatening groups as such, but also against civic activists and bloggers. Criminalization of legal actions and stretching of the definition of criminal activity made authoritarian regimes more repressive over time.

With the passage of time and with a more structurally complex governments, the scope of repression has widened too. The generally accepted idea proposed by Weber (DeMeritt 2016) that the state has a monopoly of coercion and violence served as a starting point for much



of the existing research on repression. The main focus was on authoritarian leaders that use their coercive capacity against contenders of their power. The later research on the topic widened the scope and depth of analysis, including the actors, receivers, mechanisms and tools, as well as factors that influence decision-making with regards to repression. DeMeritt (2016) highlights that repressive tactics and actors may vary depending on the circumstances. Just choosing to repress is not the same as choosing how to repress. Repressive behavior may include violation of rights, mass killings, torture, genocide and etc. The author asserts that the governments and other repressive actors can use their coercive power and choose from a variety of available repressive techniques, yet, the costs of repression may be high. Although the government is generally seen as the main repressive actor, other agents like militia, military, mercenaries can serve as legitimate action-takers, following the orders from the top (DeMeritt 2016). Similar to Davenport (2007), DeMeritt (2016) also points out that although the state in most cases has a monopoly of coercion, other critical actors from the security sector can practice repression today.

Another model that focuses on the types of repression and factors that influence it was suggested by Way and Levitsky (2006). Rather than focusing on the presence or absence of state repression, the authors discuss factors that influence the intensity of political repression. While previously mentioned conceptualizations are useful for understanding state repression, they do not distinguish types and ways of measuring repression. Way and Levitsky's (2006) model greatly contributes to the literature of repression by categorizing repressive behavior into high and low intensity and identifying underlying conditions necessary for either of them. High intensity repression like mass killings, targeted assassinations, genocide, visible violence against large groups of demonstrators - require high state capacity. Coercive capacity of the state has two dimensions: cohesion and scope. High cohesion, or high degree of compliance by subordinates is necessary to implement high intensity repression. While low intensity

repression like surveillance, monitoring, occasional harassment, requires a high level of scope, or a highly organized security sector territorially (Way & Levitsky 2006). The authors look at post-Soviet states of Armenia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Georgia as cases with different levels of scope and cohesion. Markowitz and Omelicheva (2018) offer a very similar account by categorizing political repression into disciplined and undisciplined. In line with Way and Levitsky (2006), the authors state that strong control of security apparatus and commercial networks leads to a more disciplined repression, with targeted persecution and low intensity measures (Markowitz & Omelicheva 2018). It follows that depending on the availability of resources and severity of the situation, state leaders make decisions not only “to shoot or not to shoot” but also on how much to shoot in general.

Having defined what repression is, the following sections deal with the existing repression research that tries to explain why and how authorities use repression from different perspectives. The causal mechanisms discussed and tested for the repression in the literature are presented below.

## **2.2 Explaining causes of repression**

Recent repression research has identified a plethora of internal and external factors that can have a significant influence on the decision to repress and on the tactics of repression. This section will be divided into three parts discussing perspectives on repression: structural, external, and domestic.

### **2.2.1 Structural factors**

There is an extensive literature that analyzes the existing relationship between economic factors and state repression. A major theory of “resource curse” states that there is a negative relationship between a country's economic endowments and stability. Abundance in natural

resources, and specifically in oil, is argued to lead to civil wars, conflicts, and instability in general (Ross 2001). Contrary to this, there is another theory of “rentier state”, which argues that availability of resources allows leaders to use them for patronage, clientelism, and effective repression, thus, maintaining domestic stability (Basedau & Lay 2020). In rentier states, the goal of the leader is to stay in power, and this can be achieved through providing portions of rents from domestic revenue sources (Costello 2016). In addition, the notion of social contract in rentier states is rarely existing, hence, the rulers don’t much rely on taxing the population and in return do not provide high political accountability from their side. This, in turn, gives them discretion to use high repressive techniques without facing detrimental consequences. An earlier literature review, Henderson (1991) also highlights the influence of economic determinants on repression intensity. The author states that existing socioeconomic needs and inequality are positively correlated with the use of repression. First, if the state is not wealthy enough to respond to socioeconomic demands of the society, the leaders, especially in authoritarian regimes, would use repression as a way to stay in power. Second, in relatively poor non-democratic states where the incumbent provides private goods to a narrow group of elites, the latter finds itself in a very beneficial position and has very little incentive to reform. Thus, when the inequality gap in the country is large, the elite and the government sees repression as an effective short-term tool against contenders and opposition since the resources are scarce and sharing is not an option. In addition to these two causative variables, Henderson (1991) identifies economic development as another important factor in explaining repression. The relationship here is negative: the more economically developed the state is, the less likely it will use repression. The logic is simple: even if there is high economic inequality in general, greater economic development and availability of resources means that the state can make economic and political concessions and share some part of the wealth with the public to avoid conflict.

The overarching assumption in the literature of state leaders as utilitarian rational actors often neglects the role of cultural and historical factors on repression. A litany of studies have looked at state repression from the perspectives of political economy, functionalism, instrumentalism etc. While these approaches are useful, understanding state violence should not be limited to them since behavior and decisions of both actors and victims when it comes to repression are highly shaped by cultural, ideological, and historical factors as well. Lauria-Santiago (2005) made a great contribution by studying state terror in El-Salvador in the early 1980s. The author states that until the 1990s there was not much information about this Latin American country, mainly because in the 1980s, El Salvador was deeply drowned in civil wars. The critical historical juncture in Salvadoran practice of state repression during the 1980s mainly flowed from the 1932 massacre (Lauria-Santiago 2005). The leaders of the latter events legitimized their violence through referring to the earlier 1932 bloody events and practices of that time. Hence, the “path dependency” occurred not through institutional means, but through the remembrance of people of the past and seeing prior violence as a model solution to current uprisings. These ideological and cultural factors’ importance are also seen in the fact that the rate of homicide in El Salvador in the 1990s was also high. This is mostly attributed to indiscriminate, terrifying violence and repression in the 1980s making the state almost insensitive to terror which left its mark in the future use of repression as well (Lauria-Santiago 2005). It follows that although state leaders are mostly goal-oriented rationalists, existing cultural and historical conditions may significantly influence the level of repression by laying a path for repressive behavior for future incidents.

The next structural factor that has a substantial effect in the use of repression is the type of regime. The institutional approach to repression-regime type relations has no clear cut consensus. Some scholars trace a negative relationship between democracies and repression incidents, stating that stable democratic states are less likely to repress in general (Henderson

1991). This is because in democracies, the government is more responsive and can satisfy the demands of the population by bargaining and concessions, which in turn, prevents the escalation of violent conflict and use of repressive techniques. However, it is important to note here that the democracy-autocracy dichotomy is not a clearly divided, rigid structure - the comparison here is based on the level of democracy. DeMeritt (2016) claims that regimes in between democracy and autocracy, that is hybrid regimes, show the highest level of repression. In democracies, the public has greater power to make the acting government accountable through participation, election, and contestation. Thus, democratic leaders cannot always afford high intensity repression since they will face consequences in the form of removal from the office. In full autocracies, the population is generally aware of the coercive power of the state and this serves as a deterrence mechanism from the uprisings in most cases, so that repression is not needed. In anocracies, regimes in the middle, repression reaches its peaks, as a myriad of studies suggest (DeMeritt 2016). Although this is the general pattern, based on the context and circumstances, the direction sometimes shifts, with some democracies being more repressive than others and authoritarian states choosing not to repress.

Following this analysis, it can be said that the decision to repress and how to repress are often constrained by structural and institutional factors, like the availability of resources, culture, history of violence, and the type of the regime.

### **2.2.2 External factors**

Although leaders' cost-benefit analysis of the use of repression in combination with institutional and structural factors does predict the repressive behavior in the state, the external environment also greatly shapes the turn of events. One way this takes place is through the "learning" process and dissemination of available information and tactics of repression between similar regimes. Olar (2019) proposes a variable of diffusion to be one of the driving forces of repression. Instead of domestic structural conditions and capabilities of actors, the

author looks at the external effect of repression among autocracies, in particular, how the information on the usage of certain types of repression diffuses among similar states. Here, the diffusion is defined as the usage of methods and techniques, as well as how the intensity of repression in one authoritarian regime can serve as a learning tool for the other. Since repressions are costly in economic, political and human capital terms, institutionally similar states learn from each others' mistakes and experiences (Olar 2019). The objectives of the authoritarian leaders are analogous - to stay in the office. To maintain political order and to keep stability, the incumbents of autocracies often refer to experiences of neighboring countries with similar institutional designs. Similar to the argument of conflict diffusion, with violence disseminating among neighboring states, the diffusion of repression is also found to be transcending. Olar (2019) argues that diffusion takes place only among institutionally similar autocracies. Authoritarian regimes that have legislature and political parties are better able to make concessions to public demands through institutional means rather than repressive methods. Institutionally similar regimes, then, have similar weaknesses and strengths. When conflict erupts in one state, institutionally similar regimes use it as a source of information and would try to avoid the mistakes and adjust the levels of repression when faced with opposition.

In line with Olar's (2019) diffusion argument, Darwich (2017) claims that diffusion of authoritarian policies, and specifically of repression, can be seen from the example of Arab states. In 2013, Egypt declared the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization which helped to mobilize Egyptians. In 2014, the Saudi Kingdom adopted the same repressive policy against the group (MB). From that time, the Saudi Kingdom attempted to form regional ties with other countries to disseminate repressive methods against the MB throughout the Arab World. The Saudi established patron-client relationship with Jordan through offering foreign aid, provided military support to Bahrain, and formed strong ties with UAE and Kuwait based on geographical proximity (Darwich 2017). Following the Kingdom's example, the UAE,

motivated by domestic interests, designated the MB as a terrorist group. However, other countries like Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Bahrain did not follow the lead. Such non-convergence of repressive policy among these countries is explained by domestic constraints existing within the states. Overall, the contagious effect of repression has found support in empirical studies and the diffusion of either policies or information shows that states base their decisions not only on domestic situations, but consider international context while using repression. However, it is important to underline that although international effect does have a weight on repression decision, it is, nevertheless, limited to domestic situation that imposes greater constraints on decision-making bodies rather than outside factors.

Another angle through which external influence on repression can be studied is through looking at the relations between states on different dimensions. To begin with, a major part of literature highlights the effect of foreign investment on domestic repression measures and intensity. The argument of economic globalization and increased trade and investment between states shows that greater FDI decreases the domestic coerciveness of leaders (Hafner-Burton 2005). In contrast, economic sanctions and lower degree of trade are found to lead to greater human rights abuses and repression. Hafner-Burton (2005) also finds that signing international agreements and treaties with effective enforcement and monitoring mechanisms tend to reduce states' coercive activity. The author comes to this conclusion by conducting an empirical study on 177 states from 1972 to 2002 and observing the trend that "hard" international agreements increase compliance and decrease rights abuses and repression (Hafner-Burton 2005). Contrary to the above findings with regard to sanctions, Escriba-Folch (2012) claims that economic pressure coming from the outside actually reduces the state's repressive power. The author gives two reasons for that. First, economic sanctions may lead to defections of support groups and decreased loyalty. Second, sanctions may improve the organization and unity of contenders, strengthening the opposition groups (Escriba-Folch 2012). Henceforth, the

economic coercion, level of the FDI, and international agreements appear to have a negative relationship with repression, with the increase of these variables leading to lower rates of repression.

The arguments on autocracy support offer another significant angle on how external factors can shape repression domestically. In particular, authoritarian states benefit from having states with similar regime types neighboring them, hence, they provide political, economic, and military support to other countries. Out of these three, military tools are most influential when talking about state repression. By exporting arms and weapons, deploying troops and soldiers, autocracies increase repressive power of the state, hence, preventing the democratization process (Yakouchyk 2019). The Assad regime received troops, arms, and military advisors from Iran and Russia and this substantially increased his coercive power (Yakouchyk 2019). Debre (2021) also argues that in addition to individual states, regional organizations can contribute to authoritarian survival by providing the means of legitimization and repression. The author gives the case of China, by showing that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) support to the Chinese Communist Party during the uprisings of Muslim Uighurs in Urumqi in 2009 played crucial role in repressing the rebels (Debre 2021). Based on the "three evils" doctrine of the SCO, the rioters were denounced as Islamic terrorists, and military training by the SCO was used to deter future uprisings (Debre 2021). What follows, the decision to repress and the power and choices on how to repress by state leaders are rarely a product of purely domestic factors; international factors like pressure or support from other states as well as international organizations significantly affects the outcome.

### **2.2.3 Domestic factors**

Although external influence attempts to keep the image of a good governing state may have considerable influence on repressive behavior of the states, the restricting factors still come mostly from domestic situations. These repression behavior shaping factors can be considered



from two angles: opposition-centric and incumbent-centric. One line of argument in literature focuses on the strength of the opposition as an influencing factor on the repression intensity. Bunce and Wolchik (2010) argue that for the opposition to be effective, it has to be unified, have practical political campaigns, engage with the voters, and be able to pose a real electoral challenge to the incumbent. However, this scenario rarely works in authoritarian regimes, since the state has control over media, key institutional bodies, and elections. As a result, strategic repression of opposition leaders, tactics to divide and weaken civil society groups takes place in competitive authoritarian countries (Bunce & Wolchik 2010). Hence, in the absence of advanced opposition techniques and calculated strategic choices, divided and weak opposition groups would fail to convince the public that they are worthy of support.

The incumbent-centric approach to repression is multi-faceted and underlies power and capabilities of the ruler as the foundation for further repression. Gerschewski (2013) looks at repression as one of the engines of stability in autocratic regimes. Other two pillars discussed by the author are legitimation and co-optation (Gerschewski 2013). The author states that these three components are interlinked and complement each other in maintaining stability in autocracies. First, modern authoritarian countries cannot solely rely on the use of force to keep the population compliant. Hence, the rulers rely upon “diffuse support” and “specific support” - forms of legitimation peculiar to authoritarian regimes. Diffuse support here means referrals to historical, nationalistic, religious ideologies, the charismatic character of the leader, and presence of the external threat. Specific support is about fulfilling specific social and economic demands and maintaining national security (Gerschewski 2013). Co-optation refers to the ability of the incumbent to create a firm link between the regime elite or so-called “winning coalition” and the strategic elite. This is mainly done through the mechanisms of patrimonialism, clientelism, and direct corruption (Gerschewski 2013). Similarly, Orange (2019) also emphasizes the significance of clientelism in repressive authoritarian regimes. The

patron-client relations play an important role in countries with excessive repression, and political actors use economic resources as a reward system for the elites (Orange 2019). Another research on the link between co-optation and repression comes from Frantz and Kendall-Taylor (2014) who say that institutional co-optation greatly affects the type of repression used by those in power. In particular, co-optation, by creating legislature and parties, enables the incumbent to move its challengers from the general public's eyes to the state legislature, which, in turn, gives higher monitoring and controlling power for the authorities. As a result, co-optation through institutional means is argued to decrease the restrictions on empowerment rights that generally apply to a major part of the population, while enabling the ruler to target specific individuals through imprisonment, killings, and intimidation (Frantz & Kendall-Taylor 2014). This way, political actors may tactically eliminate challengers while not creating public discontent.

The topic of co-optation and following loyalty of the military has also attracted much scholarly attention. In particular, conditions under which the military stay loyal to the regime and be willing to defend it are examined in the study by Nassif (2015). The author examines the Arab Spring and how the military in different countries reacted to the 2011 crisis. Variables that are found to be critical for the coup-proofing mechanism are satisfying material incentives of the military and appointing people from the same religious sect to the top military positions (Nassif 2015). Since the military elite benefits from the status quo, they would be interested in standing for the ruler in times of uprisings. Makara (2016) offers a similar explanation for the military loyalty during the Arab Spring. He highlights the importance of ethnic ties between the military and state rulers, and adds the component of organization to the military incentives. The perspective on military loyalty is useful for this study since it underlies resonating conditions for the extent the subordinates comply with the leader's orders.

For the state to maintain the monopoly of power and use effective violence against contenders without disrupting its international image outside, it has to have a strong coercive capacity. Way and Levitsky (2006) introduce factors that affect state stability and discuss in the presence of what variables the leaders can opt for either high or low intensity repression. The authors point out that in post-Soviet states, where the opposition has been generally weak and immobilized, the strength of the incumbent can be a better explaining factor of autocracy survival (Way & Levitsky 2006). High intensity repression like mass killings, targeted assassinations, genocide, visible violence against large groups of demonstrators - require high state capacity. Coercive capacity of the state has two dimensions: cohesion and scope. High cohesion, or high degree of compliance by subordinates is necessary to implement high intensity repression. In order to undertake violent actions, go against the citizens, and if necessary, pour some blood, the state leader needs to be sure that his subordinates fully comply with his orders. While low intensity repression like surveillance, monitoring, occasional harassment, requires a high level of scope, or a highly organized security sector territorially (Way & Levitsky 2006). The authors look at post-Soviet states of Armenia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Georgia as cases with different levels of scope and cohesion. Where the coercive state had high scope, the use of low intensity repression was possible; where the state had relatively high cohesion, the coercive apparatus had courage to use high intensity repression.

The intensity and level of repression has been studied not only as an ex post state activity but also as an ex ante measures to deter public uprisings and protests. When an authoritarian state predicts that a certain type of event, like elections, most probably cause mass demonstrations, it can effectively eliminate key figures from the picture, using exile, arrests, or other deterrence techniques. Esberg (2021) states that coercive agents are reluctant to use direct, visible violence against opposition leaders since it may result in a stronger backlash. Instead of a physical coercion, tactics like exile, harassment, and intimidations are a better

choice to avoid the backlash (Esberg 2021). Similarly, Truex (2016) argue that authoritarian states often opt for preemptive repressions, in the early stages of opposition mobilization. This can come in the form of assembly prohibition, blocking the ways of communication, imprisonment, and curfews (Truex 2016). The author points out the importance of “focal points” in anticipating repression. These focal points are important political dates like anniversary, elections, or national celebrations (Truex 2016). These dates are known to everyone and have high salience, hence, in anticipation of collective action and mass mobilization, the state apparatus blocks ways of coordination. There are increased mass detentions shortly before these focal points and during these dates. One can see that coercive states use repression strategically following the political calendar. This informal repression techniques like detentions, harassment, forced travel can be categorized as a low intensity repression in Way and Levitsky’s (2006) term. Thus, it is possible to juxtapose the intensity of repression and the level of anticipation variables to each other.

From the above discussed perspectives on repression, the external influence solely can not present a complete picture of the situation. International pressure and constraints might have an impact on the way the government uses repression, but it should not be considered as a key factor since the internal situation would play an overwhelming role in decision-making. Especially, in authoritarian states, where the power is concentrated in the hands of a few, the stakes are high, and any challenge to the incumbent rule would be suppressed immediately. The structural and domestic factors are more indicative when it comes to choosing repression intensity. This thesis looks at both structural, in particular, economic, as well as incumbent-centric domestic approaches to test Way and Levitsky’s (2006) theory for a new case - Kazakhstan. The aim is to test for the relationship and causality between the state's coercive capacity and the intensity of repression in Kazakhstan. More detailed components of each variable and the case selection parts are covered in the research design section followed below.

## 3 Chapter 2 - Research Design and Case Selection

### 3.1 Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the *intensity of repression*. According to the conceptualization by Way & Levitsky (2006), there are two types of repression intensity: high and low. Based on this differentiation, the dependent variable will be operationalized. That is:

High intensity repression is considered as visible (domestically and internationally) acts of violence, mass killings, targeted assassinations of opposition leaders

Low intensity repression is considered as less visible but more systematic monitoring, surveillance of opposition, harassment and intimidation of opposition by the police, restriction of employment and career opportunities

### 3.2 Independent Variable 1

The first independent variable is *scope* of the coercive state capacity. By definition, it is the state apparatus' power territorially and within the society. For operationalization of this variable, two important measures will be looked at:

The level of the internal security sector development (high/low) (specialized police, intelligence networks, paramilitary units) and

Economic power of the coercive state agents (concentration of economic resources in state hands).

### 3.3 Independent Variable 2

The second independent variable is coercive state's *cohesion*. In other words, it is the level of compliance within the state apparatus and shows to what extent the police, military, and the state officials comply with the orders of the leader. Two measures are taken to operationalize cohesion:

Kin ties between the leader and the coercive agents and

Fiscal health of the security sector

### **3.4 Independent Variable 3**

The third independent variable is *predictiveness of conflict*. This variable looks at whether the conflict/demonstrations were predicted or not. The operationalization is based on Truex's (2016) conceptualization of "focal points". That is, if the event is a "focal point", then it is operationalized as predicted.

### **3.5 Hypothesis**

1. High scope of coercive apparatus will allow the use of low intensity repression.
2. High cohesion of coercive apparatus will allow the use of high intensity repression.
3. If the challenge is predicted, then the state will choose high intensity repression.

To briefly describe the hypotheses that will be tested for Kazakhstan, scope and cohesion variables are derived from the theory proposed by Way and Levitsky (2006). If the security apparatus is highly developed and structured, then the use of low intensity repression is more likely. If the subordinates strictly comply with the given orders, be it killings, assassination, and illegal actions, and if the kin and/or ethnic ties are strong between the leader and the subjects, then the state can use high intensity repression. As for the last hypothesis, it would test for the type of repression if the pre-conflict conditions vary: if the protests are unexpected, and if they are predicted and had precedents in earlier similar situations. More specifically, hypothesis looks at whether a given conflict/protest was expected by the state and how this affects the choice of intensity of repression.

### 3.6 Methodology

To do an in-depth analysis of such a complex issue as repression intensity, the case study approach will be used. This method is particularly useful because it allows a multi-faceted investigation of an issue for different time frames within the given territory. Taking Kazakhstan as a macro case, which can be taken as a typical case of soft authoritarianism, this work aims to test for the repression intensity for two micro cases: Zhanaozen protests in 2011 and post-presidential elections protests in 2019.

### 3.7 Case selection

Kazakhstan has been a focus of many studies examining the stability of authoritarian regimes. As a representative case of soft authoritarianism, the country illustrates how the available structural and historical factors help the incumbent stay in power while tactically governing its population and creating the image of a nation moving towards democracy in the international arena. Way and Levitsky (2006) tested their theory on several post-Soviet countries like Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Belarus. This study will add on the authors' findings by offering a new case from Central Asia that proved to be more stable in internal and external relations. Another contribution to the literature would be testing for the nature of the conflict and its effect on the choice of repression by the coercive agents. Although the repressive mechanisms used against the population by state leaders were studied from a myriad of perspectives, the understanding of the relationship between the predictiveness of the conflict and the resulting repression is far from complete. Here, Kazakhstan offers suitable cases to test this relationship. Two events that shocked the Kazakhstani government: 2011 Zhanaozen protests and 2019 post-presidential elections protests are taken as micro cases. The government responded to these events with different levels of repression, considering the relatively stable

structural and international factors. This thesis attempts to fill this gap in the literature through answering the question: To what extent is the intensity of repression the product of the predictiveness of protest?

### **3.8 Data sources**

To gather information for the chosen variables, available data from secondary sources, local and national newspapers will be used. Information on mass killings during/after protests, detainments, restriction on media platforms, number of imprisoned journalists and political prisoners will be collected for DV. To detect the informal ties for the IV variable, biography screening will be done and investigative reports will be analysed.



## 4 Chapter 3 - Empirical Analysis

### 4.1 Background

To begin with the introduction of the case - Kazakhstan, as most Central Asian Post-Soviet states, was not ready for independence and faced new political changes with domestic hardships. The first years after independence were chaotic with economic recession and privatization, the latter mainly benefitting the former nomenklatura. The devaluation of national currency “tenge” hit hard on the public sectors like education, health, and pension system (Orange 2019). In 1991, the first presidential elections were held with Nursultan Nazarbayev winning 98% of the votes. The same year, the multi-party system was introduced, although parties were not practically powerful. By 1995, Nazarbayev was firmly in power and the economy improved with the help of oil and gas revenues; so did the popularity and legitimacy of Nazarbayev. He has won every consequent election with a large margin of votes and only in 2019 left his post to Tokayev (Orange 2019). Today, Kazakhstan is a dominant party (Nur-Otan) authoritarian regime. As it is in most authoritarian states, the use of political repression became a hallmark in Kazakhstan. To apply the model by Way and Levitsky (2006) and test for the causal mechanism between scope / cohesion and intensity of repression, the cases of repressive behavior from the state apparatus and/or state actors will be analysed. Two prominent cases of mass demonstrations faced with repressions in the history of Kazakhstan and chosen for this paper are: riots in 2011 in Zhanaozen and mass demonstrations during post-presidential elections in 2019.

First, the state’s coercive capacity in the form of its scope and cohesion both seem to be high in Kazakhstan. From the hypotheses, high scope allows the state to use low intensity repression, while high cohesion would let the state use high intensity coercion.

## 4.2 Testing for Scope

First, the national security of Kazakhstan is composed of the armed forces, national security organs, intelligence, Guards Service of the President, police and military, tax police, and emergency situation services (Kassenova 2005). By the law, the work and activities of all national security agencies are coordinated by the President. The first Security Council was formed by the President in 1993. It has an appointed Secretary at the head and the Secretariat. The SC serves as an advisory unit to the President and its tasks include monitoring and suppressing internal and external threats, defining state interests, maintaining defence capabilities and keeping the territorial integrity of the state (Kassenova 2005). Among other Central Asian states, Kazakhstan is the only country with some progress at State Security Reform (Boonstra et al. 2013). In 2011, a new military doctrine was adopted. Availability of resources and comparatively better economic conditions in the region allowed the state to rely on national funds for these initiatives. The military doctrine aims to create technologically-advanced and equipped armed forces with improved training and reaction to emergency situations. There were some changes in intelligence services as well. The modification was introduced in 2009 when President Nazarbayev dismissed the working intelligence service “Barlau” and created a new one - the “Syrbar” (Boonstra et al. 2013) due to the dissatisfaction with the former’s work on identifying regime challengers outside the country.

To elaborate on responsibilities and the structure of the national security bodies, being an integral component of the country’s security system, these bodies are subordinate and accountable to the President. Their main tasks include but are not limited to ensuring individual and societal security, coordinating intelligence activities, gathering intelligence information in the interests of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and assisting state bodies with the implementation of policies (Zakon.kz 2021a).

**The Security Council (SC)** is an advisory body formed by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan in order to aid in implementing policies related to the defence and national security, independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country, and in ensuring socio-political stability of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Akorda.kz 2021). As such, the Security Council is the highest body of the internal security sector and it is in direct subordination to the President. Agencies that fall under the SC and are responsible for the maintenance of internal security will be discussed in more detail further.

**Table 1 - Members of the Security Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan and security sector related agencies.**

(Source: Own illustration based on information from official governmental website Akorda.kz)

<b><u>Members of the Security Council</u></b>	
President of the Republic of Kazakhstan	
Chairman of the Senate of the Parliament	
Chairman of the Mazhilis of the Parliament	
Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan	
Head of the Presidential Administration	
Assistant to the President - Secretary of the Security Council	<b><u>Security sector related agencies of the SC</u></b>
Prosecutor General of the Republic of Kazakhstan	
<b>Chairman of the National Security Committee</b>	
<b>Head of the State Security Service</b>	

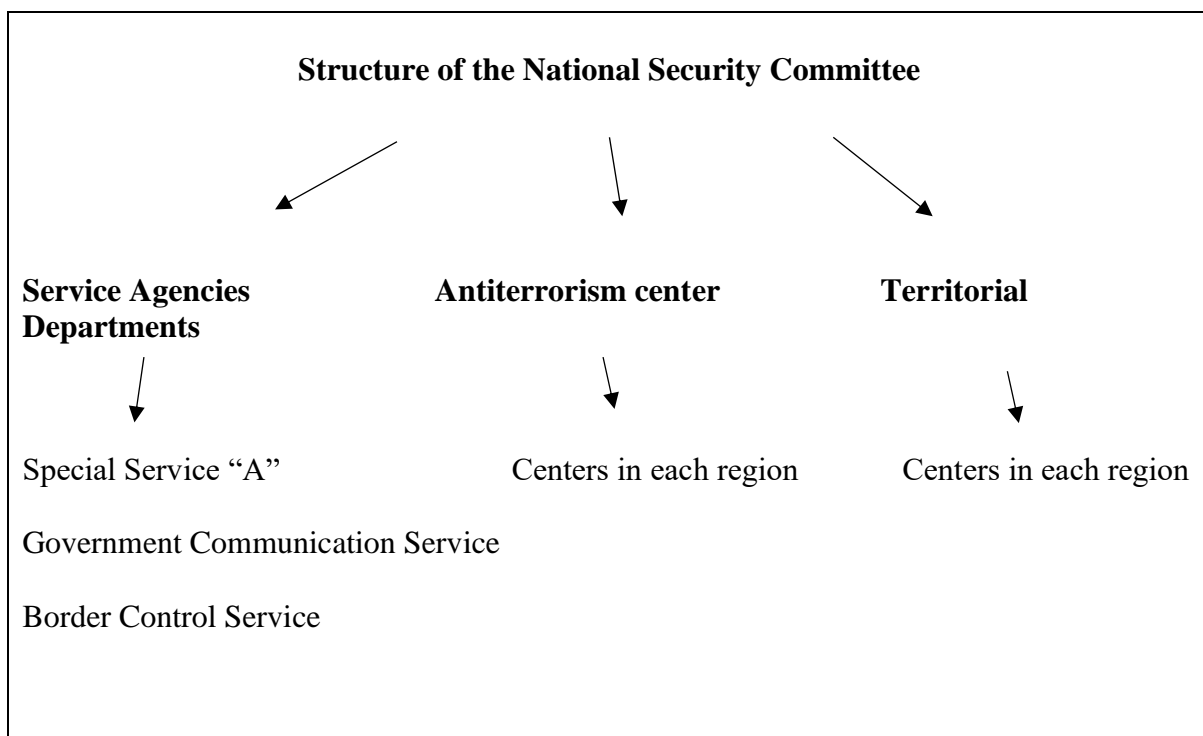
Minister of Foreign Affairs	
<b>Minister of Defense</b>	
<b>Minister of Internal Affairs</b>	

As Table 1 shows, the Security Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan has many agencies and members. However, not all SC bodies deal with the security issues. Those that are related to the security are highlighted and indicated with arrows.

**The National Security Committee** is not part of the central executive bodies and is formed and reorganized by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

**Figure 1 - The structure and bodies of the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan**

(Source: Own illustration based on information from official governmental website Gov.kz)



As it can be seen from Figure 1, the National Security Committee has three main bodies: Service agencies, Antiterrorism center, and Territorial departments. Each of these bodies have their regional agencies as well.

**The State Security Service**, similar to the NSC, is subordinate to the President of the country. The tasks include but not limited to ensuring the security of the President, Elbasy (the first President of Kazakhstan), Prime Minister, family members of the President and Elbasy, and other key political leaders, identification and prevention of threats against the protected persons, countering terrorism within the competence by the legislation. The Head of the State Security Service is directly appointed and dismissed from the service by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The structure and staffing of the Service are approved by the President on the proposal of the head of the Service (Zakon.kz 2021a).

**The Ministry of Internal Affairs** is the central executive body that coordinates all the other bodies of internal affairs. The President is responsible for appointing and dismissing the Minister. Below, Table 2 presents the organizational structure of the Ministry and bodies its bodies.

**Table 2 - Organization of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan**

(Source: Own illustration based on information from official governmental website Zakon.kz 2021b)

<b>The Ministry of Internal Affairs</b>	<b>Police</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Criminal police</li> <li>- Administrative police</li> <li>- Inquiry</li> <li>- Other subdivisions</li> </ul>
	<b>Penitentiary System</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The department</li> <li>- Probation service</li> <li>- Territorial bodies</li> <li>- Punishment executing institutions</li> </ul>
	<b>Military investigative agencies</b>	The organization is determined by the law of the Republic of Kazakhstan
	<b>National Guard</b>	

**The Ministry of Defense** is the central executive body that manages state's Armed Forces and engages in making and implementing military-political and defense related policies. According to the law, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan is the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The Armed Forces are responsible for protecting state institutions, keeping territorial integrity and sovereignty, as well as stand against illegal armed organizations (Adilet.zan.kz 2005). The Armed Forces are composed of different branches of armed forces, logistic troops, special troops, territorial troops, as well as military institutions and related organizations. (Adilet.zan.kz 2005).

Overall, the above discussed state institutions make up the military base of the country and the scope of the state apparatus. From the analysis, it can be stated that the President has direct control over the institutions and personally appoints the Heads which gives him an extensive military power over the national territory and monitoring and surveillance capabilities. This, in turn, allows the incumbent to use high intensity repression if needed, both through using direct violence and repression, if needed, or through monitoring the opposition groups and strategically eliminating contenders.

Another factor that shows the degree of scope is the economic power of the ruler (Way & Levitsky 2006). The real GDP growth from 2000 to 2004 was around 10%, making Kazakhstan the fastest growing economy among all other Post-Soviet states. The level of privatization increased from 25% in 1995 to 60% in 1999 to 65% in 2002 (Matuszkiewicz 2013). Privatization is important for the scope since it is linked to the ruler's control of the economy. In Kazakhstan, high privatization created a great room for clan politics and corruption. Especially, privatization of oil and mineral industries prevailed with so-called "Elder " clan members (Matuszkiewicz 2013). Although the information on informal and illegal wealth of state leaders and their family members is highly secreted, recently there has been a case with ex-President's daughter and the Speaker of the Senate Dariga Nazarbayeva

and her multimillion dollar holdings in London (Leonard 2020). The President Nazarbayev had a strong patronal politics and control over economy. His family members' wealth investigations have repeatedly shown that power consolidation of Nazarbayev was successful not only in politics but also in economics too. One of the scandalous events was "Kazakhgate", when back in 2003, a US national with the diplomatic passport of Kazakhstan tried to transfer more than \$78 million to hidden bank accounts. The accounts were found to be of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nurlan Balgimbayev and the President Nazarbayev (Hug 2011). Although this was one of the biggest cases that caught international attention, the actual control of economic wealth of the President is much wider and mostly kept secret. Controlling economy through appointing relatives to political posts, Nazarbayev gained monopoly of power and wealth during his rule. His wife – Sara Nazarbayeva, heads the largest charitable organization in the republic - the Bobek Foundation. The commercial firms use the Foundation to minimize their contribution to the budget based on their proximity to the Nazarbayev family (Mendybayev & Shelgunov 2001). His son in-law, Timur Kulibayev, is the largest oil and gas magnate in Kazakhstan and controls several companies, one of which is KazMunaiGaz – the largest oil and gas company. From 2019 Kulibayev is a member of the Council of National Investors and from 2020, a member of the Supreme Council for Reforms under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Zakon.kz n.d). These are just several examples of successful attempts of Nazarbayev putting public money into private pockets, hiding his multi-million assets and wealth offshore, and fully taking advantage of economy to ensure "good" life for his family as well as to bribe his political opponents.

From the above analysis, one can see that the Scope of the coercive state is high enough to use of low intensity repression. The security sector is well organized, has developed infrastructure, and is directly subordinate to the president, who also has a very strong economic power. These two essentials elements allow coercive agents to monitor the opposition and

harass and intimidate political contenders, when needed, without putting the regime under risk with high intensity repression.

### **4.3 Testing for Cohesion**

Cohesion is operationalised through the level of compliance of subordinates. As such, it is partly linked to the Scope variable since it evaluates if security apparatus and political actors comply with the orders of the ruler. As Way and Levitsky (2006) state, the level of compliance of the police, military, and other officials with the commands of the ruler is crucial for the stability of the regime. If the ruler is confident that his orders will be carried out no matter how illegal or controversial, he can opt for high intensity repression. Two essential elements that define the level of cohesion are existing familial or ethnic ties between the ruler and the subordinates and the fiscal health of the military (Way & Levitsky 2006). Below, an analysis of the relationships of people in high military ranks to Nazarbayev and the situation with the military funding will be presented.

In Kazakhstan, the Security Council members are directly appointed by the President and the appointment is based on trust, while professional skills and prior experience play a lesser role (Kassenova 2005). An attempt to appoint Tajin and Sarsenbayev to introduce a more professional outlook in 1999-2002 wasn't successful. The rising political crisis in the country made the President want a greater grasp of the national security apparatus and most trusted Bolat Utemuratov became a Secretary in 2001 (Kassenova 2005). Similarly, direct compliance of military forces to the head of the state indicates that the President appoints only those people whom he can trust and who will comply with orders as the practice shows. In the absence of well-functioning institutions, the role of informal networks became more apparent in the country. The petroleum sector especially gave great leverage to the president to manage the elites appointed based on kinship and family ties (Peyrouse 2012). The wealthiest networks of

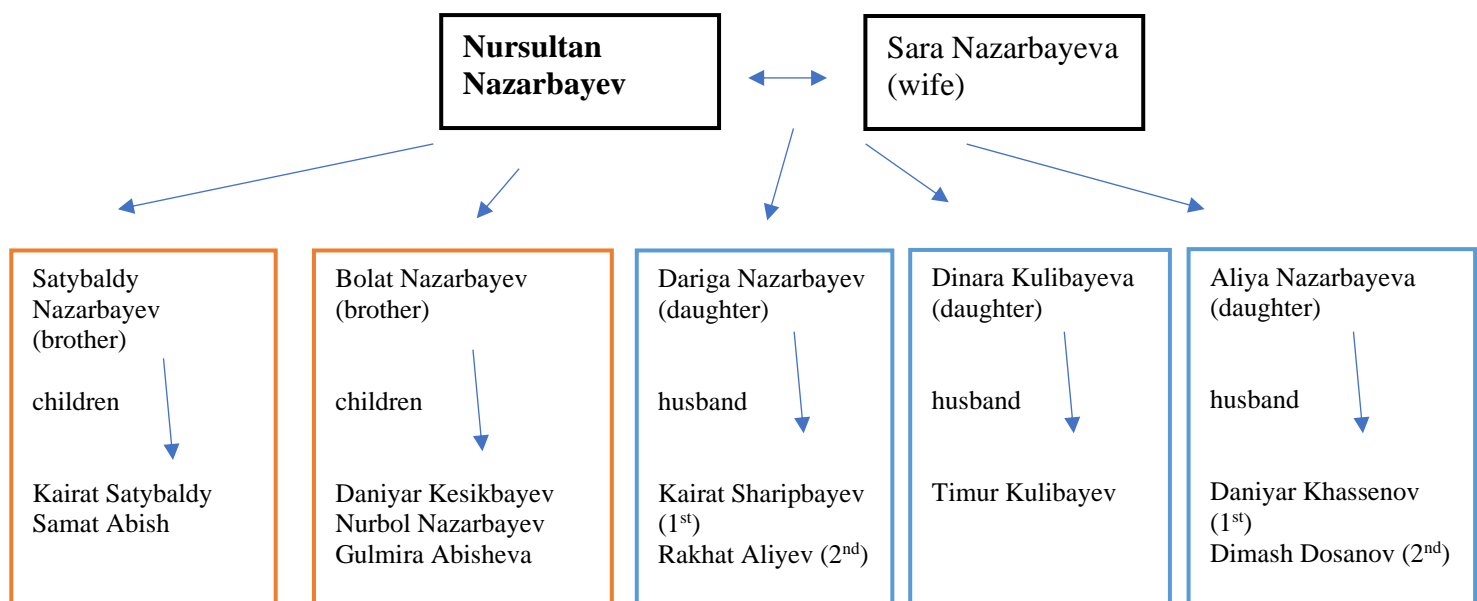


oligarchs that control huge chunks of the economy are composed of people closely tied to ex-president Nazarbayev. For example, Nazarbayev's son-in-law Timur Kulibayev and his former advisor and KazEnergy' head Bolat Utemuratov are ex-president's close associates in his inner circle (Groce 2020). It follows that patrimonial politics and strong informal networks creates high cohesion within the state penetrating regime stability.

Kazakhstani political and security system can be seen as a perfect example of nepotism, where positions are filled by relatives and friends of Nazarbayev.

**Figure 2 - Family of Nursultan Nazarbayev**

(Source: Own illustration based on information from the website Azattyq.ru)



From the first sight, nothing seems wrong, until one looks deeper into the career paths and wealth that each of this family member controls. Most of the family members are in government services and huge business owners, and some hold very serious security sector positions. As Figure 2 demonstrates, Nazarbayev has two brothers and three daughters in his nuclear family. To begin with the biography screening of brothers, Satybaldy Nazarbayev died young in a car accident, while his sons are one of the most influential people in the country. Of particular interest for the Cohesion variable is Samat Abish. In 2016, he became the First Deputy

Chairman of the National Security Committee (Radio Free Europe 2010). Kairat Satybaldy, the elder son, also held key position at the NSC back in the 1990s. Later he left the military and switched to business and politics (Radio Free Europe 2010). Bolat Nazarbayev and his children are also one of the wealthiest people in the country but are mainly out of the security sector.

His daughters are another channel of control of the security system for Nazarbayev. Dariga Nazarbayeva's second husband Rakhat Aliyev is a tragic figure with an interesting political life. In the 2000s he began his political activity and worked in the financial police department of the NSC. In 2002, Aliyev was appointed an ambassador of Kazakhstan in Austria (Azattyq.ru). Later in 2007, he was accused of killing two top managers and creating a criminal organization. Aliyev said this was the reaction to his plan to run for the presidential post. In 2015, he was found dead in Austrian jail (Azattyq.ru). The case of Rakhat Aliyev can already be an illustration of a use of high intensity repression to get rid of the political opponent. This was an obvious signal to all the "deserters" from Nazarbayev not to get in his way. Dariga Nazarbayeva and Rakhat Aliyev's son Nurali Aliyev is married to Aida Imasheva. Imasheva's father worked in the Security Council from 2003 to 2008 as a Deputy Chairman and Chairman of the Council (Azattyq.ru). Nazarbayev's second daughter Dinara Kulibayeva is married to Timur Kulibayev. Kulibayev, apart from his control of numerous state-owned gigantic enterprises in hydrocarbon sphere, had a chance to work in the politics as well. Timur Kulibayev's brother Talgat Kulibayev is a former head of the Almaty Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Major General (Azattyq.ru). Nazarbayev made dominating politics with family ties a new "normal". The list of people holding high-ranked positions in economy and politics, as well as military is endless. This demonstrates that Nazarbayev valued personal relations more than professional skills and background, since the former would guarantee a higher subordination.

The second critical element of cohesion variable is the funding of the military. In this part, Kazakhstan, as a resource-rich country, is overtaking its neighbors in the region. In Kazakhstan, defense spending is fixed at 1% of GDP. Compared to some other countries, it is relatively low, however, this doesn't stop the country from being the leader in military potential in the region. The military funding is increasing year by year. From 2014 to 2017, Kazakhstan has increased defense spending to 35% (from \$ 2 billion to \$ 2.7 billion) (Yeldes 2018). A significant portion of the funds is directed to the rearmament of the troops. There was an increase in funding in 2018 too: out of total 517.1 billion tenge, 473.3 billion was received by the Ministry of Defense, and the rest - 43.8 billion - by the Ministry of Internal Affairs for the prevention and elimination of natural and man-made emergencies (Yeldes 2018). According to the "Global Fire Power" international ranking, Kazakhstan ranked 63<sup>rd</sup> out of 138 countries based on the military potential in 2020. In Central Asia, it is on the second place, behind Uzbekistan (Nurbay 2020). The official reports of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Kazakhstan show that the three-year defense budget of Kazakhstan (2020 - 2022) amounted to 961 billion tenge (or \$ 2.55 billion). The military budget for 2020 was 331.9 billion tenge, of which 313.6 billion is allocated for the maintenance of the Armed Forces and 18.3 billion for the development of human resources and medical support (Nurbay 2020). The official numbers indicate that Kazakhstan is paying much attention and pouring a considerable amount of money into modernization of military personnel and weaponry to ensure an effective functioning military organization.

Overall, it can be concluded that Kazakhstani coercive apparatus has high cohesion. Ex-president Nazarbayev was very strategic in appointing his family members and close people to top security sector positions. This way, he could give any types of orders and be sure that they will be followed. Simultaneously, the military is well-paid and financial side of it is very good. Despite the fact that Kazakhstan is not facing any direct domestic or international military

threat, the infrastructure and organization of the security system is well-financed. So, by appointing trusted people and maintaining fiscal health of the military, the ruler gets a possibility of using low intensity repression during times of unrest.

## **4.4 Testing for predictiveness of conflict**

This part of the empirical analysis focuses on two micro cases: 2011 Zhanaozen protests and 2019 post-presidential elections protests. The cases will be compared and tested in terms of their predictiveness. The intensity of repression will be discussed based on the anticipation of the conflict.

### **4.4.1 2011 Zhanaozen massacre**

To begin with the background and causes, more than 6000 workers went on protests in 2010 in Ozenmunaigaz, a national oil company. The labor strike ended peacefully where the employees were promised concessions in the form of not changing the wage system that was planned to be changed (Salmon 2012). In May of 2011, there were mass protests in Zhanaozen again that started as a peaceful protest by workers dissatisfied with their salaries (Satpayev & Umbetaliyeva 2015). Ironically, Kazakhstan's oil producing regions are the poorest in the country in terms of economic well-being. The main discontent of protesters rose from the fact that foreign workers received much higher payment than ethnic Kazakhs. More than 700 workers of Ozenmunaigaz and Karazhanbasmunai gathered to protest against poor working conditions and low salary. Series of demonstrations and strikes continued for a long time and workers assembled to a large city protest in Zhanaozen in autumn (Salmon 2012). On December 16, the protest turned into a conflict and as a result, 16 people were killed and another 100 injured (Satpayev & Umbetaliyeva 2015). The police response was brutal, instead of using non-lethal weapons and arresting the protestors in a non-violent way, the police started

firing on marching people. The statistics of 16 people being killed might as well be just an official statement of Zhanaozen akimat, and the death toll was probably higher, since none of the NGOs and human rights organizations were allowed to enter the area (Salmon 2012). As a consequence, Zhanaozen events were identified as a massacre on the history pages. Even from the official records it can be concluded that the state used high intensity repression. The police subordination was very high, since there was not a single non-compliance and the use of illegal repressive techniques like firing at unarmed citizens was done without questioning. Obviously, high intensity repression did not stop with the police. Mass detentions, arrests, and punishments continued long after the protests were suppressed. 37 Zhanaozen residents were arrested in June and 17 of them got 3 to 5 years of prison sentence for supporting the oil workers and protesting (Salmon 2012). Some of the key figures and activists were also punished. Roza Tuletayeva was the main spokesperson during protests and she was sentenced to 7 years of jail. Maksat Dosmagambetov was a leader of the protests (6 years), Talgat Saktaganov raised the issue of Zhanaozen massacre to European parliament (4 years), and Tanatar Kaliyev the first who proceeded to the court with the police violence (4 years) (Salmon 2012). Most of the protesters whose case got into court did not get lawyers, their legal rights were violated, and they were systematically tortured. The defendants were beaten, were not treated for their illnesses, poured on with iced water, and their families were threatened (Salmon 2012). These acts of high intensity violence clearly demonstrate that the coercive state will maintain the regime intact and punish the protesters no matter how illegal and immoral the actions are.

Not only the protesters got punished but also some of the political opposition leaders were used as a scapegoat during Zahanozen demonstrations. Non-inner circle political actors and opposition politicians who showed their support for the strikers got arrested. “Incitement of social hatred” – this was a charge under which a leader of the opposition party “Alga!” Vladimir Kozlov, “Khalyk Maidany” opposition leader Serik Sapargali, and a legal advisor of

the protesters Akzhanat Aminov were sentenced (Salmon 2012). The President imposed a 20-days state emergency with the prohibition of riots and rallies. Police officers and soldiers were sent to the region and the Internet was cut down. 8 newspapers and 23 Internet sources were shut down. Nazarbayev also had to sacrifice with his inner elite group members to maintain his foreign image and Timur Kulibayev lost his position as a head of the Samruk-Kazyna company for not being able to resolve conflict in a timely manner (Satpayev & Umbetaliyeva 2015). The Zhanaozen massacre showcases that Kazakhstanian government has a high military scope and its territorial reach is extensive. The police and subordinates are highly compliant with the orders and the president has direct control over the given commands.

Along with high scope, as it was discussed in the previous section, Kazakhstan has high cohesion. Why, then, the state didn't use low intensity repression which would attract less international attention? The Zhanaozen massacre definitely put the country with a bad side in the international arena. The United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights called for an international investigation of the situation during her visit to Kazakhstan on July (Salmon 2012). In the presence of high scope and high cohesion of a coercive apparatus, the reason the state opted for high intensity coercion was the fact that the conflict was not predicted to gain such a large scale and salience. It was not a "focal point" in Truex's (2016) terms, where the state could anticipate possible uprising based on the political calendar and take preemptive measures in the form of low intensity repression. Therefore, in condition of confirmed first and second hypotheses, where high scope and high cohesion allow the state to use high and low intensity repression respectively, the choice for high intensity repression can be explained with the third hypothesis. That is, the conflict in Zhanaozen was not predicted to gain such a large scale and the government was not ready to deal with it. There were no preemptive measures taken to prevent the conflict or stop its escalation, thus, relatively high intensity repressive techniques were used.

#### 4.4.2 2019 presidential elections

On June 9, Kazakhstan held a very unusual presidential elections, one that has never occurred in the history of the state. The reason why it was so unusual is because a country leader Nursultan Nazarbayev, who was on the presidential post for almost 30 years, announced that he is resigning on March 19<sup>th</sup> and said that he will not run for a president. Hopes that this act would signal a turn to democratization have crashed during the election day. A hand-picked Nazarbayev's successor Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev won elections with 70% of the vote (Lillis 2019). Although there was no doubt on Tokayev's victory, the opposition party leader Amirzhan Kossanov got much public support during these early presidential elections. However, this support did not reach to the ballots during manipulated elections, and Kossanov captured only 15% of the vote (Putz 2019). The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe which acted as a monitoring group reported that democratic standards were not held, and elections were not free (Putz 2019). International observers and monitoring groups were denied access to the polling stations, the police arrested peacefully protesting citizens, there were mass detentions and regulations of human rights on election day.

To put it chronologically, it is important to discuss arrests and violations of human rights well before the election day. When Nazarbayev resigned in March and Tokayev became an interim president of Kazakhstan, there were numerous incidents of suppressing opposition and anti-regime activists. In March, there were a few protests against renaming the capital city Astana to Nur-Sultan in honor of former president. Several protestors were detained (Radio Azattyq 2019). In late April, people went on the streets with banners with the inscription "You cannot run away from truth #adilsailayushin (for fair elections)", and "I have a choice". Activists were arrested for 15 days (Radio Azattyq 2019). On May 1<sup>st</sup>, unauthorized antigovernment protests were held in big cities like Nur-Sultan and Almaty, where hundreds

of people gathered. According to the statement of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 80 people were detained in cities of Nur-Sultan, Almaty, Karagandy, Semey, Aktobe; some were fined, and others got administrative arrests (Radio Azattyq 2019). On the Victory Day, May 9<sup>th</sup>, there were also detentions of several people, social networks and some websites were blocked (Radio Azattyq 2019). On the day of elections, thousands of people went on protests in numerous cities of Kazakhstan, demanding fair elections and a meeting with the presidential candidate Tokayev. Activists complained that it is practically impossible to get a permission to protest in Kazakhstan, local akimats refuse to give it, and court decisions are always in favor of the government (Radio Azattyq 2019). This means that any type of protest, even the peaceful ones, are listed as unauthorized and illegal leading to more detentions and arrests.

Measures of low intensity preemptive repression were being taken several months before the elections. As the day came close and people became angrier, the number of rallies increased, so did the suppressive actions. From May 1<sup>st</sup> to May 9<sup>th</sup>, the security forces blocked the Internet and arrested several activists of a banned political party the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DCK) (Rittmann 2019). Further, in mid-May, there were news about the arrest of a famous scientist and prominent Sinologist Konstantin Syroezhkin for espionage (Volkov 2019). Expert on Central Asia and a Russian observers Arkady Dubnov commented on this situation saying that Syroezhkin's arrest could be an early strategic calculated move to keep potential threats out of the picture (Volkov 2019). A few days before the elections in Kazakhstan, in cities of Almaty, Nur-Sultan, and Aktobe, home searches and detentions of activists took place. The official comments from the police were that these searches were sanctioned by court as part of the criminal investigation of the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan. The founder of this extremist organization (DCK), Mukhtar Ablyazov, who is living abroad since 2009 and was sentenced to life imprisonment in Kazakhstan, denied all the charges (Radio Azattyq 2019). This case particularly demonstrates that due to the high salience



of elections, the government took actions of eliminating non-supporters well before the “focal point”. Constant surveillance of key activists, detentions of opposition members, arrests of peaceful protesters months before the day of elections served as deterrence technique signaling to the general population what awaits them in case of going against the regime.

On the day of elections, on June 9, there were large protests in different cities. Again, the internet and social networks didn't work on that day. Approximately 500 demonstrators were arrested, including local and international journalists and activists (Lillis 2019). From the international journalists, Marius Fossum – a representative of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, who came to monitor and report the elections was detained in Almaty (Rittmann 2019). Chriss Rickleton from Eurasianet was also arrested and tweeted that his black eye was a result of police beating. When he was released, the footage on his camera was deleted (Putz 2019). Local journalists and reporters were also arrested, along with a representative of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (Rittmann 2019). What can be followed is that the coercive state used repressive behavior before the elections as well as during the election day. Repressive techniques were not of high intensity in Way and Levitsky's (2006) term. There were no visible mass killings, targeted assassinations, or extreme violence. Looking back, one can see that the government got ready for this important day. Since such protests on election days are of no surprise for the regime, the coercive state was well prepared both in terms of blocking information spread, monitoring activists, restricting the work of observers, detaining the protestors and most importantly, having ready enough police for all these activities. Reflecting on the hypothesis, the third hypothesis on the relationship between the predictiveness of the conflict and the use of low intensity repression is confirmed for the 2019 elections in Kazakhstan.

Overall, Kazakhstan, as a resource rich kleptocratic state gives a clear example of how the government uses family ties in the security structure and politics. The use of public wealth

to enrich himself and his family by the leader and controlling every aspect of the national affairs through appointing trusted people to top positions started back in the 90s with the independence. Concentrated economic power, organized and compliant military, security sector with good fiscal health allow Kazakhstani coercive state to use both high and low intensity repression when needed. The difference on the chosen intensity of repression during 2011 Zhanaozen protests and 2019 presidential elections can then be explained with the third hypothesis, the level of predictiveness of the conflict.

## 5 Conclusion

The research question of “Why were repressions highly intensive in some cases and less intensive in others?” was answered with the interaction of three variables. The explanatory approach of this thesis is to demonstrate the effect of coercive state capacity and predictiveness of conflict on the outcome of the repression intensity.

This research analyzed the coercive state’s scope and cohesion in Kazakhstan as an independent variable affecting the intensity of repression. The investigation of the level of the security sector development and the economic power of the coercive agents showed that the scope of the state is high in Kazakhstan. Analysis of the existing family ties in politics and military and the fiscal health of the security sector yielded that the cohesion is high, too. In the presence of both high scope and high cohesion, the state has an opportunity to choose both high and low intensity repression. The difference in the chosen repression intensity in micro cases of Zhanaozen and presidential elections are explained by the third variable of predictiveness of the conflict. That is, elections are of high salience for the government, and protests shortly before and during the elections are a regular thing in most authoritarian states. Given that, the state got prepared for this critical event using low intensity repression well before the election day. In contrast, labor protests in Zhanaozen came as a surprise, and the government didn’t

think it will become large scale. The conflict was unpredicted, and the coercive agents had to use high intensity repression at a timely manner.

The findings of this study can be used for testing country cases of soft authoritarianism with similar inputs of high scope and high cohesion. When both these variables are high, the state is likely to use low intensity repression during “focal points” like elections when the protests are predicted. The scope and cohesion are not exclusive in soft authoritarian regimes – both variables can be high and defining factors of the resulting repression type. To better understand the chosen repression intensity, other variables like predictiveness / anticipation of conflict should be carefully examined.

This thesis would be relevant for other research streams like research on the international sanctions or opposition studies since it suggests useful results on the actors of repression, their networks, and the driving forces. Although this work offers an understanding of the relationship between three variables of state capacity, predictiveness of the conflict, and intensity of repression, there were some limitations. Further studies could be done with the analysis of several macro cases to increase the generalizability of the findings. Also, control of the scope and cohesion variables throughout the time period will add validity to the outcomes. Due to limited access to information this was not fully possible within the range of this thesis.

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