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Del Sordi, A.

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# Legitimation and the Party of Power in Kazakhstan<sup>1</sup>

Adele Del Sordi, University of Amsterdam

## Abstract

*This chapter surveys the legitimation strategies enacted by the political leadership of the contemporary post-Soviet republic. While showing that Kazakhstan bases its legitimation primarily on international recognition and the country's economic performance, it also focuses on an institutional dimension of legitimation. The leadership of Kazakhstan has chiefly been relying on Nur Otan, the party of power, for this. The party has contributed to legitimation by enforcing rules in the 1990s; by channeling popular support for the regime's economic performance in the 2000s; and finally by becoming more responsive to citizens' requests, thus shifting the regime toward input-related legitimation in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis.*

## Introduction

The goal of the present volume is to shed light on the importance of legitimation for authoritarian-regime stability, focusing in particular on institutional legitimacy in post-Soviet Eurasia.<sup>1</sup> The case of Kazakhstan is extremely relevant for this purpose: Governed by a soft authoritarian regime, the country is endowed with significant natural resources and yet deploys advanced forms of institutional legitimation, especially through its party of power. Moreover, the analysis of this case shows that modes of legitimation can vary over time, with shifts largely depending on the historical, economic and political conditions of the moment.

This chapter begins with a review of the main legitimating frames considered and in some cases adopted by Kazakhstan's leadership. A reliance on international recognition and strong economic performance, two of the most successful strategies, are examined in particular. In the same section, the need for an institutional dimension for legitimation is explored. Institutions, it is argued, are needed to buttress, channel and at times provide a substitute for

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the popular support deriving from international recognition and a strong economic performance. The following sections introduce Nur Otan, Kazakhstan's party of power, and discuss in detail its role in supporting regime legitimation. It is shown that the establishment of a pro-regime party in itself can be seen as the result of a strategy. For example, in a period of political conflict, when the use of repression could have delegitimized the regime by undermining its international credibility, the leadership used the party to change the terms of the conflict, resolving it in the executive's favor in a relatively soft manner. Similarly, the party contributes to legitimation by mobilizing the masses and transforming the popular consensus resulting from strong economic growth into open political support for the regime. By creating an image of broad support, the party helps to reinforce the direct connection between the leadership and the population, in turn delegitimizing political opponents that emerge from elite circles. Finally, in periods when the leadership is less able to rely on other sources of legitimacy, the party compensates for this loss by becoming a conduit for citizens' complaints and proposals, shifting the balance toward input-related modes of legitimation. The chapter concludes with a scrutiny of the main findings and a brief discussion of possible future scenarios.

## **1. Regime legitimation in post-Soviet Kazakhstan**

The Kazakhstani regime has been characterized as one of a soft authoritarian nature, relying more substantially on forms of subtle manipulation and persuasion than on outright repression (Schatz, 2009; Means, 1996). In this context, the issue of how the political leadership justifies its existence and action is particularly relevant. In order to improve the regime's stability and chances of survival, the authorities need to promote a certain level of consensus. In this section, possible legitimation strategies are examined in the light of Kazakhstan's experience.<sup>ii</sup> Following Schatz (2006), we refer to these strategies as frames, borrowing an expression from social-movement theory.

The first element to consider is personal charisma, a source of legitimacy included in Weber's classic typology as well as in Holmes' classification of legitimation modes (Holmes, 2010). The question is whether President Nursultan Nazarbayev's popularity and importance in the Kazakhstani political system implies that the leadership relies at least in part on the leader's charisma for its legitimation.<sup>iii</sup> Indeed, Nazarbayev, who has held office since 1990, successfully steered the country through its difficult post-independence phase and the

dramatic economic reforms of the 1990s without serious societal and ethnic clashes; moreover, he is often identified as a primary force underlying the present day's stability and economic prosperity. The authorities make frequent reference to the president's image as a skilled leader and as "father of the nation and a symbol of unity and stability" (Isaacs, 2011, p. 121). The leader enjoys substantial popularity and is trusted by the majority of Kazakhstanis (Lillis, 2010; IRI, 2011; Isaacs, 2010).<sup>iv</sup> However, Nazarbayev's charisma seems to be less relevant for the regime's legitimation than is implied in Weber's classic charismatic-authority ideal -type. As noted by Isaacs (2010), Nazarbayev's charisma is of a reflected type, actively constructed by the elites. The main elements of his charismatic leadership – his superior qualities, his capacity to represent the nation and be its father – are not inherent in Nazarbayev himself, but are instead a "discursive mechanism" attributed to him by means of an active and continuous discourse (Isaacs, 2010, p. 436). As noted by Isaacs, the president's power, while certainly based strongly on personal power and informal political ties, "is legitimized and formalized through rational-liberal political institutions such as the presidency, the constitution, and the political party Nur Otan" (Isaacs, 2010, p. 448).

The role of nationalism as a legitimation mode for Kazakhstan is also rather ambiguous. Since the end of the Soviet period, which was characterized by the domination of the Russian language and culture and the promotion of internationalism over localism, the political leadership has promoted a "Kazakhization" of the country. This has been accomplished through a series of symbolic policies (adoption of a new flag and national anthem, renaming streets with Kazakh names) as well as through legal and constitutional changes (Ó Beacháin and Kevlihan, 2011, p. 4). However, the construction of a Kazakh nation has been an ambivalent process, and as a legitimation frame it is handled very carefully and sometimes ambiguously by the authorities.<sup>v</sup> Especially in the 1990s, when Kazakhs were still a minority within the country, attempts to base legitimacy on an ethnic nationalistic feeling would have risked alienating ethnic Russians, who constituted a significant minority within the country (Schatz, 2006, p. 270). Even more recently, following a shift in the ethnic balance in favor of Kazakhs, the leadership has been very careful to balance Kazakhization with the construction of a more civic nationalist feeling that underlines the nature and the image of Kazakhstan as a multiethnic state in which several ethnic groups – including Russians, Koreans, Tatars, Ukrainians, Polish, Uzbeks and Germans – coexist peacefully (Ó Beacháin and Kevlihan, 2011; von Soest and Grauvogel 2015). To date, the leadership has managed to reconcile these two tendencies by delaying and softening the most hard-line nationalist policy measures, and

by establishing institutions such as the Assembly of Nations in which all local ethnic groups are represented.<sup>vi</sup>

The Kazakhstani leadership also found traditional and new traditional forms of legitimation to be impracticable. While the former category, by which we mean the Weberian traditional-authority ideal type, suppose rule to be justified through an “unimaginably ancient recognition and habitual orientation to conform” (Gerth and Wright Mills, 1970, p. 78), the latter emphasizes an “identification with predecessors known to have been very popular and assumed to have been legitimate” (Holmes, 2010, p. 108). According to Schatz (2006), referring to previous history would have been an unsuitable choice for Kazakhstan’s regime, particularly at the time of the country’s independence. He notes that while the elites of the newly independent republic rhetorically referred to the Kazakh *khanat* as an ideal ancestor, they could not link their legitimacy to a deep historical statehood, first because no such statehood existed until the Central Asian republics were created during Soviet times, and second because any such exercise would have implied a denial of the role of nomadism in the historical memory of Kazakhs, and thus would have been met with skepticism on the part of the average citizen (Schatz, 2006).

### *International recognition*

Schatz concludes that, in absence of other options, Kazakhstan’s regime ended up linking its own legitimation during the 1990s to the international recognition derived from its engagement in diplomatic relations and international organizations. This recognition was in turn used to promote support for the regime domestically (Schatz, 2006, p. 270). Unlike other Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan has engaged intensively in the international sphere since the early 1990s, as demonstrated by the quantity and intensity of its diplomatic relations, its participation – often proactive – in a large number of international bodies and organizations, and its promotion of multinationalism and multiconfessionalism (Schatz, 2006, p. 271-274). This has been done with the intent of portraying “an image of a state elite which was engaged internationally and therefore deserving of support internally” (Schatz, 2006, p. 270). Particularly relevant has been participation in regional organizations (such as the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and, more recently, the Eurasian Economic Union) that allowed Kazakhstan to improve its international profile without having to face demands for internal reforms (Del Sordi, 2013). However, the

scope of Kazakhstan's international engagement has not been limited to its own region, and continued even after the country's economy started to boom. For example, the country bid for and obtained the chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010. The high profile of the bid – presented with much publicity in Madrid in 2007 and openly supported by Russia (Wołowska, 2010) – as well as the substantial attention paid by the local media to the attempt and the events of the chairmanship year, offer an example of how international recognition and involvement are integrated into the official discourse with the goal of regime legitimation. As a direct consequence of its OSCE ambitions, Kazakhstan's regime committed to and carried out a – very limited – liberalization of the country's political system, and made an attempt to reinforce and professionalize party competition.

Kazakhstan also seems to rely on reference to external role models as an additional type of external legitimation (Holmes, 2010). In the programmatic documents for the country's development, the president makes repeated reference to the experience of the so-called Asian Tigers, particularly Singapore and Malaysia. He refers to Kazakhstan as a possible heir of those tigers, stylizing it as a “Central Asian Snow Leopard” (Nazarbayev, 1997). By referencing examples characterized by fast economic growth and moderate political liberalization, the leadership has clarified what type of political system it intends to build, while seeking to legitimize its efforts in this direction.

Nazarbayev's decision to rely more on institutions than on his own person for regime legitimation could be rooted in the attempt to seek the international community's approval, as well as the desire to distance himself from the personal-rule model employed within the country's Central Asian peers (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan). The establishment of a party of power in the early 1990s can be seen in the same light. It will be seen later that Nur Otan contributed to the regime's legitimation by helping to resolve an interinstitutional conflict; by demonstrating the leadership's capability to enforce rules without undermining the country's international-recognition-based legitimacy, this enabled it to maintain an image based on respect for procedure and a limited use of repression.

### *Economic performance*

The choice of international engagement as a main legitimating frame was in part due to the country's poor economic performance in the early 1990s (Schatz, 2006). However, this situation has since changed radically. Starting from the 2000s, Kazakhstan has enjoyed an economic boom, mainly due to the increasing intensity of exploitation of its ample oil and natural-gas resources. Between 1999 and 2007, the country's GDP increased at rates close to or above 9 per cent per year. This trend was interrupted in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, but the country's growth rate has since increased again. Despite high levels of corruption and significant differences among regions, the country's wealth is being distributed among increasingly broader segments of the population, and the state is trying to establish an efficient welfare system<sup>vii</sup>.

As a consequence, the leadership has in recent years relied increasingly on the country's economic performance as a source of legitimation. According to Bhavna Davé (2007), the post-Soviet Kazakhstani state sought symbolic legitimacy by adopting a social contract similar to that in force during Soviet times; in exchange for security and welfare guarantees, the general public was required to act compliantly (Davé, 2007, p. 115-116). Expanding in parallel with the country's wealth, the content of this 'contract' has become more extensive over time; the leadership today seeks to portray itself not only as the provider of economic prosperity and political stability, but also as a promoter of sustainable development.<sup>viii</sup>

The achievement of a high level of prosperity and stability has been termed output or performance legitimacy (see Easton, 1965; Scharpf, 1999). Holmes calls this mode of legitimation "eudaemonic" (Holmes, 2010, p. 106; 2015).

In Kazakhstan, the leadership has sought to construct an image of a benevolent ruler who actively seeks to create economic wealth, promote societal harmony, and establish a stable, effective and internationally recognized state. In other words, the leadership mediates and appropriates the positive economic performance and societal stability through the creation of relevant legitimating frames. In his annual messages to the people of Kazakhstan (*Poslaniia Narodu Kazakhstana*), the president makes frequent reference to the positive results his administration has achieved. Most importantly, these speeches serve to reinforce the impression that the leadership and the president himself are the promoters of and indeed the source of these outcomes. The 2005 message to the people provides an example in this regard. At the height of the country's economic growth, almost 15 years after independence,

Nazarbayev stated, “We have done plenty in the last years. Our functioning market economy, the economic growth, the improvement of living standards are visible evidence and have earned us international recognition” (Nazarbayev, 2005).

Although it might conceivably be regarded as a category of its own, political and societal stability can be considered as another of the goods provided by the regime to keep the populace contented. Unlike its neighbors, Kazakhstan did not experience significant domestic conflict in the 1990s, and was not swept up in the wave of color revolutions in the mid-2000s. The regime has effectively made use of this stability to improve its own legitimacy, for example in the early presidential elections in 2011, in which the campaign was focused on the president’s ability to prevent spillover from the 2010 political unrest and ethnic clashes in Kyrgyzstan. Political stability and interethnic and interconfessional harmony are core elements of president’s discourse, which frames Kazakhstan as a tolerant and harmonious country in which different groups can peacefully coexist.<sup>ix</sup>

Economic performance is also framed as a mode of legitimation through the contrast of these results with the past, particularly with the difficult post-independence decade, which was characterized by a serious economic crisis. Creating this contrast with the past (Holmes, 2010, p. 108) effectively helps transform popular satisfaction regarding economic performance into support for the regime, as it conveys the message that the current leadership has produced tangible and radical change with regard to economic opportunities and living conditions. This strategy has been used widely by the president; for instance, in the abovementioned 2005 message to the people, he invites citizens to evaluate the changes in their lives since the 1990s and to be proud of what they and he have accomplished together.<sup>x</sup> However, this effect should not be expected to persist. As time passes, younger generations will be less and less aware of the scale of the change, and will thus be less likely to appreciate current conditions simply because they are so significantly different from the past. Moreover, the country’s strong economic performance is both a relatively recent phenomenon and is relatively fragile; this was demonstrated by the consequences of the 2008 global financial crisis, which affected Kazakhstan significantly (if not in a lasting manner).

The decision to give a larger legitimizing role to institutions and in particular to Nur Otan, Kazakhstan’s party of power, was likely grounded in the need to channel the popular approval generated by the country’s strong economic performance into approval for the

regime, as well as the necessity of relying on alternative legitimation modes when levels of satisfaction regarding economic performance are low or their effects less evident.

## **2. Institutional legitimacy and the party of power**

Above, we examined how both international recognition and economic performance – the two main legitimating frames adopted by Kazakhstan’s leadership – have contributed to the development of elements of institutional legitimation

In the case of international recognition, institutions have enabled the leadership to support its multiethnic and multiconfessional claims on the international stage, and thus indirectly in front of the domestic population. Institutions, on the other hand, have helped transform the popular consensus regarding strong economic performance into open support for the regime, and have served as a substitute for this consensus in periods of weaker economic performance or when positive economic outcomes have contributed less obviously to popular satisfaction.

However, accounting for the role of institutions in regime legitimation requires a theoretical approach in addition to an empirical one. This contribution relies on the conceptualization of institutional legitimacy presented on the introductory chapter of this volume (Brusis, 2015). Building on Beetham’s empirical definition of legitimacy (Beetham, 1991), Brusis distinguishes three modes of legitimation (Brusis, 2015). The first, “demonstrating rule enforcement”, refers to the leadership’s capacity to ensure all actors consider rules to be binding and to consolidate political institutions, including so-called boundary rules (that is, those that are not the object of everyday political conflict). The second mode of legitimation, “demonstrating responsiveness”, relates to the reconciliation of government institutions with citizens’ expectations. Here, the leadership needs to show ordinary citizens as well as influential elites that their preferences and concerns are being taken into account. Finally, by “demonstrating popular approval”, leaders give the perception that they enjoy widespread popular support, mostly doing so through use of the electoral process, the legislature and mass organizations such as political parties (Brusis, 2015, p. X).

In this chapter, the legitimizing role of a specific institution – the party of power – is considered. This term has been used in reference to executive-based parties in the former Soviet Union, particularly Russia and Ukraine. The main feature of these parties is their

origin in the executive branch of power, which establishes and uses them in order to reinforce its rule, for instance by achieving better control of the legislature (Gel'man, 2008; Meleshevich, 2007).<sup>xi</sup> Created by the elites around Kazakhstan's president at the end of the 1990s, Nur Otan qualifies as a party of power. While it dominates the electoral competition and the political scene, its success is to a large extent dependent on the support of the elites that contributed to its creation (Del Sordi, 2012).

The establishment of a pro-regime party can be seen as a conscious strategy on the part of the authoritarian leadership with the aim of enhancing the regime's stability and durability. A number of studies on so-called authoritarian institutions have adopted this perspective in seeking to understand how pro-regime parties enhance regime stability.<sup>xii</sup> By helping to create a controlled arena for political competition, Nur Otan indeed supports the leadership's efforts to coordinate elite behavior. In addition, membership functions as a "loyalty card", signaling an individual's alignment with the leadership's goals and an informal acceptance of underlying regime rules. Finally, Nur Otan performs the important role of mobilizing the population for elections, generating high turnout rates and overwhelming vote shares for the existing leadership's preferred candidates (Del Sordi, 2012).

However useful, this perspective's rationalist and functionalistic approach takes little account of the historical and contingent forces that often drive the creation of parties, which themselves are inevitably embedded in a system of shared historical and cultural references (March and Olsen, 1989).

In Kazakhstan, as elsewhere, the party-creation process was neither coincidental nor dependent solely on specific elite strategies, but was on the contrary influenced by a specific historical and cultural context. The country's long experience under the Soviet Union played a role in shaping the society's relationship with political parties, by contributing to a popular lack of engagement in politics, increasing skepticism toward politicians, or even creating societal conditions of dependency that were exploitable by a totalitarian regime (Isaacs 2011). As the party was created, these conditions have influenced its development of a non-ideological form, in which a vague sense of participation and approval is emphasized over programmatic commitment<sup>xiii</sup>.

In addition, the choice to establish a system based on party rule was influenced by post-Soviet elites' familiarity with this instrument, which was developed and refined over more

than 70 years of use in the USSR. Indeed, the establishment of a party that was declaredly the ‘functional equivalent’ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Brill Olcott, 2010, p. 93) conceivably had much to do with creators’ previous experience with the Communist Party, even if Nur Otan was not the direct continuation of its predecessor (Del Sordi 2012).

### **3. What role for Nur Otan? From popular approval to government responsiveness**

Linked closely with the figure of the president and the current regime, Nur Otan is an institution of fundamental importance in the contemporary Kazakhstani political system. A creation of the ruling elites, it has over the years evolved to serve a variety of regime-stabilization needs, coordinating elites behind the president and effectively mobilizing citizens during elections.

However, Nur Otan also plays a very important legitimating role. The establishment of a pro-regime party can in itself be seen as the result of a strategy. During a phase marked by political conflict, when the use of repression could have delegitimized the regime by undermining its support internationally, the leadership used the party to change the terms of the conflict and resolve it in the executive’s favor. Similarly, the party contributes to legitimation through the mobilization of the masses, creating the image of broad popular support for the regime. Finally, in periods when the leadership is less able to rely on other sources of legitimacy, the party compensates for this loss by serving as a conduit for citizens’ complaints and proposals, thus fostering input-related modes of legitimation.

The following sections analyze three phases of Kazakhstan’s recent political history, trying to detect the legitimizing role of the party in each of them. In addition, the motives behind the adoption of additional legitimizing modes will be examined, as well as the reasons for shifting from one mode to another.

#### **3.1 Nur Otan as a party of power: Establishment, stabilization and rule enforcement**

As previously seen, in the initial post-independence period Kazakhstan’s regime relied for legitimation chiefly on international recognition and its domestic reflection. While this led to significant diplomatic activity and an intense engagement within international organizations, the effort to improve international recognition did not prevent the country’s leadership from

maintaining tight control over the political system and curtailing opportunities for open competition. However, these conditions did influence the regime's selection of institutional methods of control that generated comparatively little conflict. For instance, the president probably started the process of charisma routinization, shifting the source of his regime's legitimation toward institutions rather than personal rule, during this phase (Isaacs, 2010, p. 448).

The establishment of a party of power can be seen as one of the comparatively soft methods of control associated with this trend. Sustained by the blossoming of social and political movements that took place in the last years of the Soviet Union, the Kazakhstani political scene was characterized in the early 1990s by a relative pluralism (Brill Olcott, 2010). The parliament produced by the 1994 elections included multiple political forces despite the executive's efforts to influence results in favor of its first party of power, the Union of People's Unity (SNEK), and the legislature subsequently proved to be vocal and independent.

A turning point in this regard was a vote on a government-proposed package of privatization reforms, which the parliament strongly opposed (Kuttykadam, 2010). The president reacted by dismissing the legislature in early 1995, nominating a hand-picked Assembly and ruling by decree for nine months. Media and opposition movements were silenced, despite having become increasingly vocal to the point of engaging in street protests as a result of the parliamentary crisis. For days the army patrolled the streets of the country's largest city, Almaty, with their task officially described as dealing with criminality (Kuttykadam, 2010). Even if it was effective, this strategy had enormous costs in terms of consensus, and appeared likely to damage the legitimacy of Nazarbayev's rule, as it demonstrated the president's open disregard of elected representatives' opinions regarding a crucial issue, in this case the privatization of national assets. Most importantly, the open use of repression threatened to undermine the international recognition the leadership had painstakingly tried to build, and on which it was relying for domestic legitimacy (Schatz, 2006; Brill Olcott, 2008).

The crisis was all the more serious as it involved the fundamental rules of representation; in Offe's terms, this could be considered as a conflict "over" the rules (Offe, 1996). By showing that relations between institutions had led to open confrontation, the crisis revealed the weakness and instability of Nazarbayev's rule.

The situation was partly ameliorated by a rebalancing of interinstitutional relations in favor of the president, when a new constitution that assigned broad powers to the head of state was

adopted in 1995. However, this did not in itself resolve the conflict between the executive and legislative branches. In the 1995 elections, the SNEK, now renamed the People's Unity Party (PNEK), acquired only a slightly stronger position in the new legislative body (the Mazhilis). Its majority was not sufficient to prevent new legislative rebellions, which again cast a spotlight – if not with the intensity of 1994 – on the relationship between state powers.

This continued tension put pressure on the president to find a more effective and less conflict-generating way to stay in power. In other words, a tool was needed that would allow the leadership to manage the political system by demonstrating its capacity to enforce rules without simultaneously undermining the country's international recognition.

The consequent creation of a new party of power, Otan (Fatherland), involved the investment of significant executive resources (Del Sordi, 2012). Founded in 1999, Otan was provided with unprecedented institutional support. Legislation was adopted that ensured its dominant position in the Mazhilis, including the introduction of strict regulatory requirements for political parties, a very high vote threshold (7 per cent) for entering the parliament, and a prohibition on the formation of parties having an ethnic or religious basis (Isaacs, 2011; Del Sordi, 2012).<sup>xiv</sup> The party could also count on administrative resources, including the use of governmental facilities and broad coverage by the state media.<sup>xv</sup> Finally, Otan was openly supported by the president, who has served as the party's chairman since 2007.<sup>xvi</sup> Thanks to this support, Otan won the elections of 1999 and 2004 with increasingly larger majorities (respectively of 24 and 42 seats, out of a total of 98), in the process transforming the legislature into a loyal, flexible and reliable law-making machine that ensured the efficient implementation of the presidential policy agenda.<sup>xvii</sup>

In this way, Otan managed to bring the fundamental interinstitutional conflict “under” the rules (Offe, 1996), legitimizing the regime by consolidating institutions and “demonstrating rule enforcement” (Brusis, 2015, p. X). By transforming the parliament's lower house into a loyal legislature dominated by the party of power, the leadership resolved in favor of the executive a conflict between institutions that had endangered the regime's stability and legitimacy throughout the late 1990s. The vertical structure of power was consolidated, effectively subordinating the legislative branch to the executive and the presidential administration. Moreover, as the appearance of democratic procedure was maintained, this solution did not undermine the country's international reputation.

### 3.2 The super party: "Demonstrating popular support"

In the 2000s, the party of power became an electoral machine, responsible for winning overwhelming majorities in elections, thus providing the regime with an image of unity, consensus and invincibility. This evolution originated in a change of the political and economic context. As seen above, the economy began improving significantly at the turn of the decade (Brill Olcott, 2010). At the same time, several new political formations emerged from within elite circles and tried to take part in the political game. This posed a clear challenge to the regime and threatened its legitimacy; for the first time since the mid-1990s, political formations independent of the political leadership sought a role as intermediaries between citizens and institutions, breaking the political monopoly established by the existing authorities (Isaacs, 2011).

While the first of these formations – the Republican People's Party of Kazakhstan, established by former premier Akezhan Kazhegeldin – had little success, a more serious challenge came from the opposition movement known as the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (*Demokraticeskii' Vybor Kazakhstana*, DVK).<sup>xviii</sup> Despite an official goal of promoting the adoption of transparent and rigorous anti-corruption rules, the main driving force behind the DVK was members' ambition to take a more active part in Kazakhstani politics, and to enter the system of privileges associated with proximity to the president and his circle (Expert 2, 2011).<sup>xix</sup> Though the DVK initially drew a significant following, it ultimately failed due both to internal divisions and the intervention of the authorities. Nevertheless, the Kazakhstani political leadership took its rise as a warning, prompting a strengthening of the party of power (Expert 2, 2011).

A further challenge came from Asar, a pro-regime party created by Nazarbayev's daughter Dariga in 2003. Along with other pro-presidential parties (the Civic Party and the Agrarian Party), Asar managed to obtain a few parliamentary seats in the 2004 elections. While generally loyal, Asar on several occasions showed its potential as an independent force. For instance, in 2004 Asar candidates opposed Otan candidates in many of the southern districts where Asar's power base was strongest (former Asar member, 2012). In addition, it seems likely that Dariga Nazarbayeva, backed by her husband Rakhat Aliyev, intended to use Asar as a platform for her own rise to the presidency following her father's presumed retirement, a strategy that was promptly curtailed by the president (Expert 1, 2010). Along with the Civic Party and the Agrarian Party, Asar was forced to merge with Otan in 2006 (Del Sordi, 2012).

This sent a signal to the elites that their political ambitions now had to be channeled through the super party to have any credible chance of success.

By creating a super party, the merger also served the purpose of strengthening the authorities' direct connection with the citizenry. The electoral process is central to this purpose: Nur Otan is a primary electoral-campaign actor thanks to the capillary diffusion of the party's branches throughout the country's territory and its presence in institutions such as schools and hospitals. Campaigns are organized efficiently, in part thanks to the impressive amount of administrative resources devoted to this task, and result in extremely high turnout rates and vote shares. In 2007, for example, Nur Otan secured all 98 seats within the Mazhilis (Del Sordi, 2012).<sup>xx</sup>

Nur Otan's electoral victories "demonstrate popular approval" for the regime, communicating a signal of wide and strong popular support for the regime (Brusis, 2015, p. X). Most importantly, Nur Otan's overwhelming electoral successes demonstrate that the president and his party are the true and legitimate defenders of the citizenry's general interests, while all other parties are competing only in order to promote the interests of specific elite segments. In other words, the party helps create a direct connection to the citizens, reconciling the regime's action with popular expectations and contributing to a justification of its policy choices (Easton, 1965).

A development of this kind was possible only in the context of the economic boom of the 2000s. The party was able to transform citizens' genuine approval of the ongoing economic growth into open support for the regime, using the tools of popular mobilization and electoral success. Furthermore, this accumulated support decreased the need to rely on international recognition for legitimacy; while that strategy was never abandoned altogether, as will be seen below, the leadership could afford to produce overwhelming electoral victories during this phase without fearing the judgment of the international community. However, the next section will demonstrate that the leadership's choice of legitimation strategies may change significantly in phases marked by economic recession.

### 3.3 The party as a vehicle of government responsiveness

The global financial crisis of 2008 had serious consequences for the Kazakhstani economy, especially within the banking sector and labor market (Barisitz et al., 2010). To some degree,

this constrained the regime's ability to derive legitimacy from the country's economic performance, instead prompting the political leadership to rely more heavily on forms stressing government responsiveness (Brusis, 2015, p. X).

There were several reasons for this shift. First, although levels of support for the regime remained generally high, local manifestations of dissent increased after 2008 as a consequence of the economic crisis. This was particularly true within the western regions of the country.<sup>xxi</sup>

In addition, the instability in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, where repeated protests brought down the rule of Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2010, prompted fears of similar events in Kazakhstan. The possibility of contagion related to a new wave of color revolutions was perceived as a serious threat by the authorities, and led to a number of restrictive measures (Finkel and Brudny, 2012). However, these same concerns led the regime to seek to enhance its image of being a responsive and responsible government.

The regime's ambition in 2010 to chair the OSCE served as a final aspect influencing its shift toward a greater responsiveness to citizen demands. In large part, this change was a continuation of the leadership's long-term efforts to secure international recognition. When the country proposed its candidature, it committed itself to political liberalization – an issue deemed particularly urgent by the OSCE – as well as to a number of other reforms (Wołowska, 2010). Seeking to balance these commitments with the ability to maintain domestic political control, the authorities subsequently promoted a mild liberalization of political rules. While falling far short of creating the conditions for open political competition, these reforms did include an amendment of the legislation relating to parties and elections, thus allowing two loyal opposition parties to enter the Mazhilis in 2012. This demonstrated to both the international community and the domestic population that the leadership was willing to embrace an agenda of gradual democratization.<sup>xxii</sup>

In addition to these reforms, a series of initiatives was put in place that demonstrated authorities' willingness to listen to external voices and proposals, further bolstering the regime's input legitimation.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Once again, Nur Otan played an extremely significant role in this phase. First, cooperation between Nur Otan and other political parties was enhanced. Representatives from all moderate political formations are frequently assembled by Nur Otan to discuss relevant

political issues and collect proposals for the solution of outstanding problems. In these meetings, the party of power appears as a ‘promoter of democracy’, evincing both a paternalistic tolerance and a genuine willingness to listen in equal measures (All-parties-meeting, 2011). An additional goal of these meetings, according to a Nur Otan official, is to promote professionalism within the other parties, given their comparative lack of experience and the dearth of training opportunities (Nur Otan senior member, 2011).

While these meetings are targeted at party personnel, and indirectly at the most politically engaged segments of the population, Nur Otan is also engaged in initiatives that address the citizenry in general, with the goal of enhancing the regime’s responsiveness.

The most important initiative carried out by Nur Otan in this sense was the *Khalyktyñ dauyçy – Golos Naroda* (People’s Voice) project. This had some precedent in the form of the *Otandastar* (the listening Otan) project, although this latter endeavor took place on a smaller scale. In October 2011, specially designed boxes were placed in Kazakhstan’s most important cities with the aim of gathering complaints and suggestions from the citizenry. In the capital city, Astana, more than 55,000 people “had the chance to express themselves and [be] listened to“ (Nur Otan senior member, 2011). However, the merely symbolic nature of this initiative was made clear when the government published the content of some of these citizen missives; instead of any real advice, criticism or complaints, the published messages contained only generic praise and support for the regime.<sup>xxiv</sup> The initiative was not repeated, probably because the country’s growth rates returned to a significant level; with economic performance once again strong, the leadership felt less need to demonstrate government responsiveness through input-related projects.

The party has a more permanent system for gathering proposals and complaints from the population, called the *obshchestvennaia priemnaia* (literally, public reception). This is a sort of office-hours system, in which citizens line up to talk with a party functionary about ordinary or daily problems. While not exclusively managed by the party – government officials such as regional leaders and parliament members also have their own *obshchestvennaia priemnaia*, for example – this institution seems to harken back to the Soviet practice of using the party as a barometer of the public mood, channeling relevant information about people’s preferences in the absence of a functioning chain of representation (Pravda, 1978).

Since 2011, party officials in local branches have also been given the task of promoting local residents' applications for a funding scheme called "Innovation Projects". While serving as a demonstration that the government is listening to society, both the *obshchestvennaia priemnaia* and the Innovation Projects program enable the leadership to gain an understanding of real popular needs in a system where the programmatic or policy-preference aspect of elections does not come into play.

Finally, party membership can itself be seen as a way for citizens to gain official attention for their requests and proposals.<sup>xxv</sup> While this is only partially true for Nur Otan, as membership is often handed out to individuals entering public universities or government-paid jobs, and thus does not necessarily imply any particular level of political ambition or commitment (Del Sordi, 2012), this motive may play a bigger role in decisions to join the party's youth division, Zhas Otan. This organization monitors and mobilizes the youth population both during elections and non-electoral periods by sponsoring meetings, conferences and trips to other cities. This initiative's primary functions are probably connected with the need to demonstrate the regime's strength while keeping young people away from the ranks of the opposition, particularly given the ongoing fear of contagion from external color revolutions (Robertson, 2007; Finkel and Brudny, 2012). However, the organization genuinely gives many youth the feeling that they are engaged more deeply in public affairs than would otherwise be possible, as well as the impression that they could one day become part of the establishment themselves (Zhas Otan members 1 and 2, 2011).<sup>xxvi</sup>

#### **4. Conclusions**

This chapter has shown how the political leadership in Kazakhstan bases its legitimation primarily on international recognition and the country's economic performance. The relative prevalence of each of these frames has been conditioned by the social, political and economic conditions of the moment, with economic performance becoming a viable legitimation strategy only in the second decade of the country's independence, and showing its precariousness during and after the 2008 global financial crisis. In addition, it was found that an institutional dimension of legitimation was necessary; institutions, it was argued, are needed to buttress, channel and at times provide a substitute for the popular support derived from international recognition and economic performance. In Kazakhstan, this task has chiefly been performed by Nur Otan, the party of power.

Three phases were examined, in which the party played three different roles. In the difficult phase of the 1990s, characterized by a dramatic economic crisis and a still-fragile state, the establishment of a pro-regime party helped resolve a potentially destabilizing interinstitutional conflict and consolidate the new institutional system around the figure of President Nazarbayev. With regard to legitimacy, the party helped demonstrate the authorities' capacity to enforce rules without seriously undermining the newly independent republic's international credibility.

The environment in the 2000s was very different, as the state was increasing its strength and effectiveness, and was benefiting from a booming economy. In this period, the leadership needed to defuse internal opposition while productively channeling the genuinely broad popular support and approval for the regime's performance. The Nur Otan party offered a means of channeling that satisfaction in the form of overwhelming electoral support.

Finally, in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, the leadership was simultaneously confronted with declining economic growth and a number of manifestations of dissent, both within the country in the form of domestic opposition, and outside its borders in the form of potentially contagious protest movements. In this context, the authorities became aware that relying on economic performance had become less practicable as a legitimation strategy, and that a substitute was thus needed. The Nur Otan party filled this gap by becoming more responsive to citizens' complaints and proposals, in the process shifting the regime toward an input-related mode of legitimation. The party's shift toward a more responsive style of public engagement was additionally linked to the leadership's attempt to bolster its international legitimacy by participating in international politics on a higher level, specifically by securing the OSCE chairmanship.

It might be argued that this mild liberalization and the creation of space for dissent could result in the growth of opposition movements and street protests, following the example of the Russian protest waves of 2011. However, there are significant differences between the two cases. The protests in Russia were driven in large part by the increasing dissatisfaction of a middle class that had benefited under Putin's first mandate, but had begun realizing that the regime's widespread corruption was closing off valuable opportunities. In other words, the middle class "started to hit the glass ceiling made of bureaucratic barriers and the arbitrariness of state bodies, nepotism and rampant corruption" (Balcer, 2012, p. 5). In Kazakhstan, economic stability is still quite recent and is therefore not yet taken for granted;

moreover, the potential for economic growth is so much larger – both in absolute terms and in comparison with Russia – that a comparable level of frustration is unlikely to be reached for some time. As long as the majority of Kazakhstan’s citizens feel they are well “taken care of”, there will be relatively little space for open political contestation. However, the recent slowdown in economic growth may serve to accelerate this process of disillusionment, and there is indeed evidence of increasing dissatisfaction among the country’s younger generations (Shatsky, 2014).

A second trigger for the Russian protests was the perceived distance between citizens and the political leadership. Balcer notes how most people “interpreted the two leaders’ swap of places as evidence that they held their citizens in complete contempt, particularly when Medvedev admitted that their decision had been made a long time ago” (Balcer, 2012, p. 4). By contrast, Nazarbayev’s decision to “soften” the regime’s nature and to rule through institutions instead of relying on mere personality showed that the leadership holds the position of its citizens, as well as the opinion of the international community, in at least some regard. The rhetorical strategy of focusing on present-day economic reforms while stating that democratization will follow at some distant point – a staple for Nazarbayev – is at least in the short term likely to succeed in persuading citizens to take the long view of current events. Moreover, the strategy nurtures the feeling that current shortcomings regarding political freedom and participation are only a temporary phenomenon, rather than evidence of the leadership’s contempt.<sup>xxvii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> In order to underline the opportunity provided by such an analysis, a caveat should be made here. Legitimacy is, as noted by Huntington, “a mushy concept” that is not easy to capture or measure, although it is widely employed (Huntington, 1991, p. 46). In an authoritarian context, the issue of distinguishing between legitimacy and compliance generated by fear or opportunity seems even more difficult to comprehend (for a discussion, see Wedeen, 1999). Acknowledging the difficulty of identifying the citizens’ “true” motives, this chapter seeks to examine the political leadership and at its choices in terms of legitimating frames and strategies. While focusing on legitimation (rather than on legitimacy) gives only a partial view of the situation, it nevertheless allows an observation of what frames are considered feasible and appealing by the population, therefore deriving some information about citizens’ stances as well.

<sup>ii</sup> Schatz analyzes the legitimating choices of Kazakhstan’s post-independence leadership. He notes how elites make conscious choices (or claims, in his terminology) with regard to legitimizing their rule, and observes that these claims set ‘the terms of the debate for future political maneuvering’ (Schatz, 2006, p. 268).

<sup>iii</sup> Nursultan Nazarbayev built his political career during the 1970s and 1980s in the ranks of the Communist Party of the Republic of Kazakhstan. A protégé of the Communist leader Dinmukhammed Kunaev, he took a critical stand toward his patron as signs of renewal began arriving from Moscow. While the strategy did not work in the short term (a Muscovite, Gennady Kolbin, was appointed to Kunaev’s place), Nazarbayev managed to ride the wave of protest that followed that appointment to become president in 1990, all the while painting himself as a moderate and moderating figure (Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan, 2011).

<sup>iv</sup> A survey by the Strategic Center of Social and Political Studies in Almaty found that 89 per cent of Kazakhstanis were happy with the president’s government. The survey was conducted in 2010, and interviewed 1,592 people (Lillis, 2010). A survey conducted by IRI in 2011 asked 1,521 people whether they thought Nazarbayev should resign: 60 per cent of respondents chose the option ‘definitely not’, while 21 per cent picked “probably not” (IRI, 2011).

<sup>v</sup> According to Holmes (2010), this is a quite common occurrence. As a nationalistic strategy could imply threats to other states, as well as having exclusionary results, this is not a practicable long-term legitimation frame.

<sup>vi</sup> The adoption of Kazakh as the country’s primary language has not implied the relinquishment of Russian as a near-official language at all levels. A typical language-policy statement is: “The planned promotion of the Kazakh language will not happen in a way that damages the use of Russian” (Nazarbayev, 2012).

<sup>vii</sup> Economic inequality did not increase as a result of the country’s economic growth (Hare and Naumov, 2008). The percentage of people living under the poverty line is decreasing, although modestly and unequally across regions (Mussurov, 2012). Despite having disposed quickly of the Soviet-era welfare system, Kazakhstan has maintained a welfare-state image, and has implemented bold social policies of its own (Maltseva, 2012).

<sup>viii</sup> The 2012 message to the nation was titled “Socio-political Modernization: A Vector of Kazakhstan’s Development” (Nazarbayev, 2012). A development fund, Samruk-Kazyna, was established in 2008.

<sup>ix</sup> In his 2008 message, Nazarbayev cited “long-term stability, peace and consensus” as results of his policies and as preconditions for Kazakhstan’s further development (Nazarbayev, 2008).

<sup>x</sup> The quote reads, “It was not long ago that the sinister decade of the 1990s has gone, one when our life has changed radically with Kazakhstan’s independence. [...] It was a period when important

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decisions needed to be taken [...]: if only one wrong decision had been taken, the whole trajectory of our country would have been different. Then, the people decided to entrust me with the task of leading the country through those difficult times. I am trying to account for this trust by assessing with you every year the progress that we made. [...] And this year [...] I invite you to evaluate our work together: there is much to be proud of.”

<sup>xi</sup> Other features have been found in the literature, including the parties’ non-ideological, pragmatic and centrist nature; their dependence on a strong central personality; and their wide reliance on administrative resources to drive electoral participation (Meleshevich, 2007; see also Smyth, 2002).

<sup>xii</sup> Authoritarian institutions are formal institutions of a type usually associated with democratic political systems, including multiple political parties, partially competitive elections and parliamentary assemblies; these are also adopted in autocracies and may play a role in reinforcing authoritarian rule (Brownlee, 2007; Gandhi, 2008; Magaloni, 2008; Levitsky and Way, 2002). Among these institutions, single-party rule has been the subject of a considerable amount of study (Magaloni, 2008; Magaloni and Kricheli, 2010).

<sup>xiii</sup> Nur Otan presents a vague ideology and all-embracing concerns, to the extent that it can be considered to be a “catch-all” party (Kirchheimer, 1966). It defines itself as the “party of the majority” and appeals to generally shared humanistic ideas such as ethnic tolerance and the social and spiritual well-being of citizens (Nur Otan 2007).

<sup>xiv</sup> The prohibition on ethnic- and religious-based parties prevents the mobilization of two potentially strong sources of opposition: the Russian ethnic group and the Islamists (Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan, 2011).

<sup>xv</sup> Forms of support include “institutional engineering” operations that seek to limit the number of parties in the political system (Gel’man, 2008; Isaacs 2011; Del Sordi, 2012). Nur Otan relies heavily on administrative resources, enjoying privileged access to government facilities and state media (Isaacs, 2011; Del Sordi, 2012).

<sup>xvi</sup> This connection was further strengthened when the name was changed to Nur Otan, which is reminiscent of Nursultan, the president’s first name.

<sup>xvii</sup> In the 1990s, Nazarbayev extensively used presidential decrees as a means of carrying out his policy agenda. After 1999, the number of decrees decreased significantly in favor of ordinary legislation (Del Sordi, 2012).

<sup>xviii</sup> After removal from office, Kazhegeldin declared his intention of competing in the 1999 presidential elections, and created his political party as a platform. However, he never registered his presidential candidature, and he was subsequently accused of financial misdeeds and forced to leave the country (Isaacs, 2011).

<sup>xix</sup> Kuttykadam notes that they were fighting for the favor of Nazarbayev, but “ended up where nobody had expected to, including DVK itself” (Kuttykadam, 2010, p. 144).

<sup>xx</sup> In 2007, Nur Otan obtained more than 90 per cent of the votes in many regions. In 2012, percentages were slightly lower, but still well above 80 per cent (Del Sordi, 2012).

<sup>xxi</sup> In May 2011, workers in the mining sector in the city of Zhanaozen (in the western, oil-rich part of the country) launched a strike. Protests became violent and were repressed by the police forces in December, triggering popular indignation and an official attempt to restrict information regarding this potentially destabilizing event (Lillis, 2011).

<sup>xxii</sup> In 2008, the number of signatures required for party registration was reduced, as was the number of people required to participate in a new party’s founding congress (Isaacs, 2011: 99). The electoral law was amended in 2009. The electoral threshold was not lowered, but a special provision was added allowing the first runner-up to enter the Mazhilis (Constitutional Law ‘On Elections’ Art, 97.1.2).

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<sup>xxiii</sup> Input legitimacy refers to mechanisms or procedures that link political decisions with citizens' policy preferences (Easton 1965; Scharpf, 1999). In non-democratic contexts, such decisions may only give the impression that such a link exists. In Kazakhstan, a number of participatory institutions exist (a legislative chamber, elections, political parties, civil-society organizations, mass media); this is in part related to the relative openness associated with Kazakhstan's strategy of intense international engagement, and the need to maintain an image of being a country progressing toward democracy (Schatz, 2006). Although these institutions are kept under strict control by the leadership (Isaacs 2011, Del Sordi 2012), they nevertheless provide venues for citizens to participate in the political process, or at least to have the impression of such participation.

<sup>xxiv</sup> See a speech on this topic by Nur Otan official Amyrkhan Rakymzhanov, given in Astana in November 2011. Available at [www.astana.kz/ru/node/46033](http://www.astana.kz/ru/node/46033).

<sup>xxv</sup> Between 1999 and 2012, the number of party members grew from 164,041 to 934,297. [www.nurotan.kz](http://www.nurotan.kz).

<sup>xxvi</sup> In the words of the deputy director of Zhas Otan's Almaty division: 'It is useful. I am a political scientist and came here to get some experience, work with youth, with people. And then, it will not be difficult for me to work in the civil service or in some *apparat* [...]. Before me, here many guys worked, and now one works in the Central Apparatus [...]' (Zhas Otan member 1, 2011a). Another Zhas Otan activist pointed out, 'We receive many skills, we learn how to draft various reports [...]. We have a chance to show our skills and then it is easier for us to find a job' (Zhas Otan member 2, 2011b).

<sup>xxvii</sup> The slogan "economy first", widely used by Nazarbayev, was inspired by Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore. (Nazarbayev, 2005).