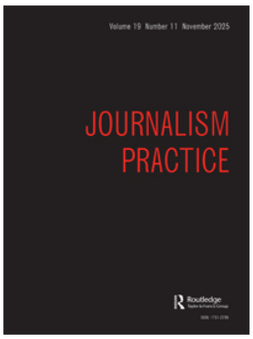

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"You Receive Gos-Zakaz, Keep Your Mouth Shut": How State Information Policy De-Professionalizes Journalism

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ABSTRACT

Authoritarian countries have various tools to control the media environment in their countries, including strict regulations, physical intimidation, threats, attacks, and forceful shutdowns of critical media outlets, among others. By examining the state information policy of Kazakhstan, locally known as "gos zakaz," this study sheds light on the misuse of state-financed media outlets and their effects on practical journalism. This article adds to the growing scholarship of journalism in Central Asia, a region where little scholarly knowledge has appeared in international peer-reviewed venues due to political and other obstacles. By utilizing semi-structured interviews to collect data among members of the journalism community during April 2023 and January 2024, the findings suggest that state information policy effectively turned Kazakhstan's journalism into a powerful propaganda machine. The state policy also promotes de-professionalism, silences critical voices, and promotes official narratives. Journalists working for gos zakaz receipient media outlets have become "servants" to the authorities in this Central Asian nation. The media capture theoretical framework is applied to analyze and discuss the findings. It is a suitable theory because it argues that news outlets misreport the news in favor of patrons and that the patrons use media outlets to serve their own political goals.

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News media; de-professionalism; journalism; Kazakhstan; Central Asia; subsidy; policy

Introduction

This study examines a case from Kazakhstan where the government uses the state budget to subsidize media outlets for publishing government-sponsored content. Locally known as "gos zakaz," this state information policy has turned Kazakhstan's journalism into a propaganda machine by creating a financial and editorial dependency of the media outlets on the state.

State support for media outlets exists in many countries in different forms, including tax relief and cash payments to lower the price of news subscription fees for the public, to modernize newsroom facilities, to help build pluralistic and culturally diverse media sectors, and others. In essence, state aid programs exist in democratic contexts

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to create and support a critical mindset and citizenship so people actively participate in the democratic political process by being fully informed about what is happening in society. The ultimate beneficiary of state aid programs in democratic contexts is the public. In the context of Kazakhstan, however, the public is largely fed with state-approved media content.

This study is important for several reasons. First, this study discusses and interprets state aid policy in a context where the Kazakh government is the primary provider of information and its (mis)use of that role in spreading and promoting its ideology, thereby promoting de-professionalism in journalism. The Kazakh government is also the largest advertiser in the country (Nussipov 2019). Second, this study attempts to contribute not only to the growing scholarly attention to the transparency of state financial interventions to the media market but also to a new contextualized understanding of how state financing exacerbates the de-professionalization of journalism. Third, this study sheds new light on how the state controls media outlets and feeds the public with homogenous content where there is little or no pluralism of points of view on socially and politically matters (IREX 2018).

To address the above-noted research inquiry, this study used semi-structured, qualitative interviews to collect data among journalism community members in Kazakhstan during April 2023 and January 2024. The findings are discussed in relation to the media capture theoretical framework that argues news outlets misreport the news in favor of patrons and that the patrons use media outlets to serve their own political goals rather than public interests. In other words, media outlets receive funding in exchange for favors.

Literature Review

Governments support media outlets either direct or indirect ways. Direct support usually includes grants, cash payments or interest-free loans to the media outlets or the industry in general, while indirect state support includes favorable postal rates or communication rates, tax exemptions and others. These methods of support are known as a state subsidy.

It is difficult to define what a subsidy is because it has different meanings in various contexts (Dragomir 2018; Zahariadis 2013). The distinction between state subsidy and state-sponsored content/state advertising, along with state funding, has become blurry (Dragomir 2018). But the state allocation for information and news has always existed. Kreiss and Ananny (2013) cite, for example, the Postal Act of 1792, the Newspaper Act of 1970, and tax exemptions for newspapers and magazines in the United States.

In democratic contexts, subsidies are intended to support media outlets that would otherwise go bankrupt and shut down or to improve journalists' working conditions, including increasing their salaries, advancing their professionalism, strengthening their audience relationships for the public benefit, and others (Murschetz 2020). Some subsidies were given for replacing old printing equipment with newer technologies, or the state reimburses expenses spent for training the next generation of working journalists (Murschetz and Karmasin 2013). In the context of Belgium, Picone and Pauwels (2013) note, subsidies existed to help support the press sector in general, including funding to pursue investigative works when not possible within the normal budget of the newsrooms. The goal is to increase quality journalism to serve the public interest in the best possible ways. The state support also exists to encourage the public consumption of

news by subsidizing subscription fees because a reading public and a fully informed public are critical elements of active citizenship (Kolo and Weichert 2013; Lardeau and Le Floch 2013; Picone and Pauwels 2013). Some governments subsidize postal rates for print media outlets. The Canadian government supports the news industry by offering a tax credit to citizens who subscribe to digital news (Scire 2022).

In some countries, state support is not used for the public benefit, but rather to preserve the power of the state leaders and their government (Dragomir 2018; Picard 2013). Authorities use money to control and capture media outlets to their favor. Dragomir (2018) argues that public funding for state-owned media outlets, state advertising, state subsidies, and market disruption tactics are the primary four tactics in capturing media outlets in one's own country. State resources are often used to fund media outlets that are friendly to governments (Rohrbacherová 2023). De Waal (2014) argues that state advertising is misused to support friendly media outlets and indirectly punish independent media outlets in many parts of the world, including in Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Instances of editorial capture driven by the arbitrary and opaque allocation of state advertising are widespread across Europe (Rohrbacherová 2023). Dragomir (2018) notes that governments pressure advertisers to avoid placing their ads in critical media outlets.

When governments use state funding to advertise or as a subsidy, it has devastating effects on press freedom and freedom of speech (Rockwell and Janus 2002). Media outlets tend to avoid covering government corruption scandals when the government advertises in them (Di Tella and Franceschelli 2011). Di Tella and Franceschelli (2011) also refer to the specific case of Argentina, where the government withdraws government advertising in retaliation for critical articles in some media outlets while tripling advertising spending in a competitive media outlet. This demonstrates abuse of power by governments in allocating government spending for advertisements. Similar practices have been used elsewhere, including in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua (Rockwell and Janus 2002), and such practices proved to be devastating to free press and free speech. "Authorities adopt such methods at specific moments in time when coverage of some media becomes intolerably critical" (Dragomir 2018, 1142).

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes "media capture" theoretical framework because it is a useful theory to explain how and why the media fail to exercise their main function. The term "media capture" is defined as "a situation in which the media have not succeeded in becoming autonomous in manifesting a will of their own, nor able to exercise their main function, notably informing people. Instead, they have persisted in an intermediate state, with vested interests, and not just the government, using them for other purposes" (Mungiu-Pippidi 2008, 73). The media can be captured by various groups, including government, politicians, advertisers, and private companies, that have incentives to distort media coverage (Enikolopov and Petrova 2015). Media capture is a salient issue because captured media can manipulate public opinion and seriously distort collective decision-making (Corneo 2006), deepen the social inequality of wealth (Petrova 2008), and reduce citizens' welfare (Prat 2015). Media capture especially is one of the strongest influences on what news media outlets report or how they frame their work (Frisch, Belair-

Gagnon, and Agur 2018). Thus, Petrova (2008) notes that the rich spend money to influence the media and, therefore, public opinion. To demonstrate how the news media is essential for those wanting to capture media outlets, it is relevant to discuss the study by McMillan and Zoido. McMillan and Zoido (2004) discuss the context of Peru under the presidency of Alberto Fujimori, where the police chief of the Fujimori government bribed judges, politicians, and the news media. "The typical bribe paid to a television channel owner was about a hundred times larger than that paid to a politician, which was somewhat larger than that paid to a judge" (69). McMillan and Zoido add that news media outlets received bribes five times larger than the total of the opposition politicians' bribes, suggesting that capturing the media is the most critical one to retain power.

Media capture theoretical framework has been applied to analyze and discuss research works in various contexts, including in Afghanistan (Relly and Zanger 2017), China (Pan 2017), Hong Kong (Frisch, Belair-Gagnon, and Agur 2018), Balkan countries (Milosavljević and Poler 2018), the Czech Republic (Vojtěchovská 2017), Hungary (Szeidl and Szucs 2021), Russia (Roudakova 2017), Turkey (Coşkun 2020), Latin America (Márquez Ramírez and Guerrero 2017), South Africa (Atal 2017), Tanzania (Powell 2017), sub-Saharan Africa (Mabweazara, Muneri, and Ndlovu 2020), and other countries. Mabweazara and Pearson (2025) have edited an important book about media capture in the context of Africa and Latin America with contributors from and/or about Ethiopia, Brazil, Ghana, Nigeria, Morocco, Chile, Mexico, Uganda, Argentina, and Colombia that demonstrates media capture as something evolving globally.

One of the specific ways in which media capture affects the media is through instrumentalization of media outlets (Roudakova 2008), where the patrons use the media to advance their own interests for political ends. For example, the patrons expect positive content about themselves and to have media to spread a negative image of one's opponents (Roudakova 2008). If patrons hold events, even if they fail to meet journalistic criteria of newsworthiness, they will not only be reported but also positively framed (Koltsova 2001). This quid pro quo relationship puts enormous pressure on editors not to offend clients or sponsors. Controlling the content of news outlets is one of the top wish-list items for many actors in society (Hardy 2019; Roudakova 2008).

The sponsors or patrons sanction media outlets for failing to meet their needs or wants or simply for a failure to show loyalty (Atal 2018; Campbell, Martin, and Fabos 2014). In such a context, journalists become subordinates to those in power who set the news agenda (Camaj 2016). Journalists become tools or "servants" to combat political and economic enemies (Camaj 2016; Roudakova 2008), "forcing their political perspective-dictated by their financial interests down journalists' throats" (Roudakova 2008, 50). In essence, clientelism breaks down the autonomy of journalism among other social institutions (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos 2002), and in a clientelist system, commitment to particular interest is stronger and the notion of common good is weaker (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 58).

Koltsova (2001) notes that the state actors may use any tools they have to influence media outlets, including sending tax police offers to scrutinize tax avoidance or fire and sanitary control units to discover wrongdoings in editorial offices, just to name a few. Other examples may involve sudden increases in rent for the buildings or a shutting down of electricity and/or water supplies. Many media outlets may violate the rules, but only those media failing to show loyalty are punished (Koltsova 2001).

Context of Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is the 9th largest country geographically in the world and has about 20 million people. The country is rich in natural resources such as oil and gas and is listed among upper-middle-income countries according to the World Bank. Kazakhstan was a part of the Soviet Union for almost 70 years until 1991, when it became an independent state. Kazakhstan was ruled by the first President Nursultan Nazarbayev for about 30 years. He resigned in 2019. He ruled the country in an authoritarian style (Kudaibergenova and Laruelle 2022) and his political decisions were "divorced from society" (441) by creating an economic and political system that privileged the elite (Ibadildin and Primiano 2024). The second president, Kasym-Jomart Tokayev, has made some changes since 2019 to become a "listening State" (Kurmanov, Selteyev, and Almaganbetov 2024). The political system is still dominated by a small group of elites (Freedom House 2024). Kazakhstan's law provides citizens the rights to participate in the political process, but the government severely limits the exercise of this right (US Department of State 2023) and political institutions are a "closed structure" (Maltseva 2021). There is strong economic inequality, as 162 persons own more than 50% of the total wealth of the population (KPMG 2019), and employment and advancement as a career official have to do with political connections and are based on loyalty (O'Connor, Knox, and Janenova 2021).

During the Soviet years, journalism served the interests of the Soviet government (Freedman 2011). Roudakova (2017) notes that Soviet journalists were journalists in name only because of their propaganda engagement. "They were unmistakably representatives of the state" (33).

It is important to acknowledge that different countries/regions have different media systems. Hallin and Mancini (2004) proposed three major models of media systems based on the analysis of countries in Western Europe and North America. They called these the Polarized Pluralist, Democratic Corporatist and Liberal models. Although Hallin and Mancini argued that the media models of Western Europe and North America tend to be the dominant ones globally, they also acknowledge that media systems of individual countries may have mixed models of media systems, and some models may fit roughly. In the context of Kazakhstan, the country does share some elements of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) conceptualization of the polarized pluralist media system, represented in Kazakhstan by a historically strong role of the state, a weak commercial media environment, and how media outlets are linked with politics. For example, some state institutions continue the Soviet-era practice of forcing their employees to subscribe to state newspapers (IREX 2013, 2019). Understanding the context of media models can explain the role of politics and other interconnected factors in how media outlets operate.

The Kazakhstan government's control of the media system was expressed in two ways: its funding, including through subsidies, and that state media outlets do not cover strikes, rallies, and protests (IREX, 2024). The IREX 2024 report notes that the state media may even create false narratives. The nature of journalistic professionalism has been analyzed in a couple of previous studies. They collectively suggest that professionalism is low in Kazakhstan not necessarily because Kazakh journalists are less educated but because of political and socioeconomic constraints. Many journalists in Kazakhstan do not follow ethics and instead engage in accepting/seeking gifts as part of their practice in journalism (Kurambayev and Freedman 2020; Kurambayev and Myssayeva 2023).

Media outlets in Kazakhstan are largely owned by the government, and although a few private media companies operate in the country, they are loyal to the government (Nussipov 2019). The Kazakhstan government spends more money on media than on the advertising industry (Nussipov 2019). Gos zakaz is essentially PR work for the government. Officially, it is aimed at increasing both the competitiveness of national news outlets and the effectiveness of state information politics. As part of this gos zakaz policy, some topics appear to be in high demand, such as the state language policy, status of the state language, the history of language, and culture, while other topics change depending on year.

Nussipov (2019) notes that the media environment in the country is "dysfunctional" because the government allocates massive funding to media outlets. According to information on Legalacts.egov.kz (2021), the government paid 187,500 tenge (roughly $400) for one minute of documentary video, 22,000 tenge (about $55) for one second of a video clip, 580 tenge (a little bit more than $1 USD) for one second of radio time. It is important to understand "gos zakaz" (state order) in Kazakhstan is a practice in which the government spends billions of tenge each year for promoting its policies through various media outlets. For example, a city administration/the central government or individual ministries may announce a tender, or solicitation, among media outlets to win a state contract to promote Policy A or Policy B. Media outlets may receive 50 or 100 million tenge in return for publishing an average of at least two or three positive articles daily about that policy for the next six months or year. There may be many "winners" or recipients in support of the same Policy A or Policy B. The more media outlets write about the government-approved themes in a positive way, the more money they receive.

The Protenge[1] telegram channel in Kazakhstan reported on July 20, 2023, that the state spent 5.2 million tenge (approximately $11,600) to produce video content about President Tokayev. The videos were supposed to be about "how many languages President Tokayev speaks" and "colleagues notice the amazing erudition of President Tokayev." However, the telegram channel reported that the videos were later deleted after its news post was published. Protenge telegram also reported on July 26, 2023, that one of the regions announced a tender for Instagram promotion in one of the regions of Kazakhstan. The akimat [mayor] wanted to spend 6 million tenge for 1,500 posts on an Instagram page with at least 53,000 subscribers. That equals almost 10 dollars USD[2] per post.

Over the years, gos zakaz has changed and currently includes online influencers/bloggers, who are now eligible to apply for gos zakaz to promote the government and its desired image, but what has not changed is the lack of transparency. The Media Law Center, a local non-governmental organization funded by international donors, created an interactive map to inform the public where and how government budget money was spent. After the interactive map was published, Kazakh authorities decided not to disclose budget distribution.

Media Capture in Kazakhstan and Resisting Media Instrumentalization

Kazakhstan has a history of using tax authorities to bankrupt certain media outlets and/or impose pressures on printing houses (IREX 2001). In some cases, media outlets faced forced change of ownership (IREX 2003). An IREX report in 2015 noted that "media

suffer a high degree of pressure and risk of being closed if the content does not correspond to official expectations" (244). Independent media outlets and journalists face online harassment, physical attacks, DDoS attacks on their sites, and other practical restrictions. News websites face blockage if they refuse to delete content requested by the authorities. Some reporters receive serious threats for their reporting. For example, independent news website Orda.kz editor Gulnara Bazhkenova received a parcel in October of 2022 containing a severed pig's head with a torn photo of herself in retribution for her investigative reporting about corruption. In another case, an independent news site ulysmedia.kz editor Samal Ibraeva received a parcel with meat and pictures of her children. A funeral wreath was delivered to the editor of another independent media outlet, Elmedia. All of these above-noted media outlets are well known for original, serious, and investigative reporting.

In 2023, Kazakhstan denied accreditation to 36 journalists of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)'s Kazakh Service, locally known as Azattyq. Azattyq is well known for independent reporting, including about corruption and other sensitive political matters. In April 2024, RFE/RL and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reportedly signed a mediation agreement. No details were publicized. Media outlets that contradict the official story or criticize the authorities do not receive a state subsidy.

Some journalists and outlets do attempt to resist the media capture despite the socioeconomic and political constraints under which they operate. Well-known journalist Erbol Mandibek resigned from his job at a state media outlet in 2020 by publicly declaring that "Kazakhstan [state media] doesn't cover people's problems – the priority there is fulfilling the authorities' instructions," an RFE/RL news report said. He is quoted as saying that he could not take "lies" and the choice between a good salary and his conscience (RFE/RL 2020). Another Kazakh journalist, Aidar Elkeyev, alone organized a picket in front of the Ministry of Finance against a "foreign agent" law proposal that would have labeled any media organizations that receive funding from foreign countries as such (KazTag 2023). In 2017, another independent journalist, Daniyar Moldabekov, staged a protest alone by wearing handcuffs to protest against proposed media law changes in Kazakhstan that would bring more restrictions. In 2022, about 60 journalists protested against media censorship in the city of Almaty, Kazakhstan (Orda.kz 2022).

Kurambayev, Myssayeva, and Freedman (2025) reported on how independent media outlets and journalists have challenged authority's decision to rename the capital city from Astana to NurSultan in honor of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev. They boycotted the new capital name until 2022, when the Kazakh government returned the capital city's name to its previous one. In 2023, a small number of journalists appealed to the country's president, prosecutor's office, and the minister of internal affairs to protect journalists who were facing a growing number of attacks (AdilSoz 2023)

When state TV broadcast the narrative that protestors were terrorists during the January 2022 nationwide protest of people demanding political change and economic opportunities, protestors attempted to push back the official narrative by carrying banners that read, "We are not terrorists" (Synovitz 2022). They stormed the buildings of state TV channels in Almaty, destroyed the equipment, and set the buildings on fire (Columbia Journalism Review 2022; IFEX 2022; Reed 2023).

Methods

This study utilizes a semi-structured qualitative interview to collect data. It is important to acknowledge that this method has some drawbacks. Respondents may hesitate to respond honestly, may provide vague responses, or may refuse to answer certain questions because they may feel uncomfortable for political, personal, or ethical concerns (Söderström, Junman, and Holdo 2024). In such situations, we attempted to clarify with follow-up questions or rephrasing initial questions. If ambiguity persisted, we took it as reluctance to continue with particular question(s) to avoid becoming "interrogators" (Lune and Berg 2017, 74). Another drawback of the qualitative interviews is that some may deceive or may have faulty memories (Brennen 2017). Preconceived notions of not only the participants of each other but also of the topic/issue being discussed could negatively affect the study (Lune and Berg 2017). This could eventually lead to a biased sample or biased conclusion (Lune and Berg 2017). We acknowledge that one should not consider respondents' experiences as "true" (Lune and Berg 2017, 67) because respondents share their own experiences and their interpretations of those experiences. Despite some drawbacks, it is still a suitable and popular method to understand respondents' experience, knowledge, and worldviews on the subject (Lindlof and Taylor 2011), especially as "journalists tend to be qualitative thinkers" (Palmer 2021, 77). The definition of who is a journalist is changing because anyone can perform journalistic activities, such as producing news content and sharing via social media and other platforms. This study defines journalists as people who cover the news or comment on public affairs in the media.

The first interview was conducted on April 4, 2023, and the last one was conducted on January 6, 2024. Four male and 15 female journalists and editors agreed to participate in this study (see Table 1). The authors used snowball and convenience sampling to reach out to several familiar members of the journalism community from previous professional connections and then sought their referrals to other eligible respondents. The participants were assured that their identifying information would not be revealed and that they participated on the basis of fully informed consent. The authors conducted four face-to-face interviews, while the rest were conducted via the online platform Zoom.

These interviews lasted from 18 min to 83 min, with an average interview being 32 min. The interviews differed in length in part because some respondents chose to skip some interview questions, while other respondents were elaborative in their responses. Researchers conducting qualitative studies involving human subjects face serious practical challenges (Janenova 2019; Jonbekova 2020; Kurmanov 2024) because some may view researchers as "spies" (Jonbekova 2020, 363). Human subjects are "half-committed" (Janenova 2019, 4). This can occur when prospective respondents are unwilling to participate in research interviews for fear of government retaliation (Freedman and Shafer 2012). Even when potential respondents agree to an interview, they "keep postponing, and changing the date of the interview, giving various reasons, and finally, might refuse at a last minute" (Janenova 2019, 4). This is especially true when research is about freedom of speech and freedom of the press, as they are among the most sensitive topics (Kurmanov 2024). Even when eligible respondents do participate in interviews, they "are reluctant to share their views openly" (Janenova 2019, 4) and exercise self-censorship.

Table 1. List of respondents.

# Respondent	Gender	Position	Type of media working	Interview method (in-person, via Zoom, etc)	Language of the interview	Years of experience
#1	Female	journalist	TV	In-person	Russian	3
#2	Female	journalist	TV	In-person	Russian	8
#3	Female	journalist	TV	In-person	Russian	8
#4	Female	editor	website	In-person	Russian	10
#5	Female	Journalist/ editor	website	via Zoom	Kazakh	17
#6_	Male	journalist	radio	via Zoom	Kazakh	28
#7	Female	journalist	Media NGO	via Zoom	Russian	20
#8	Female	journalist	newspaper	via Zoom	Kazakh	11
#9	Female	editor	newspaper	via Zoom	Kazakh	24
#10	Female	Press service	Gov't	via Zoom	Kazakh	9
#11	Female	journalist	magazine	via Zoom	Kazakh	25
#12	Female	editor	website	via Zoom	Kazakh	11
#13	Male	journalist	NGO	via Zoom	Kazakh	4
#14_	Female	Journalist/ editor	website	via Zoom	Kazakh	6
#15	Female	journalist	website	via Zoom	Kazakh	11
#16	Female	journalist	website	via Zoom	Russian	27
#17	Male	journalist	website	via Zoom	Kazakh	9
#18	Female	journalist	website	via Zoom	Kazakh	29
#19	Male	Journalist	website	via Zoom	Kazakh	23

The interviews were conducted in a combination of Russian and Kazakh languages, depending on which language the respondents felt more comfortable or preferred. One author is a Kazakh national and is fluent in the Kazakh language. All authors speak English fluently. Some interview questions included: (a) What is gos zakaz? (b) What topics/issues are covered by gos zakaz? (c) How does it affect your job? How does it affect the objectivity of reporting? (d) What conditions does the Kazakhstan government impose for being the recipient of gos zakaz? Interviews contained some other questions along with follow-up and clarifying ones. We also inquired about the implications of gos zakaz on their journalistic practices and about how media outlets are instrumentalized.

All interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the respondents and then manually transcribed. The qualitative data was analyzed by reading and re-reading responses multiple times to derive some common themes and patterns (Roulston 2014). Then themes are narrated with some direct quotations (Roulston 2014).

Findings

The findings suggest that the state policy of gos zakaz has turned Kazakhstan's journalism into a powerful propaganda machine. It promotes government propaganda and stifles any criticism by depriving the right of the public not only to know what is happening in their own country but also the opportunity to be exposed to a pluralism of ideas and viewpoints on public matters affecting everyone. It also de-professionalizes journalism practice. All these directly and/or indirectly "impairs the public's informed participation in public affairs, blocks movement toward democratization, shields dictatorial rulers, and enables nepotism, corruption, and favoritism to flourish" (Freedman 2011, 8).

De-Professionalization: Journalists or Content Creators?

This theme refers to the idea that Kazakhstan's state gos zakaz policy promotes de-professionalization in journalism. This finding contributes to a wave of other study arguments of de-professionalism in journalism (Besbris and Petre 2020; Splichal and Dahlgren 2016; Wang and Meng 2023; Zajc and Lukan 2024), especially as journalism programs prepare students to be "content creators" rather than journalists (Besbris and Petre 2020) and today's journalists are less prepared in interviewing, critical thinking, and understanding newsworthiness (Ferrucci 2018). The concepts of "professionalism" and "professionalization" have always been subject to sharp debate (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 33). Hallin and Mancini (2004) note that three dimensions of professionalization include (1) autonomy, (2) distinct professional norms such as ethical principles, and (3) public service orientation. Dedicating oneself to serve the public is one of the elements of professionalism (Ward 2015). Gos zakaz also kills the idea of objectivity in reporting, or at least the idea of giving an opportunity for opposing points of view in news reporting. In the case of gos zakaz articles, Kazakh journalists are expected to avoid any negative content or anything perceived to be negative, thus leaving working journalists to produce only positive articles praising the government policies and programs and the authorities. It also encourages ethical misbehavior. Specifically, journalists fulfill the gos zakaz act in the interests of the state by voluntarily losing professional autonomy and damaging the credibility of journalism in general. Gos zakaz decreases the plurality of news sources for Kazakhstan's journalists, creates a culture of dependency on the state for funding and for editorial guidance, promotes the perception among the upcoming generation of journalists that the government and/or officials must regularly pay via "gos zakaz" for positive press coverage, and that journalists must seek guidance about what to cover and what to avoid covering. This gos zakaz policy also disrupts the market logic among media outlets competing for audience attention and for the limited advertisers in the media market. Cumulatively and in the long term, this gos zakaz effectively de-professionalizes journalism practice.

Research respondents consistently spoke about how the state is not interested in the professional growth of journalists, so it is beneficial for the political system to give state orders and that journalists should write what they are told based on the approved list of themes rather than having journalists pitch ideas to their immediate supervisors. Journalists are also provided with a list of experts that they are expected to consult and interview those experts when they need quotes/soundbites. When journalists propose different ideas for writing, they are told to work on gos zakaz only. This finding resembles a study about news-making in Russia by Kovalev (2021) where he quotes a former senior manager about weekly meetings of senior managers of media outlets in Russia as saying "what they do is brief these managers for the week to come: what subjects to cover and from which angle and which subjects are off-limits" (Kovalev 2021, 2908).

One respondent quoted his supervisor when the journalist proposed independent ideas for potential articles as saying "[pitching ideas] this would be a problem for us, and you no longer have time to complete the government order[ed] materials, so do it." Another respondent added, "this needs to be written outside of working hours, not at work." The implication is that journalists are expected to work only on gos zakaz during working hours. Another respondent also noted, "middle-aged people have families

and their own personal lives, so it will be difficult to devote personal time to them. A person experiences professional fatigue. Those who work under government orders understand that they are not free." These journalists' quotes support the idea that Kazakh journalists are discouraged from pursuing their independent ideas. Even when journalists manage to write their own stories, they would not be able to publish their stories in their own media outlets unless they chose to publish their works under a fake name with independent media outlets to avoid being revealed that they are associated with independent media outlets. Some journalists do publish their own independent works under fake names (Kurambayev and Myssayeva 2023).

In the long term, journalists grow professionally, thinking and learning that journalism is only about covering government activities and nothing else, or at least approval from the authorities must be sought before pursuing non-governmental story ideas. The growing journalists gradually lose the idea that journalists work for the audience and that the audience wants quality and relevant content. "Your work and time will go in vain, you will think to yourself if you write in the way different than what they want," said one female journalist, using "them" in reference to the government officials. "If a certain event or emergency occurs in society, you will not be able to write about [it]. This is because it is not on the list of approved topics by the government order," said another working journalist. One female journalist said that "you work for the government and the government buys your journalistic work. It comes with certain restrictions and requirements."

Speaking of specific examples from restrictions, one respondent noted,

we wrote about opening a new school but we were not allowed to write that the school lacks chairs or the construction is not fully completed [at the time of the opening]. If you write about it, it will not be published. Then self-censorship strengthens. This is why you take a photo from outside [of the school building], not inside.

This explains why people do not see everyday problems discussed in the pages of newspapers, on TV, and on news sites unless the content ends with a statement that the government has found a solution to the problems being discussed. "Gos zakaz stops them all," said one journalist. "Even among colleagues, when we suggest that we explore new heroes for our articles, some say that [we should] explore how to write lengthy articles to get more money from gos zakaz."

Army of Propaganda Promoters

This theme discusses how Kazakhstan's media outlets promote the state narrative and state ideology while preventing other issues from arising in public discussions. The two most important elements of state propaganda in Kazakhstan's media environment should be noted. First, the state is overwhelming the media environment with its government-sponsored content. Second, the state uses gos zakaz to promote its official narrative when a crisis hits the country and distract the public. In other words, the state weaponizes its gos zakaz to silence certain issues from appearing in public domains. For example, Kazakhstan faced nationwide unrest in January 2022, known as Bloody January. Bloody January was a series of nationwide protests in which people came out to the streets in Kazakhstan cities demanding jobs, improvement of living conditions, and political freedom, among others. The official narrative was that these are "terrorists" rather than

citizens demanding improvements in their lives. In situations like this, media outlets that receive gos zakaz remain silent and obey the government in promoting its official narrative. The state used its official narrative through media outlets to persuade people about happenings in the country. As one respondent noted,

media outlets promote [the] official narrative without giving the protestors a chance to speak up in media outlets. Not only that, they are portrayed as bad people. This is how the public agenda emerges and shapes public opinion. For example, provocations are using employees of X or Y company to protest and promote [an] anti-government mood.

Or, "If there is a problem [in the public], then gos zakaz articles begin appearing how Akim [mayor] is working hard to solve the problem."

One journalist noted that 90% of his news website is filled with gos zakaz content, while another female journalist working for a newspaper noted that 6 or 7 pages out of a total of 8 pages are filled with gos zakaz. Another female journalist shared her experience at a time when she had to write only gos zakaz content nonstop for three months.

> Different ministries agree [to a different] timeline when one ministry expects more to publish during certain period of time. For example, [the] ministry of emergencies does not order anything between January 1-March 1. However, after the weather gets warm and snow starts melting and more problems start emerging because of melting snows, then ministry activates its gos zakaz,

said one female TV journalist working in the city of Almaty. Another respondent noted,

[The] Ministry of X or Y may have 45 articles per month, another ministry may have 50 articles per month," depending on their funding and other requirements. As one respondent noted, "it is the money from the state budget … to prevent [a] protesting mood in society.

The gos zakaz has been integrated into newsroom operations so much that it has become a motto at least for one media company. "Our [company] motto … is to finish gos zakaz," said one female TV journalist. She added that they had a board hanging on the wall and, with a marker, their motto written there for everyone to see.

Discussion/Conclusion

This study analyzed the context of Kazakhstan, a country in Central Asia where little journalism scholarship has appeared in international peer venues due to political and other reasons. Its journalism is produced in the context where the government is the primary or sole information provider and the largest advertiser. Specifically, this study examined how the government subsidies make some information easily and ubiquitously available when the state wants the public to consume certain types of information paid from the taxpayers' money.

However, people face increasingly high "search costs" (Zahariadis 2013, 61) to access alternative information, while independent media outlets and journalists face practical challenges to do their jobs, including cyberattacks on their websites and social media accounts, strict regulations, direct and/or indirect censorship, threats, physical intimidations, attacks or harassment, among others. Gandy (1981) noted that information and knowledge have not only economic value but also political value, and people's lack of information about certain important matters can be used as a tool to control the

actions of people. In this regard, Kazakhstan's government is well invested in "information subsidies," so the official narrative dominates the media discourse. And these subsidies are intended to preserve the power of the authorities (Dragomir 2018; Picard 2013) rather than empowering the public with essential information for them to actively engage in political discussions. "An information subsidy is an attempt to produce influence over the actions of others by controlling their access to and use of information relevant to those actions" (Gandy 1981, 61).

As this study's findings suggest, the state policy has a devastating effect on the press freedom in the country, including the potential for deep social inequalities, lack of informed citizenship, transparent governance, and accountability of abuses of power by the political elite (Mabweazara and Pearson 2025). Freedom of the press is instrumental in protecting human rights, corruption, abuse of power, discrimination, and others. In this regard, journalism is a profession with a democratic function, and that carries special responsibilities to guard the people's right to know (Keeble 2001). Journalism should expose and fight the forces that manipulate public debate (Ward 2015, 309). Good journalism can bring the bad guys down and defend the powerless, who could not fight back without journalists on their side (Usher 2021). Di Tella and Franceschelli (2011) cite other works that argue the introduction of investigative reporting was linked to decreased corruption in society and thus increased government accountability. So, Kazakhstan's government intervention in the media environment is leading to what Murschetz (2013) called "net welfare losses to society," especially as it is unlikely that the public has an appetite for state-sponsored media content in Kazakhstan and that media outlets publishing state-sponsored content normally are not interested in ratings, circulation figures, or audience feedback. Audience metrics do and should matter. Otherwise, these subsidies are a waste of taxpayers' money (Murschetz 2013).

This finding should be analyzed in relation to the public suggestion and discussion of potentially closing all journalism programs in the country because they are perceived to be failing to prepare qualified journalists and that aspiring journalists do not get proper professional mentoring during their internships (Kurambayev and Issenov 2022). Kazakhstan's state policy of gos zakaz is also promoting de-professionalism in journalism. This de-professionalism is occurring at a time when international media organizations (such as Internews Network, OSCE, individual embassies of foreign governments, etc.) invest funding to promote quality journalism in Kazakhstan and wider Central Asia by holding regular theoretical and practical trainings for local journalists, including training with experienced international colleagues.

Gos zakaz is threatening independent media by financially supporting media outlets loyal to the state and thus indirectly punishing critical ones. One cannot have a sustainable independent media operation without long-term financial stability, especially in a context where receiving grants/funding from foreign entities is increasingly becoming risky because of "foreign agent" laws in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan does not have a history of people donating money to support media outlets, and there is little or no media subscription culture in Kazakhstan and wider Central Asia. Under such a context, the state's financial influence appears to be effective and strong. Some individual journalists and media outlets "fight" in their own ways against state influence by refusing to apply for and receive state funding. This has created a division among the country's journalism community, "us" vs. "them" referring to media outlets receiving gos zakaz.

Prat (2015) notes that media capture is harder when a country has media plurality in the existence of a large number of independent media outlets, and transaction costs, where Prat refers to the checks and balances that reduce the government's ability to reward favorable media outlets and punish critical ones. Kazakhstan and the wider Central Asia region are where the obligation of citizens to the state is emphasized more than protection of citizens (Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018) while laws increasingly focus on protecting regimes (Kangas 2018). "News media has holdup power in a way that a politician or judge does not have" (McMillan and Zoido 2004, 86). McMillan and Zoido (2004) note that the ultimate constraint on any democratic government is the citizenry as a whole (87).

Limitations and Future Studies

This study has several weaknesses. First, this study relied on a relatively small number of respondents. Second, this study used a semi-structured qualitative interview that it is vulnerable for criticism, as the respondents may deliberately try to please the interviewer or may have faulty memory (Fontana and Frey 2000), try to purposely mislead the interviewers in their responses (Miller and Glassner 2004) or may exaggerate about their experiences (Lindlof and Taylor 2011). Third, it is unclear whether this study's findings can have any applicability beyond the context of Kazakhstan.

Notes

1. https://t.me/s/protenge.
2. The typical monthly salary of a journalist in the country is approximately 300,000 tenge (approximately, 700 USD).

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