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## The political aspects of eco-activism in Kazakhstan: challenges and opportunities

**Abstract.** *This article examines the political aspects of environmental activism in Kazakhstan. The authors emphasize that environmental problems are becoming increasingly relevant for Kazakh society, especially if political factors contribute to the development of the environmental movement. The article analyzes the relationship between environmental activism and the possibility of dialogue between civil society institutions and state structures in Kazakhstan and also gives examples of the participation of environmental activists from the government and civil society in the implementation of environmental protection projects. The authors also discuss the role of civil society and international organizations in the struggle for environmental protection in Kazakhstan. In conclusion, the authors emphasize that environmental issues should be included in the political dialogue in Kazakhstan to ensure the sustainability and conservation of natural resources for the benefit of future generations of the country.*

**Keywords:** *eco-activism, pandemics, governance, political movements, agenda.*

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### Introduction

The Club of Rome was the pioneer in the announcement of environmental problems globally in the late 60s, and especially in the 70s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and laid the theoretical basis for the current ideas of sustainable development. The reports «The Limits to Growth» by Dennis L. Meadows, «Mankind at the Turning Point» by Laszlo Ervin «Beyond the Age of Waste» by Gabor Denes aroused understanding, but also criticism in the ranks of the scientific and cultural elite of that time. From that years that became a priority on the international agenda. The UN response was that in 1972 a program for environmental protection UNEP appeared in the global governance, in the 70s green parties began to emerge in the political arena, which are now becoming significant political forces in many European countries.

This study attempts to consider Kazakhstan's experience in promoting environmental awareness and eco-activism as well as lessons learned from ecological related activities. Kazakhstan is one of the countries that demonstrate a high degree of concern for ecology and the natural environment. The task of the state is not only to eliminate the consequences of environmental disasters, but also to inform the population about the need to preserve the ecological cleanliness of the environment, as well as about the principles of an environmentally responsible lifestyle.

One example of promoting environmental awareness in Kazakhstan is the Green Activist campaign. This initiative, launched several years ago, encourages the citizens of Kazakhstan to take an active part in environmental projects and contribute to the preservation of the environment. For example, activists report introducing houseplants, using environmentally friendly hygiene products, and reducing the use of single-use plastic products.

Kazakhstan also hosts events dedicated to World Ecology Day. Such events help raise environmental awareness and draw attention to environmental issues.

An important factor in the success of environmental activities in Kazakhstan is the participation of private and public organizations that work in the field of environmental protection. They introduce environmentally friendly technologies, conduct environmental education activities and promote the formation of an environmentally literate consciousness in the public.

The lesson that Kazakhstan has learned from its environmental activities is that nothing is more important than the public health and sustainable development of the country. The elimination of environmental problems must be considered as one of the priorities, which requires not only the participation of the state, but also the support of the public, private organizations, and the scientific community.

## Methodology

The examination of the settled above issues will be conducted via interviews/surveys data, as well as the governmental policies on the topic (as primary sources). The eco-activism experiences are assessed through the primary and secondary sources. The SWAT analyses will be performed to detect advantageous and disadvantageous sides of the issues, accompanied by the data provided by statistical agencies.

Surveys aim to reflect upon the citizens' visions of eco-activism in Kazakhstan/Almaty; policies will reflect the status quo in decision-making; and secondary resources will provide the discourse and media coverage of the issue.

All three methods would serve as a ground for multiple approached study of the problem.

The novelty of the article is determined by the rather insufficiently studied topic of eco-activism in Kazakhstan through the prism of political activity. Previously, eco-activism has been studied as a social phenomenon, the influence of Western green policies and the range of environmental problems Kazakhstan faces. The shift from resource and environmental rhetoric is the focus of this study, since the purpose of the article is to consider eco-activism as one of the forms of political movement, covering wide layers of the population regardless their social, gender, ethnic and gender belonging.

The main questions of the research relate to the forms of environmental activism, the qualitative characteristics of its participants, awareness of the population in the above topic, as well as forecasts of the conditions of environmental activism in the future.

Using the example of existing environmental projects done by civil society institutions or/and business, their leaders, the involvement and coverage of the population in relevant projects, as well as the current state policies involved in solving environmental problems [1], we hypothesize that, with due attention and support from all stakeholders, the environmental movement can become a unifying platform for the formation of a sustainable thinking fully consistent with the goals of sustainable development proposed by the UN.

## Literature Review

Kazakhstan is a resource-rich country that also faces significant environmental challenges. Over the past few decades, the country has experienced an evolution in environmental activism, as citizens have become increasingly aware of and concerned about pollution, water scarcity, and other environmental issues [2]. Here are some key findings from the literature on the topic:

The Soviet-era approach to the environment was characterized by a focus on industrialization and economic growth, with little regard for environmental damage. After gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan faced severe pollution and environmental degradation due to decades of unsustainable practices. This legacy has influenced the development of environmental activism in the country [3].

In Kazakhstan, the state has historically played a dominant role in environmental management, with civil society and NGOs having limited capacity and freedoms. However, over the past decade, NGOs have become increasingly active in advocating for environmental protection, and the government has implemented some policies to address environmental concerns [4].

Major environmental concerns in Kazakhstan include air pollution from industry and transportation, water scarcity and contamination, and deforestation. There is also growing concern about the impact of extractive industries such as oil and gas on the environment and public health [5].

Environmental activism in Kazakhstan takes various forms, including protests, advocacy campaigns, community organizing, and legal action. Some activists use social media and other online platforms to mobilize support for environmental causes [6].

Environmental activists in Kazakhstan face significant challenges, including harassment and intimidation by authorities, limited access to information and funding, and public apathy or lack of awareness about environmental issues [7]. However, there are also opportunities for collaboration between civil society, government, and the private sector to develop sustainable solutions to environmental challenges [8].

Overall, the literature suggests that environmental activism in Kazakhstan is evolving in response to the country's complex environmental challenges and changing political and social contexts. More research is needed to understand the factors that shape environmental activism in Kazakhstan and its potential impact on environmental policy and practice.

## **Discussion and Findings**

A sufficient number of environmental projects and initiatives have been implemented in Kazakhstan, among which the following can be called key:

- Green Academy is an organization that focuses on environmental education and sustainable development skills.
- The Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative is a project that contributes to the conservation and restoration of steppe ecosystems and the sustainable development of the Central Asian region [9].
- Zhasyl Kazakhstan is a national environmental initiative aimed at creating a clean and green living environment for people, developing and shaping an environmental culture [10].
- «Eco-Damu» is a project that contributes to the sustainable development of rural areas of Kazakhstan. It develops and implements innovative systems in the field of energy, nature conservation, ecotourism and agriculture [11].
- «Tazalyk» platform is an environmental organization created to create conditions for people to live and live in an ecologically clean environment. The organization is engaged in environmental education, conducts environmental campaigns and events [12].
- The Green Economy Financing Facility for Kazakhstan (GEFF) is a program that supports financing of sustainable development activities in Kazakhstan through the active participation of banks and is calculated to receive environmental benefits from financial investments [13].

As a case study on the state of eco-activism in Kazakhstan, the cases of Kok-Zhalau and Bozshyra will be included in the examples.

Kok-Zhailau (translated from Kazakh as "heavenly pasture-land") is a unique 1000-hectare natural landmark between the Small and Large Almaty gorges near Almaty, the largest city in Kazakhstan and its former capital. It is the habitat of many rare and relict animals and plants, including snow leopards, mountain tulips, wild apple and other vulnerable or rare species.

For many years, the landfill has received domestic and industrial waste, which has led to significant environmental pollution, including water and air. A number of environmental and civil society organizations are actively working with local authorities and the community to address the pollution problem in Kok Zhailau.

Several organizations are conducting scientific research to study the state of the environment in Kok-Zhailau [14]. For example, in 2018, at the initiative of the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, monitoring stations were installed in the district to monitor air quality [15]. The results of the research showed that the level of air pollution in this area is significantly higher than the average for the city.

A number of organizations are also working on the ground to draw attention to the problem of pollution in Kok-Zhailau and at the national level. For example, the National Ecological Society "Green Salvation" [16] conducts campaigns, conducts actions, publishes materials in the media and uses social networks to inform the public about the problems associated with Kok-Zhailau [17].

In addition, specific actions were taken to solve the Kok-Zhailau problem. In 2019, the government of Kazakhstan decided to create a fund within the framework of the Nurly Zhol Presidential Program. The fund will finance various projects to restore the area, including waste management and soil cleanup projects.

Many people with different backgrounds and professions united to stop the planned construction of the ski resort. The main idea was to keep Kok-Zhailau wild and do not damage biodiversity as many scientists insisted that they are lungs of the megapolis. It was in the Ile-Alatau state national park, but in 2010 it was moved off from the protected area territory for the construction of the resort.

Also, the concern was that it was not in compliance with the UN's Aarhus Convention signed by Kazakhstan in 1998 ensuring public participation in the decision-making in relation to the construction of a ski resort in the Kok-Zhailau area.

The Kazakh government and the public are showing their interest and are taking action to combat the environmental problems in the area. Therefore, the petition for defending Kok-Zhailau received more than 30 thousand signatures by November 21, 2018 [18].

The confrontation lasted for about 7 years and the victory of civil society can be considered on October 29, 2019, when the President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev banned the construction of the Kokzhailau resort. It was a serious victory of eco-activists in Kazakhstan.

The Bozzyra problem in Kazakhstan is an environmental pollution problem associated with the processing of petroleum products and petrochemicals in the region of the city of Atyrau on the western coast of the Caspian Sea. Pandemic 2020, the popularization of places on Instagram has given impetus to the development of domestic tourism and interest in unusual places in Mangystau has increased.

The Bozzyra landmark belongs to the Karakiya district of the Mangystau region and is located 300 kilometers from the regional center - Aktau.

This section of the Ustyurt plateau represents vast desert landscapes of limestone deposits, ornamental rocks 250 meters high named "Fangs". It is a place where it is possible to find the remains of fossilized shells, sea urchins, cephalopods - belemnites and even teeth of prehistoric sharks from the times of the Mesozoic ocean Tethys [19].

In place of the ancient ocean, limestone outliers and canyons appeared, which is now one of the «pearls» and «visiting cards» of Mangystau, and of Kazakhstan as a whole. There are archeological monuments in the tract - from the Paleolithic to the early Middle Ages. This unique and wild area was known to a rather narrow circle of tourists, mainly from Russia.

In 2020, it became known about plans to build a boutique hotel near the famous "Fangs" landmark on Ustyurt plateau. This fact has become a new impetus for strengthening eco-activism. Many eco-activists of the Kok-Zhailau movement, having experience in achieving their goals, switched their efforts on unique Bozzyra in the desire to leave it wild and without the construction of hotels, which could disrupt the ecosystem of this place.

Several environmental movements and organizations in Kazakhstan have taken important steps in recent years to address this issue. Some of them include:



- Kazakhstan Society for the Protection of Nature - an organization that actively fights for the protection of the environment and nature in Kazakhstan. It has held many activities to raise public awareness of the Bozzhyra issue, especially on social media and digital media [20].
- Green Shores of the Caspian - an environmental movement founded in 2019 to combat environmental problems in the Caspian Sea region, including the problem of Bozzhyra. The movement actively supports the initiatives of the authorities and public organizations in the fight against this problem.
- The Association for Environmental Protection is a non-governmental organization dealing with environmental problems in Kazakhstan. It works at the level of regional authorities and public services to ensure strict control over compliance with environmental and environmental standards.

Many other groups and movements are also focused on solving the Bozzhyra problem in Kazakhstan. For example, there are Facebook groups such as «Fighting Ecological Disaster in Kazakhstan» that share information and news about the issue, as well as fundraisers and PR events.

Summary statistics related to the work on the Bozzhyra problem have not yet been officially published [21]. However, the latest official statements from the authorities of Kazakhstan declare large-scale cooperation with society, environmental organizations and specialized highly qualified specialists who continue to analyze the situation and take measures to make the natural environment around Bozzhyra clean and safe.

The current situation is not clear. Eco-activists had interim victory, the hotel will be not built close to Bozzhyra, but anyway the construction plans are still valid. Therefore, it is probably a new destination where eco-activism will prove its soft power and get the real result.

The research on Eco-activism in Kazakhstan at present has involved 153 respondents mainly from Almaty city. Among them, 39% of them are male whereas 61% are female respondents. Almost 89% of the respondents were young people between 18 and 35, whereas 10% were between 36 and 50, and those over 50 composed 1%. It should be noted that 90% of the respondents were employed or self-employed people, 9% were studying at education institutions, and the remaining 1% was an unemployed.

Regarding one of the core issues of this study, the participation in eco-activism events in Almaty, 46% of the respondents indicated their regular involvement. Moreover, 44% of the respondents noted their occasional attendance of abovementioned arrangements and 10% have never engaged such activities.

It is interesting to note that 50% of the respondents were learning about environmentalism and the environment, 35% were involved in a local environmental activism group, and only 15% were attending environmental activism rallies, strikes, and marches. Notably, 57,7% named water and air pollution as the biggest environmental concerns facing Kazakhstan today, while 26,9% mentioned recycling, 26,9% indicated radiation from nuclear testing sites, 25% viewed shrinking of the Aral Sea and yet 42.3% recognized all above causes. Based on the data, we may suggest that 42% of respondents believe current eco-activism efforts in addressing these concerns are affective, 38% deny efficiency of the latter and 22% abstained.

It is important to say that 60% of respondents believe that governmental policy interventions should be taken to address environmental issues in Kazakhstan, while 40% consider financing support measures to be more effective. It is also notable that slightly less than half of the respondents, 40%, believe eco-activism has had a significant impact on public policy in Kazakhstan, 30% expressed opposite opinion and 30% were uncertain.

Finally, 61% of survey participants noticed an increase in public awareness and concern for environmental issues in Kazakhstan in recent years, whilst 21% didn't view the increase, and 18% were not sure.

The claimed methodological framework included the SWOT analysis on eco-activism in Kazakhstan, the assessment of which can be observed in the following table 1:

Table 1. SWOT analysis on eco-activism in Kazakhstan

<b>Strengths</b> - Growing awareness of climate change in Kazakhstan, including Kazakhstan's participation in the Paris Climate Agreement - Existence of international cooperation at the local level to support and develop eco-activism - Increased demand for environmental goods and services in the country, which can create opportunities for businesses and organizations in this area	<b>Weaknesses</b> - Lack of specific government policies, measures and funding to support development in the field of eco-activism - Lack of awareness and understanding of the population about the problems associated with climate change and the need to eliminate environmental problems - Insufficient level of civic engagement and participation in the implementation of projects related to environmental protection
<b>Opportunities</b> - Opportunity to attract international investment in projects in the field of eco-activism - Opportunity to collaborate with other countries and organizations working in the field of climate and environmental protection to share knowledge and transfer best practices - Opportunity to increase the range of potential customers for businesses and organizations working in the field of ecology and nature conservation	<b>Threats</b> - Difficulties in obtaining funding and government support for eco-activism projects in Kazakhstan - The impact of the activities of industrial companies on the environment and the need for better regulation and control of these activities - Lack of a legislative framework that can support the activities of organizations and businesses in the field of ecology and nature management in Kazakhstan
Compiled by authors	

This is not an exhaustive list of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for eco-activism in Kazakhstan, however this SWOT analysis provides an overview of the current situation and how opportunities can be seized and threats in this area can be overcome.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that eco-activism in Kazakhstan is a relatively new phenomenon, and its political aspects can be different and varied. Recommendations for improving the state of eco-activism in Kazakhstan may include the following:

- Coordination with local authorities, which can facilitate the organization of eco-activist events.
- Search for appropriate financial and technical resources for the development and implementation of environmental protection projects.
- Constructive establishment of cooperation between state and civil structures in the field of environmental protection.
- Achieving an understanding of the importance of environmental protection and related issues of social mobilization and awareness at the country level.

Optimization and improvement of the institutional form of organization of work on environmental protection, including the sustainability and transparency of state and non-state authorities.

One of the main opportunities for eco-activists in Kazakhstan is the growing economic need for more sustainable development, increasing the level of environmental education of the population and raising international awareness of environmental issues in the country. For example, as options, it is possible to propose to the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic and the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan to introduce into the

educational process the mandatory passage of full-fledged disciplines, such as “ecology” and “sustainable development”.

A few recommendations for improving eco-activism in Kazakhstan from a political perspective include:

- Improving political institutions, taking into account the interests of civil organizations, NGOs, independent experts, civil activists and ordinary citizens:
- Development of a more effective mechanism for dialogue and cooperation between state and civil organizations:
- Creation of working groups and organizations to provide resources for eco-activists and assist them in matters related to environmental protection:
- Increased funding and technical support for work related to environmental protection in Kazakhstan. This may include financial support from both government and non-government organizations.

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### **Қазақстандағы экологиялық белсенділіктің саяси аспектілері: қиындықтар мен мүмкіндіктер**

**Аңдатпа.** Бұл мақала Қазақстандағы экологиялық белсенділіктің саяси аспектілерін қарастырады. Авторлар экологиялық проблемалардың қазақ қоғамы үшін өзектілігі артып келе жатқанын, әсіресе экологиялық қозғалыстың дамуына саяси факторлар ықпал ететінін атап көрсетеді. Мақалада экологиялық белсенділік пен Қазақстандағы азаматтық қоғам институттары мен мемлекеттік құрылымдар арасындағы диалог мүмкіндігінің өзара байланысы талданады, сонымен қатар қоршаған ортаны қорғау жобаларын жүзеге асыруға үкімет пен азаматтық қоғам белсенділерінің қатысуына мысалдар келтірілген. Авторлар сонымен қатар Қазақстандағы қоршаған ортаны қорғау үшін күресте азаматтық қоғам мен халықаралық ұйымдардың ролін талқылайды. Қорытындылай келе, авторлар еліміздің болашақ ұрпақтарының игілігі үшін табиғи ресурстардың тұрақтылығы мен сақталуын қамтамасыз ету үшін Қазақстандағы саяси диалогқа экологиялық мәселелерді енгізу керектігін атап көрсетеді.

**Түйін сөздер:** экобелсенділік, пандемия, басқару, саяси қозғалыстар.

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### **Политические аспекты экоактивизма в Казахстане: вызовы и возможности**

**Аннотация.** В данной статье рассматриваются политические аспекты экологического активизма в Казахстане. Авторы подчеркивают, что экологические проблемы становятся все более актуальными для казахстанского общества, особенно если политические факторы содействуют развитию экологического движения. Статья анализирует связь между экологическим активизмом и



возможностью диалога между институтами гражданского общества и государственными структурами в Казахстане, а также приводит примеры участия экологических активистов со стороны правительства и гражданского общества по реализации проектов по охране окружающей среды. Авторы также обсуждают роль гражданского общества и международных организаций в борьбе за охрану окружающей среды в Казахстане. В заключении авторы подчеркивают, что вопросы экологии должны быть включены в политический диалог в Казахстане, чтобы обеспечить устойчивость и сохранение природных ресурсов в интересах будущих поколений страны.

**Ключевые слова:** экоактивизм, пандемия, управление, политические движения.

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