



Lund University
Department of Sociology
Bachelor in Development Studies

Understanding the concept of democracy among the youth The Case of Kazakhstan

Author: Sara Bilgen

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Supervisor: Olle Frödin

Abstract

Many studies have been conducted in recent years to assess democratic support around the world. In Kazakhstan, however, survey results have produced contradictory results. Democracy is a broad and complicated concept with numerous interpretations. To determine people's actual desire for democracy, we must first understand the concept they have in mind. By conducting qualitative interviews with open-ended questions, this study aims to study the in-depth meanings behind the concept of democracy among the young people in Kazakhstan. This study uses an interpretive framework of social constructivism in which individuals seek to understand their world and develop their own unique meanings that correspond to their experience. The findings are analyzed and categorized by three distinct definitions of democracy: Dahl's definition of democracy as focusing on governmental procedures, Diamond's definition of democracy as liberty and freedom, and Huber's definition of democracy as equal social benefits. The findings suggest that young people place their emphasis on Diamond's definition of democracy as liberty and freedom, and Huber's definition of democracy as equal social benefits. Overall, the young people support the concept of democracy, but they believe that Kazakhstan is not ready for full democracy yet.

Key words: democracy, public opinion, Kazakhstan, young people, social constructivism, meanings of democracy.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The problem

Various studies have found evidence of almost universal public support for democracy. The analysis of mass attitudes toward democracy around the world has received a lot of attention from scholars over the last two decades. The majority of empirical research in the postcommunist region has concentrated on Eastern Europe and Russia, while Central Asia has received less attention when examining political support (Nikolayenko, 2010). Most of the information available on public support for democracy is available from public surveys. Nonetheless, public opinion surveys on the support for democracy in Kazakhstan had contradictory results. According to particular findings, the public is favorable towards democracy (Rose 2002; Nikolayenko 2011), while others have come to the conclusion that the majority do not support it (Lubin and Joldasov 2010; Junisbai 2017) or that there is not a strong call for democracy in Kazakhstan (Roberts, 2012). Others suggest that the Central Asian view of democracy is different from the ‘Western view of democracy’. They want democracy as in social and economic benefits, rather than multiple political parties or competitive elections (Stronski and Zanca 2019). The results from this literature have strongly varied due to the wording of the survey questions. Democracy is a contested concept with various meanings attached to it. To determine people’s actual desire for democracy, we need to find out what concept people have in mind when they rate democracy’s importance. Following the results from literature, the aim of this research is to explain the inconsistency in data by conducting in-depth discussions with the locals and exploring the concepts and meanings they attach to democracy.

1.2 Aim and Research Questions

In recent years, many studies have been conducted to measure the democratic support in Africa, Latin America and around the globe. However, very little attention has been given to the analysis of democratic support in Central Asian countries, where the legacy of communism has its own impact on attitudes towards democracy (Look, 2020).

Public opinion surveys have explored conceptions of democracy among ordinary citizens and documented high support levels for democracy in Kazakhstan. However, these surveys limit the answers of the participants by asking only close-ended questions. Democracy is a complicated concept, having numerous meanings that evoke different meanings for different people. In order to determine people's actual desire for democracy, we need to understand the concept people have in mind.

This paper aims to explore the in-depth meanings and opinions behind the concept of democracy by conducting qualitative interviews with open-ended questions. Open-ended questions are more likely to give people the freedom to give their own interpretations of democracy. The close-ended questions only provide options to determine what types of democratic conceptions are most and least popular among ordinary citizens. Therefore, this paper aims to address the question of how ordinary people understand democracy.

This research will answer the following research questions:

- 1) *What is the attitude towards democracy among young people in Kazakhstan?*
- 2) *Which aspects do they emphasize in their definitions of democracy?*

1.3 Development Perspective

1.3.1 SDG 16: Democracy and Peacebuilding

There is a widespread debate about the linkages between democracy and sustainable development. The SDG 16 framework, which aims to create institutions of peace, justice, and inclusion, covers important aspects of democratic institutions. SDG 16 was developed to ensure that the right steps were taken to achieve peace, justice, and strong institutions to support and ensure the sustainability of development structures at national levels. National contexts are the basis for the progress of the development agenda. SDG 16 is both the result and an enabler of sustainable development. Its main objectives are to ensure that everyone has access to justice and to create inclusive, effective, and transparent institutions at all levels. According to Consuegra,

the development of a nation depends on a successful combination of democracy and sustainable development (Consuegra, 2020).

1.3.2 Development Challenges

Kazakhstan has a long history of political oppression, which makes it hard to conduct research and collect reliable data. For decades, the government has been going after political opponents and stopping any kind of civil activism. Journalists, activists, and anyone who criticizes the government are imprisoned or punished by law. The long history of political oppression has made society self-reserved and cautious. People are afraid to talk about politics and express their political views in public. Therefore, they might be reluctant or scared to give an interview or might filter their answers. This has been the most important development challenge I came across during the interview process. While conducting interviews, I noticed that some of the interviewees were hesitant to answer political questions. Some of them avoided answering the question directly and changed the topic of the conversation, while some of them asked me to skip the question. Even though major progress has been made in regards to freedom of expression and freedom of speech, people are still very cautious about political topics. I attempted to gain their trust by assuring them that the interview would be conducted anonymously, that the results would be used solely for academic purposes, and that any data gathered from the interviews would not be shared with third parties.

1.4 The relevance of the research

The Central Asian nations haven't made as much progress toward democracy as many Western officials had hoped they would after the fall of the Soviet Union. Despite the authoritarian government, Central Asian societies are gradually becoming more pluralistic. Recent years have seen a significant transformation in the region. Kazakhstan has been going through a political awakening. The wave of sociopolitical activism and protests has led to the biggest political upheaval in 2022 since the independence of the country. Growing dissatisfaction with the government reflects the frustration of people with corruption, inequality, and worsening living conditions. This new wave of political activism is the result of years of growing discontent with how the country has been governed. Years of false promises about eliminating corruption and

improving living conditions didn't lead to any improvement in the living standards of the ordinary citizens (Stronski and Zanka, 2019).

The urgency of youth socialization is great for societies—like Kazakhstan—that have experienced massive political, social, and economic transformation, all in a very short period of time. Indeed, youth have been a primary target of the Kazakhstani government's ongoing efforts at nation and state building. The younger generation of Kazakhs have been brought up since the country became independent, and their views regarding their own lives and various aspects of public life are of great interest to researchers and experts. The main reason for this is that these young people have had entirely new experiences of growing up. On the one hand, there are those aged 30 or over who have lived with their parents through the economic crisis and havoc following the collapse of the Soviet Union, but on the other hand, there are those aged from 18 to 30, who have grown up during a period of economic growth and stable development for the country. There is no doubt that their different experiences of socialization have had an effect on their opinions and behavior (Junisbai and Junisbai, 2018).

By studying the meanings and attitudes towards democracy among young people, we can identify the political values held by them. Their political values and experiences influence their interpretations of political events and their impressions of the country's possible future political development. Since young people are the future of the country, their views and values will also help us understand the political trajectory of the country. There is a lack of understanding of political support in Central Asia, especially about how the young view the political world. Given that there is such concern about the disconnection of the young from politics, and the implications this will have on future democratic practice, there is a need to understand these issues in much greater depth.

1.5 The disposition of the paper

At first, the research paper gives a brief context of Kazakhstan to help the reader understand its political and historical background. Furthermore, the paper analyzes previous literature regarding democracy and public opinion surveys in Central Asia and Kazakhstan. It is followed by a theoretical section that explains the theories and concepts that have been used in the research process, namely social constructivist theory. Next, the paper introduces the definitions of democracy that are used to analyze and make meaning of the collected data. It is followed by the research methodology, sampling format, and coding. Lastly, the paper presents the research findings and concludes with recommendations for further research.

2. Background

2.1 Country Overview

Kazakhstan is a post-soviet country located in Central Asia. It's considered an upper middle income country that is rich in oil and natural resources, is ruled by an authoritarian government, and is ranked 128th in the Democracy Index (Kazakhstan Country Report, 2022). The multiethnic country has a population of 19 million people, making it one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world (Sinor, 2022). Native Kazakhs are an ethnic community that is a mix of Turkic and Mongol nomadic tribes. In the 18th century, Russia invaded the region, and in 1936, Kazakhstan became a Soviet Republic. In 1991, it gained its independence from the Soviet Union. Significant numbers of ethnic Russians who had been relocated during the Soviet era left for Russia in the early years of independence. The demographics of Kazakhstan were altered by this emigration as well as the return of ethnic Kazakhs. In the twenty-first century, the Kazakh population accounted for nearly two-thirds of the total population, while the Russian community accounted for slightly more than one-fifth. Kazakh and Russian are the country's two official languages. Both languages are widely spoken by the population. However, urban areas tend to speak more Russian. Kazakhstan has been influenced by Russian culture, literature, and language more than any other Central Asian country (Sinor, 2022).

The land of Kazakhstan is very rich in natural resources. Some of its main exports include raw materials, chemical products, manufactured and agricultural goods. Kazakhstan has had impressive economic growth since gaining independence in 1991. Rapid economic growth, combined with structural reforms and foreign direct investment, has helped to reduce poverty and transform the country into an upper-middle-income economy (Kazakhstan Overview: The World Bank, 2022).

Although the accomplishments are impressive, they conceal the country's weaknesses and uneven development. The slow rate of productivity growth, wealth inequality, rising living expenses, a lack of job opportunities, and weak institutions are a few of the problems that the country is facing. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified these issues and led to the biggest protests in Kazakhstan's history earlier this year (Kazakhstan Overview: The World Bank, 2022).

The tragic events of January have made it abundantly clear that urgent political and economic reforms are required to achieve long-term economic growth and evenly distribute resources among the population. In this regard, the government intends to take a firmer stance against corruption and improve the rule of law, announcing measures to increase competition and private sector growth and to address government inefficiency. Political reforms are also needed to raise living standards of ordinary citizens and create more job opportunities (Kazakhstan Overview: The World Bank, 2022).

2.2 Political context

After the independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, each of the five countries of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—adopted political institutions of democratic government and market-oriented economies. The authorities in the region, however, call themselves "democracies" for personal gain while maintaining an authoritarian system of government.

Kazakhstan has been ruled by a former dictator, Nursultan Nazarbayev, for 30 years. The oil and mineral trade in the country is largely controlled by a small number of individuals with close ties to the president. As the economic situation has stabilized, Nazarbayev's dominance has

increased. He has won each presidential election, and his supporters have dominated the legislature. As of 2010, Kazakhstan was reported as an authoritarian regime and was ranked 128th out of 167 countries in total in the Global Democracy Index by The Economist (Kazakhstan Country Report, 2022).

The Freedom House report states that “Parliamentary and presidential elections are not free or fair in Kazakhstan. All major parties exhibit political loyalty to the president. The authorities have consistently marginalized or imprisoned genuine opposition figures. The dominant media outlets are either in state hands or owned by government-friendly businessmen. Freedoms of speech and assembly remain restricted, and corruption is endemic” (Kazakhstan Country Report, 2022). Transparency International ranks corruption in Kazakhstan 34th out of 100, with 0 being highly corrupt and 100 being very clean (Kazakhstan Country Profile, 2020).

After 30 years in power, Nursultan Nazarbayev stepped down from the post and was replaced by current President Tokayev. The speaker of the senate was elected president in questionable elections. Nazarbayev continues to hold substantial political power and influence despite his resignation. After the recent elections, a strong civil society was formed that started challenging the current regime and advocating for democracy and good governance (Primiano and Kudebayeva, 2020). In January 2022, mass protests broke out all over the country due to public discontent with the government. Hundreds of thousands of people marched through the streets, demanding political reforms. This was the largest political unrest since the independence of the country. However, protests were hijacked by unknown extremist groups that attacked strategic locations, burned down governmental buildings, beheaded police officers, and killed hundreds of innocent people, including children. More than 200 people have died and thousands have been hospitalized. What started as peaceful protests turned into a bloody massacre. These events have deeply traumatized the local population and shook the ground for a newly formed democratic society. The current President has promised political reforms by allowing freedom of speech and by fighting the political elite, including the Nazarbayev family. In various speeches, the President has taken aim at Nazarbayev's legacy (Mazorenko and Kaiser, 2022).

3.Literature Review

Scholars who have studied public opinion polls on democracy in Kazakhstan have found contradictory results. Some findings indicate that the majority of Kazakhs support democracy, while others indicate that they are neither interested in politics nor supportive of it.

The main piece of secondary research for this research consists of a sociological survey conducted across Kazakhstan in 2014. It is a research project undertaken by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation Central Asia which aims to shed light on the values and attitudes of young people. The work analyzed many aspects of their lives, exploring topics such as religion, politics, democracy, the economic situation, and human rights, aiming to find out young people's views on these issues. The survey covered a sample of 1,000 respondents aged 14 to 29 in Kazakhstan's 14 regions, both in urban and rural areas (Umbetaliyeva et al. 2016).

Young Kazakhs are commonly regarded as being uninterested in political life. Therefore, an important objective of the research is to identify the political values held by young people. The fifth chapter of the report focuses on young people's attitudes to politics and their political values. The survey explores three important aspects – young people's assessments of the level of development of democracy in Kazakhstan, their relationship between levels of individualism and collectivism; and their opinions on certain political issues. These three variables allow researchers to investigate the degree of change in the political views of the younger generation (Umbetaliyeva et al. 2016).

According to the survey, young people in Kazakhstan are satisfied with the state of the economy and have high hopes for the future of their nation. The study found that 76% thought the economy was doing "good," and 8% thought it was doing "excellent." Furthermore, the majority of respondents believe the economy will improve in the coming years. Young people in Kazakhstan are also pleased with the country's democratic development: 78% are pleased to some extent, 17.% are unsure, and only 5% are dissatisfied. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of young people believe that Kazakhstan is heading in the right direction. This is likely why they have a high level of trust in government institutions. They place a great amount of trust

in the highest authorities—the President, the government, and parliament—and less so of local government institutions, the civil sector, and law enforcement agencies. They are also less trusting of international organizations, banks, and the media.

According to the study, a significant proportion of young people are uninterested in politics, and only a small proportion participate in political activities. Furthermore, the majority of people do not believe it is important to engage in politics or participate in events and citizen initiatives. A very small number of people have done any volunteer work in the past year and a very small proportion of the respondents are members of any governmental or non-governmental organizations.

To summarize the findings, young people in the country tend to be very optimistic in their assessment of the economic and political situation in the country and generally link all the country's economic successes to the head of state. The younger generation also has a high opinion of government institutions, although they are less trusting of institutions at a lower level. Young people are generally satisfied with government performance and democracy, but their views on democracy are immature and inconsistent. Young people are developing new values, new ideals, and new ideas, which for the moment are coexisting peacefully with the values of their parents' generation (Umbetaliyeva et al. 2016).

Another piece of literature that analyzes young people's attitudes towards democracy in Kazakhstan is a nationally representative public opinion survey conducted by Barbara Junisbai and Azamat Junisbai in 2012. The survey items covered a range of economic and political attitudes, including: attitudes about economic inequality; attitudes about the role of the state in alleviating inequality; perceived causes of poverty and wealth; and support for democratic principles. Based on the results, young Kazakhstanis are often more accepting of inequality, more likely to envision a limited role for government in the economy, and less likely to attribute inequality to dishonesty or the unfair economic system compared to previous generations. When asked about the importance of democracy and fair elections, well over 80 percent of all respondents expressed clear support for democracy. Yet, the results indicate that young Kazakhstanis who were educated and grew up in the era of President Nursultan Nazarbaev's consolidation of power are significantly less likely to express support for democracy, are less in

favor of questioning government decisions, and are less likely to be bothered by political nepotism and family rule. They exhibit attitudes that clearly reflect the political context they grew up in (Junisbai and Junisbai, 2020).

A similar result was drawn by Nancy Lubin in the article *'Snapshots from Central Asia'*. The author suggests that the majority of ordinary citizens do not regard democracy as the best system to resolve Kazakhstan's problems. Lubin used data from a public opinion survey that was conducted in 1993 and again in 2007 in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The data presents two snapshots in time to compare how attitudes in Central Asia have changed regarding a wide range of issues, including corruption and democracy. In both the 1993 and 2007 surveys, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 1,000 respondents in each country (Lubin and Joldasev, 2010).

The findings suggest that a few respondents regarded democracy as the best system to resolve Kazakhstan's problems. Respondents put a greater priority on strong leadership, stability, and law. Citizens in Kazakhstan hope for a strong leader who will institute stability in the country. According to the authors, this was due to the economic instability and political chaos that arose after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The views haven't changed significantly over the years. Nevertheless, support for the democratic system has increased in Kazakhstan. As shown in Figure 1, the number of respondents who preferred a Western-type democracy went up in 2007. Also the support for certain democratic procedures, particularly free speech and freedom of the press—did grow in importance in the intervening years (Lubin and Joldasev, 2010).

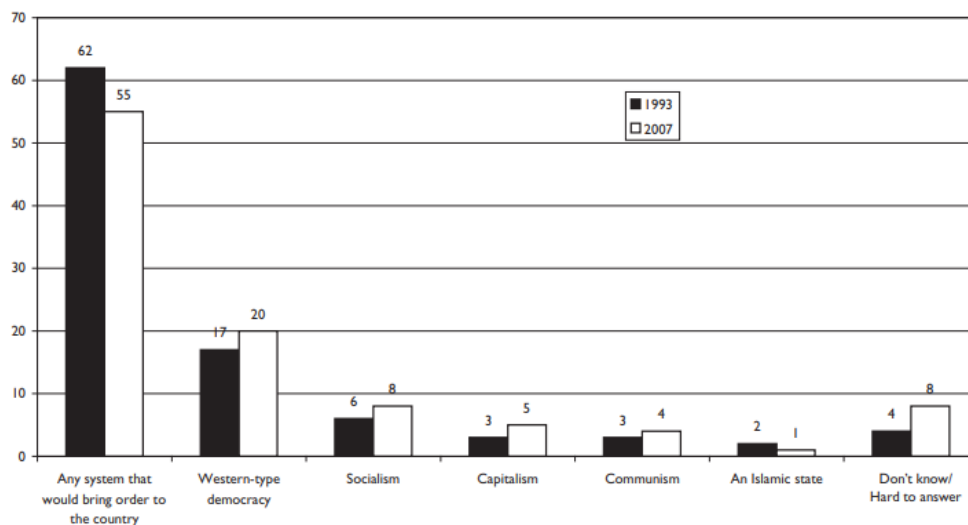


Figure 1. What political system would be the best for Kazakhstan to solve its problems?

The lack of change may have been the result of traditional efforts in both countries to maintain order and discipline, especially in response to what they perceived to be the relatively weak new governments that emerged from the "color revolutions" in neighboring Kyrgyzstan and other former Soviet republics. Due to the limited history of democratic rule in these nations, democracy was widely viewed as, at best, an ideal for the distant future, but not the best system for resolving current issues.

Contrary to those findings, Olena Nikolyenko in *"The Support for Democracy in Central Asia"* (2011), argues that the majority of respondents from Central Asia favor democracy as an ideal form of government. This study used data from the LiTS designed by the European Bank in collaboration with the World Bank. The study was conducted in 2016 across four Central Asian countries; Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. A total of 1,000 respondents participated in the survey from each country. Public support for democracy was measured by asking respondents with which of the following three statements they agree the most:

- (a) Democracy is preferable to any other form of political system:
- (b) Under some circumstances, an authoritarian government may be preferable to a democratic one:
- (c) It does not matter whether a government is democratic or authoritarian.

Acceptance of the first claim is interpreted as supporting democracy. Only 50.2% of respondents said that democracy was their preferred form of government in Kazakhstan. Nonetheless, 27.8% of respondents stated that 'it makes no difference to ordinary citizens whether a government is democratic or authoritarian'. These numbers demonstrate Kazakhstanis' extreme political apathy and disillusionment. In order to better understand public support for democracy, the analysis looks at citizens' ties to a particular set of political practices. The findings indicate that public support for democratic procedures such as free and fair elections and freedom of expression is extremely strong. For example, 92% of respondents believe that free and fair elections are important for their home country. The gap between the number of people who support democracy and the number of people who support a set of specific democratic procedures is likely to arise from the vagueness of the word "democracy." While citizens in non-democratic countries may interpret democracy differently, they appear to agree on the importance of key democratic institutions (Nikolyenko, 2011).

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Social Constructivism

This study uses the social constructivism theory to explore the meanings and perceptions young people attach to democracy. Creswell (2013) defines social constructivism as an interpretive framework in which individuals seek to understand their world and develop their own unique meanings that correspond to their experience. In social constructivism, people seek to comprehend the environment in which they live and work. They create subjective meanings of their experiences. Since there are so many different interpretations of these meanings, the researcher should look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas. Therefore, the purpose of research is to rely as much as possible on the perspectives of the participants. These subjective meanings are frequently negotiated from a social and historical perspective. In other words, they are not merely imprinted on individuals, but rather are shaped through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that influence individual lives. According to Andrews (2012) language predates concepts and allows an individual to structure the way their world is experienced. Rather than starting the

research with an existing theory, researchers develop a theory or pattern of meaning throughout the data collection process (Andrews, 2012).

Democracy is a multidimensional concept that may evoke different associations for different people. To determine people's actual desire for democracy, we must first determine what concept people have in mind when they hear the word "democracy" (Ulbricht, 2018). Therefore, social constructivism is the most suitable approach to study the meanings people attach to "democracy". It's important to understand their individual experiences and get an in-depth understanding of their attitudes towards government, democracy, and democratic institutions. and to make sense of those subjective meanings. Since there are so many different interpretations of democracy, the researcher should look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas. By studying subjective meanings and personal experiences, we can understand and make sense of that society in general.

As a researcher, I ask participants open-ended questions to gain an in-depth understanding of concepts and meanings. The questions are open-ended and broad so that the participants can create their own interpretation of the events, which is usually done during the conversation. The more open-ended the questioning, the better. This method gave the participants the freedom and ability to fully express their own opinions. As the researcher, it was my responsibility to pay close attention to what they had to say and to interpret the data in light of their experiences and backgrounds (Creswell, 2013). The interpretation of their experiences revealed a significant amount of information and also offered new insights into the overall study. Social constructionism was the most effective framework for gaining access to the perspectives that influenced the worlds of the participants.

4.2 Theoretical Definitions of Democracy

Public opinion polls that ask about public support for democracy inevitably raise the question of what democracy means to these respondents. When they claim to prefer democracy to other forms of government, what do they really mean? Even though we acknowledge that the average citizen is less knowledgeable about politics and democracy, we might turn to democratic theory to determine the broad parameters of an appropriate response.

This section will introduce three alternative definitions of democracy, which will serve as the primary theoretical choices in defining democracy. Other responses will undoubtedly appear in the interviews. However, the extent to which democracy is defined in terms of these three broad choices provides a framework for measuring public support for democracy and analyzing the content of their meanings. Each definition has different effects on how the public feels about democracy and the principles that guide the process of democratization. However, it's important to note that definitions can be compatible with each other.

The most widely used definitions of democracy focus on the procedures of governance. The writings of Robert Dahl, published in 1971 and 1989, serve as a standard for describing the fundamental elements of democracy. In his work, *Polyarchy*, Dahl identified eight criteria for democracy: the right to vote; the right to be elected; the right of political leaders to compete for support and votes; elections that are free and fair; freedom of association; freedom of expression; alternative sources of information; and institutions that depend on votes and other expressions of preference. Like many other democratic theorists, Dahl believes that democracy equals the institutions and processes of democratic government. If all citizens can participate equally in free and fair elections, and if elections determine the actions of the government, then democracy has been achieved. Achieving democratic institutions is often accepted as a bare minimum to achieve a democratic government. The establishment of democratic institutions is frequently emphasized by local governments and global NGO communities as the essence of democracy. From this perspective, we might expect citizens to associate democracy with democratic institutions. These people would cite "free and fair elections," "responsive government," "multiparty competition," and "popular control" or "majority rule" as defining characteristics of democracy.

In contrast to defining democracy in terms of its institutions and procedures, the second definition focuses on the outcomes of democracy. Democracy includes an emphasis on freedom and liberty as its essential goals, with the institutions of democracy as a way to achieve these goals. Political liberties, citizen participation rights, equal justice before the law, and equal rights for women are four of the core democratic values identified by Larry Diamond (1999). Other types of government might aim to accomplish these same objectives in theory, but in practice, it

is incompatible for autocratic regimes to encourage citizens' freedoms and liberties. If individuals concentrate on the objectives of democratic government, this will produce different definitions of democracy. The protection of individual liberty and rights by the rule of law is essential to democracy. Even though people in developing countries might not be familiar with democratic institutions, their desire for freedom and liberty may lead them to support democracy as a means of achieving these objectives (Dalton et. al, 2007)

The third definition of democracy focuses on a social aspect. Along with civil and political rights, democracy can include social rights such as providing social services to those in need and ensuring the general welfare of others. According to this approach, democratic principles and institutions are meaningless unless people have access to enough resources to meet their basic social needs (Huber et. al., 1997). Some scholars argue that support for democracy in developing countries is actually support for a higher standard of living. Given that democracy is associated with developed and wealthy nations, support for democracy is typically taken to indicate a desire to attain the same level of economic standards, though not necessarily the same level of political standards. This debate over the political versus economic foundations of democracy has been discussed in various research on the democratic transitions in developing countries. This definition would lead people to cite economic improvement, social welfare, and economic security as key elements of their definition of democracy.

These three alternatives—procedures/institutions, freedom and liberties, and social benefits—constitute the primary theoretical choices in defining democracy.

The extent to which democracy is defined in terms of these three broad choices provides a framework for assessing levels of support for democracy and the content of those democratic principles. Each of those definitions highlights different principles that guide the democratization process. It's important to mention that Huber's and Diamond's definition are compatible with each other and both focus on the outcomes of democracy.

It's important to note that the collected data will not be solely categorized into those three definitions. As a researcher, I clearly understand that other responses will undoubtedly appear

during the interviews, and it's important to include any experience and any interpretations. However, the extent to which democracy is defined in terms of these three broad definitions will be used as a primary framework for measuring public support for democracy and analyzing the content of their meanings.

5. Method and Data

This thesis has been performed as a qualitative case study since it focuses on providing a detailed and intensive analysis of a particular case (Bryman, 2012: p. 66). Data collection techniques used in this study are documentation and in-depth interviews.

5.1 Qualitative Case Study

Case study research focuses on studying the events surrounding a single case. The qualitative approach to a case study, according to Creswell (2013), is when the researcher focuses on investigating one or more cases through in-depth data collection using a variety of data sources. These multiple sources of data can be in the form of textual, visual, or audio files. The purpose of the case study is to provide an in-depth understanding through data analysis of numerous sources of information describing all aspects of the case (Creswell, 2013). Case studies are relevant in conducting social research because they study people's experiences and feature personal observations from the researcher regarding a particular case. While case studies may be specific to one or more cases, the findings can be understood variously. This research was conducted as a case study as it aims to explore personal experiences and personal opinions of the younger generation and aims to explore the in-depth meanings and opinions behind the concept of democracy.

5.2 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviewing was chosen as the most relevant interviewing form for this research since it allows for open answers and in-depth discussions (Bryman, 2012: p. 470). We focus on open-ended questions as they are more likely to tap into what citizens spontaneously associate with the term "democracy", and to provide a method allowing different interpretations of

democracy across individuals. The epistemic advantage of an interview is that it provides: access to the participants' understanding of the world and their experiences. In qualitative interviews, participants have the chance to elaborate on their experiences and share their perspectives and interpretations. Moreover, the interviewer has the opportunity to discuss and explore with the participants and to get a deeper understanding of the case (Risjord, 2014, p. 58). Therefore, the purpose of an interview is to gain access to the subjects' "perspectives and interpretations." Additionally, the interviewer needs to have proficiency in the language in which the interviews are conducted to engage in meaningful conversation.

Altogether, 15 interviews were conducted with people from different backgrounds. In three languages (Russian, Kazakh, and English), depending on the preference of the participant. They were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were then coded into English. The length of the interviews varied between 15 minutes and one hour. One interview guide was translated into Kazakh, Russian, and English. Since it's a semi-structured interview, some variations and adjustments to the questions were made during the interview process. The interview guide was made up of three sections. The first section included questions about the economic, socio-cultural and educational backgrounds of interviewees. The second section included general questions about the participants' political stance and their opinion on the current government. The third section asked about their opinion of democracy, what democracy means to them, whether they support it and which characteristics of democracy are the most important.

5.3 Sampling

Interview participants were young people aged between 18 and 30 years old. Since this is not representative research, random sampling methods were used to choose the participants for the interview. Random sampling is a sampling method that allows for the randomization of sample selection, where each person has the same probability of being selected as other samples (Bryman, 2012: p. 418). Special attention was given to make the sample as diverse as possible and include participants from different backgrounds and demographics.

The interviews took place both in person and online. In person interviews were conducted in Almaty. The largest city in Kazakhstan and the scientific, cultural, historical, industrial, and

financial center of the country. This location was chosen because the city attracts young people coming to work and study from all over Kazakhstan. Moreover, Almaty is the city where I lived my whole life; therefore, it was easier for me to gain access to local people as well as strategic locations. As compared to other rural areas of the nation, Almaty's urban population is thought to be more educated and technologically advanced.

5.4 Data Analysis and Coding

During the fieldwork, analyzing the data started hand in hand with the data collection phase. Interviews were conducted in Russian, Kazakh, and English. They were later translated, transcribed, and reduced into codes. After the data had been broken up into more manageable pieces, it had been analyzed and related to theoretical ideas and research questions.

5.5 Ethical Considerations

During the interviews, Lund University's ethical code of conduct was strictly followed. The participation in the interview was fully voluntary. The motive of the interview was clarified in the beginning and explained in a clear manner that the material is for a bachelor's thesis and there is no organization involved. Permission to record the interviews was asked in advance, and the full anonymity of the participants was guaranteed. No names have been revealed, either in the transcriptions nor in the actual thesis.

5.6 Limitations

The limitations of this study consist of the fact that the topic of the research can be politically sensitive and might have resulted in discomfort in answering certain questions. This discomfort was tried to be eliminated by interviewing the participants in an informal setting and creating a safe and friendly environment for them to really express their opinions. Interviews were conducted at cafes, offices, libraries, and parks.

The limitation of the sampling was that I could only reach out to the urban and educated population. People from rural areas with lower economic conditions might have a totally different outlook on politics and democracy than those living in urban centers. The age group

was aimed to be from 18 to 30 year old. However, most respondents were aged 21 to 23. The oldest interviewed participant was aged 25 years old. Therefore, the results from this study can't be generalized to a wider population. The size of the sample is quite small, and I could not reach as many interviewees from other regions. However, the study can still offer a glimpse into the minds of young people in Kazakhstan.

My own background as a Kazakh female researcher might have affected the study results. There were many advantages to conducting research at 'home'. Obviously, the results are more accurate when the researcher is familiar with the language, society, and culture. As an 'insider', I also had access to local organizations and local people. However, there are also some limitations to conducting the fieldwork in your home country. First of all, the results of the research may be influenced by my own biases and opinions. Second, those I interview may provide me with the responses they believe I want to hear. Their responses to my questions may be influenced by their own assumptions about my morals and political leanings. Another limitation is the language. In Kazakhstan, the majority is bilingual. Even though almost everyone speaks and understands both languages, many people feel more comfortable expressing themselves in one of those languages. In order to achieve more diverse and inclusive results in the research, interview guides were translated and conducted in both languages, depending on the choice of the participants. I speak fluent Russian and Kazakh, but I do not have enough academic Kazakh to comfortably write and conduct interviews with the participants. This could affect the results of my research.

Furthermore, answers to open-ended questions are subject to different interpretations by respondents, and answers are often imprecise and must be recorded by interviewers. The administration of the interview, question order, the location, the interviewer's approach, and body language can all have an important influence on the answers of the participants and should be taken into account.

6. Analysis

In the analysis I will present the main findings observed during the interviews. The analysis section categorizes the interview findings through the prism of the three alternative definitions of democracy —procedures/institutions, freedom and liberties, and social benefits.

The findings will also be linked to the literature review and other references to support the claims. Analysis is concluded with current limitations and recommendations for further research.

6.1 The findings

The findings suggest that the emphasis is made on freedom and liberty as the essentials of democracy. Generally, young people have a positive outlook on the concept of democracy, but they also believe Kazakhstan is not ready for it yet. The respondents also highlighted the importance of the social aspect of democracy. Young people believe that social services such as free education, free healthcare, and higher living standards are important aspects of democracy. Some respondents also mentioned the institutional and procedural aspects, such as free and fair elections or transparency, but it wasn't mentioned as frequently as the other two definitions.

The following table represents the answers of the respondents in accordance with the three given definitions. You can view a more detailed version of interview codes attached to Appendix 1).

Table 1.

(Y – "Yes," meaning the person mentions this definition; N – "No," telling the person does not note this definition)

Interviewee	Procedures/Institutions	Freedom/Liberty	Social benefits
1	Y	Y	Y
2	N	Y	Y
3	N	N	Y
4	Y	N	Y
5	Y	N	N
6	Y	N	N
7	-	-	-
8	N	Y	Y
9	N	Y	Y
10	N	Y	N
11	N	Y	Y
12	N	N	Y
13	N	Y	Y
14	N	Y	N
15	Y	Y	N
16	N	Y	Y
Subtotal	4 – Y 11 – N	10 – Y 5 – N	10 – Y 5 – N

As you can observe from the table, respondents define democracy in terms of freedom and social benefits. It's crucial to remember that there are no common characteristics among those who see democracy as a source of freedom or social benefits.

The interviewees were asked, "What does democracy mean to you?". The answers stated that democracy is "people" and "people's voices." . When I continued by asking about the fundamental principles of democracy, they immediately mentioned political and speech freedom. This might be a result of Kazakhstan's long history of political oppression. Even after the fall of the USSR, people were afraid to express their opinions on political issues for many years. People, especially the older generation, are still reluctant to express their political views, despite significant improvements in recent years. The society is becoming more and more politically and socially active since Nursultan Nazarbayev's resignation. The new president, Tokayev, has increased political freedom and allowed more protests. Nevertheless, the government continues to block the internet during protests, and some protesters are being arbitrarily arrested. The Internet and social media networks play a crucial role in this sudden upsurge in activism. People began to express their opinions and concerns about the government and political issues on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Physical, financial, and religious freedom are some additional responses I got. These responses suggest that a key component of democracy is a person's freedom to select their own school, occupation, or religion.

The social component of democracy was also mentioned during the interviews. When asked about the most important problems facing the country, seven people answered low quality of living, bad economic situation and poverty as one of the most urgent problems in Kazakhstan. Five of the respondents mentioned low quality of education. Some scholars argue that support for democracy in developing countries is actually support for a higher standard of living. Given that democracy is typically associated with advanced and wealthy countries, support for democracy is frequently seen as a desire to attain the same level of economic standards (Stronski and Zanca 2019). Our findings support this claim because the majority of respondents cited economic improvement, social protection, free education/healthcare, and higher living standards as key elements of their definitions of democracy.

Our respondents didn't pay too much attention to Robert Dahl's definition of democracy, which focuses on the procedural and institutional aspects of democracy. Our findings are consistent with Nikolayenko's findings, namely that public support for democratic procedures such as free and fair elections and freedom of expression is extremely strong. The majority of respondents agreed that free and fair elections and the right to free speech are crucial for Kazakhstan's development, despite some of them holding the opinion that Kazakhstan is not yet ready for democracy. As Nikolayenko (2011) suggested, the gap between the number of people who support democracy and the number of people who support a set of specific democratic procedures is likely to arise from the vagueness of the word "democracy." While citizens of Kazakhstan may interpret democracy differently, they appear to agree on the importance of key democratic institutions such as free and fair elections and freedom of speech. However, because respondents did not mention freedom of speech as a democratic institution but rather as a value in itself to be heard, I classified freedom of expression into the second definition of democracy, which emphasizes freedom and liberty. The interviewees rarely mention other democratic institutions such as "responsive government," "multiparty competition," and "popular control" or "majority rule". During the interviews, only two or three interviewees had a clear understanding of what the democratic institutions are. According to two of the respondents, we lack the financial resources to sustain a western democracy and must combine a strong leader with some democratic values.

According to the findings, the young people, who participated in the interview, has a favorable opinion of democracy. However, some of them are skeptical that it is the best system for Kazakhstan. First and foremost, they are convinced that Kazakhstan is not ready for democracy. Some have claimed that the younger generation will be able to build a democratic country in the future, but the older generation currently has a negative attitude toward democracy, making it impossible to build an effective democratic government. Clearly, there is a significant mental gap between the older and younger generations. Some of the respondents have stated repeatedly that the older generation runs the government and the economy. They do, however, retain a Soviet mentality from the past. Their political values and perspectives are vastly different from those of the younger generation. When asked about the country's most pressing issues, some have cited the Soviet mentality and reliance on Russia as the main challenges.

When asked whether Kazakhstan is heading in the right or wrong direction, young people are generally optimistic about the country's future. Seven respondents stated that the country is on the right track, and the other six respondents stated that young people are on the right track. Only two respondents said the country is heading in the wrong direction, and four said it's too early to tell with the new administration. These findings are consistent with the results of a social survey of Central Asian youth conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

However, the younger generation has a low opinion of government institutions and does not trust the government or its institutions. Most people who were interviewed either have limited or no trust in the government. The results are as follows: "Somehow trust the government" – 8, and "No trust at all" – 3. Many respondents appear to trust the new president and his policies, but not the first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Once again, the younger generation has high hopes and expectations of new President Tokayev and his office. He has gained popularity among young people ever since the January events. They think he handled it extremely well and showed that he was a leader and not just Nursultan Nazarbayev's puppet. They also point out that he will only earn their complete trust if he fulfills his commitments and advances the nation.

When asked about the system of government in Kazakhstan. Five respondents think that Kazakhstan has an authoritarian regime, two believe it is post-Authoritarianism, and two think it is oligarchy in Kazakhstan. However, there are also six respondents who believe Kazakhstan is partly democratic and six respondents who believe that it's on its way to democratization with the new government. When asked whether they are satisfied with this system only two respondents said that they are completely satisfied, five of them said that they are only satisfied with the new government, five respondents said that they are partly satisfied, and two of them said that they are completely unsatisfied with it.

Some factors that should be considered when analyzing interviewees' responses are their age and interest in politics. Previous research showed that young people in Kazakhstan aren't that interested in politics. However most respondents in this research were the ones who are interested in politics. Therefore, the research results can be biased as people's judgment regarding democracy might be affected by their interest in politics. The majority – 11 people were interested, while the rest – 5- are not interested in politics. Also the research didn't cover all

age groups, the age category was aimed to be 18-30 years old. However, the oldest interviewee is 25 years old, whereas the youngest is 19. The average age of the interviewees was 21 years old. Also, it's very important to note that most of the respondents were very educated compared to the general population.

The educational experience of research participants is as follows: One high school graduate, seven university students, and nine university graduates. 15 out of 16 interviewees have or obtained a bachelor's degree, and only one respondent is a high school graduate, who is also considering applying for a degree.

6.2 Future recommendations

One of the future improvements of the research is diversifying the educational background of the respondents. It is suggested to increase the age group of the interviewees to improve the research further. Gathering the data from different age groups will allow us to make a more profound analysis of what are thoughts on the democracy of the whole population in Kazakhstan. In addition, the study research has not considered the region of residence of the respondents. It is conventionally believed that people in big cities have a more liberal mentality than those in small towns and villages. The majority of the interviewees are currently residing in Almaty – the most populous city in Kazakhstan. Although they originally came from different cities in the country, they have been obtaining the degree and living in Almaty for the past 3 to 7 years. Therefore, their judgment might differ from that of young people living in villages.

Another reflection that will help improve the research is changing the research method. Interviews were chosen correctly for the analysis, allowing the researcher to ask open-ended questions of the respondents. Nonetheless, to discuss if democracy is the appropriate political system for Kazakhstan as a continuation of the research, it would be recommended to choose the focus group method. Focus groups will enable you to observe the interaction between different age groups and hence analyze their opinions in accordance with their background. Nonetheless, this advice is for future research and a revised research question.

7. Conclusion

To summarize, the study discovered that young people in Kazakhstan define democracy as freedom and social benefits. This study looked at three dimensions of democracy: Dahl's definition of democracy as focusing on governmental procedures, Diamond's definition of democracy as liberty and freedom, and Huber's definition of democracy as equal social benefits. In general, the interview participants are optimistic about the concept of democracy, but they believe Kazakhstan is not prepared for it. They are also very optimistic about the country's future and have high expectations for the new president. They believe that young people have very different political and social values than older generations and that Kazakhstan can achieve economic and political development with the new generation in the near future. Moreover, they do not believe that democracy is the only way to become a prosperous and developed country, but they still place a great value on social benefits, freedom of speech, fair elections, and transparency.

7.1 Takeaways from the research

I learned a lot of new information and insights and gained a better understanding of the views of young people and their opinions on democracy and the government. More improvements could be made in the research methods.

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Appendix 1: List of Interviewees

Interviewee	Region	Age	Language	Place of interview
Interviewee 1	Almaty	22	Kazakh	Cafe
Interviewee 2	Shymkent	20	Kazakh	Park
Interviewee 3	Uralsk	19	Russian	Public Library
Interviewee 4	Almaty	19	Kazakh	Public Library
Interviewee 5	Almaty	22	Kazakh and Russian	Zoom call
Interviewee 6	Almaty	23	Russian	Cafe
Interviewee 7	Almaty	23	Russian	Zoom call
Interviewee 8	Almaty	23	Kazakh	Public Library
Interviewee 9	Almaty	22	Kazakh	Zoom call
Interviewee 10	Almaty	25	Russian	Public Library
Interviewee 11	Taraz	22	Russian	Park
Interviewee 12	Almaty	20	Russian	Cafe
Interviewee 13	Almaty	19	Russian	Private office
Interviewee 14	Pavlodar	20	Kazakh and Russian	Cafe
Interviewee 15	Almaty	21	Kazakh	Cafe
Interviewee 16	Pavlodar	22	Kazakh	Cafe

Appendix 2: Interview Guide (Translated to English)

Section 1: Background

1. **Region:** Where were you born and raised?
2. **Age:** How old are you?
3. **Language:** Which language do you consider as your native language?
4. **Education background:** Which university did you graduate or currently attend?
5. **Interest in politics:** Are you interested in politics?
6. **News:** How often do you watch news?

Section 2: General Questions

1. In general, would you say that things in our country are headed in the right direction or the wrong direction? Why?
2. What are the most important problems our country is facing ? (social /economic/ political/ cultural etc.) Does the government address these problems effectively?
3. In your opinion, what type of government does Kazakhstan have? (Democratic/ authoritarian/ strong leader/ transitioning etc.) How satisfied are you with this system?
4. How much do you trust the government? How much do you trust the president? How much do you trust the first President Nursultan Nazarbayev?
5. What do you think about democracy? Do you think democracy is necessary in Kazakhstan? Can democracy solve the problems you listed before?
6. What does democracy mean to you? Can you describe it using your own words?
7. Which values/ practices/ characteristics do you associate with democracy? What are the most important characteristics of democracy for you?

That was all for today! Thank you for participating in this interview. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix 3: Interview Codes

Section 1: Background Information	Source
Region	
- South Eastern Kazakhstan	12
- Northern Kazakhstan	2
- Western Kazakhstan	1
- Southern Kazakhstan	1
Age	
- 19	3
- 20	3
- 21	1
- 22	5
- 23	3
- 25	1
Primary Language	
- Kazakh	7
- Russian	7
- Both	2
Education background	
- High School graduate	1
- University Student	7
- University graduate	8
Interest in Politics	
- Interested in Politics	11
- Not interested in Politics	5

Appendix 4: Interview Codes

Section 2 : General Questions	Source
The country is going in the right or wrong direction	
- Right	7
- Wrong	2
- The young people are going in the right direction	6
- We are going through transformation and it's too early to tell	4
The most important problems that the country is facing	
- Corruption	11
- No solidarity among the people and the government	7
- No opportunities for young people	7
- Bad economy/ Poverty	7
- Low quality of education	5
- Post soviet legacy among the population (especially older generation)	5
- Inequality	5
- Nepotism	4
- No democracy	4
- Dependency to Russia	2
- Violation of human rights	2
- Ecological problems are being ignored	1
- Low quality of government management	1
Current political system	
- Authoritarianism	5
- Post-authoritarianism	2
- Oligarchy	2

- Parliamentary democracy	2
- Partly democracy	6
- On its way to democratization with the new president	6
Satisfaction level with the government	
- Satisfied completely	2
- Partly satisfied	5
- Satisfied with the new government and the new president	5
- Not satisfied	2
Trust to the government	
- High level of trust	4
- Trust the new government	4
- Somehow trust the government	8
- Yes, I trust the government in general, but not the politicians	3
- No trust at all	3
Trust to the New President	
- Yes	6
- No	4
- I will trust the new president if he keeps his promises	5
Trust to Nursultan Nazarbayev (Former President)	
- Yes	1
- No	12
Attitude towards democracy	
- Democracy is good for Kazakhstan	6
- Democracy isn't the right political system for Kazakhstan	9
- Giving people the power to choose is dangerous	4

- Kazakhstan is not ready for democracy	5
- The younger generation is ready for democracy but not the older generation	6
- It's better to develop under authoritarianism/ communism, then adopt democracy once the country is developed	4
- The road to democracy is bloody	2
- We need gradual reforms and changes, but not sudden democratization	1
- We need a strong leader	4
- We shouldn't follow western political trajectory	2
- Positive attitude towards democracy in general but we don't need it in Kazakhstan	6
- Democracy is inconvenient and makes the processes slow	1
What is democracy?	
- Freedom	10
- Freedom of Speech	8
- Physical freedom	4
- Freedom of religion	2
- Economic freedom	1
- Independence	1
- The voice of the people	10
- Free and Fair Elections	6
- Law and Order / Institutions	3
- Globalization and international cooperation	2
- Social benefits	10
- Social protection of people	2
- Provide good conditions and opportunities to its citizens	5

- Free education/ healthcare	6
- Better living standards	5
- Economic Growth	7
- Transparency / Honesty	4
- Protection of human rights	2
- Solidarity among the citizens	3
- Responsible government	2