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## SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM MOVEMENT IN KAZAKHSTAN ON ISSUES OF RAPE AND SEXUAL ABUSE

### *Abstract*

This paper analyzes several aspects concerning the national issues of rape and sexual harassment incidences in the context of Kazakhstan via a discourse analysis approach of social media activist movements. The article touches upon crucial social media movements, such as '#MeTooTalgo', 'NeMolchi.kz' or '#OrtashaEmes', which all emerged after the 2016 incident with the rape case in a Talgo Train, causing eventually an upward rising tendency for awareness-raising social media campaigns across the country. Alongside that, the paper also provides insight into the discussion about the societal influence of the contextual conservative patriarchal state on women, the factors causing women to become victims of sexual and physical abuse as well the power of the social media as a tool and platform for catalyzing the enraged voices of women into influential instruments for societal changes. On top of that, this paper also looks at how the movements of social media activism have influenced government decisions and law amendments in the country towards tightening legislations. The paper follows a discourse analysis research methodology, where only secondary sources of information are used and referred to. In conclusion, the significance of this paper is that it tries to enlighten and bring forth one of the societal problems that women and under-aged girls in Kazakhstan face, and which has yet to be accepted as a "societal problem" by the society itself. Hence, despite the conservative regime with a still developing but much promising civic society, social media has shown to be 'a free fighting space' for those who want to voice their problems and for those who want to be heard.

**Keywords:** social media movements; patriarchal state; Talgo train rape incident; #NeMolchi.kz; #OrtashaEmes; Kazakhstan; sexual and physical abuse.

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## АКТИВИСТСКОЕ ДВИЖЕНИЕ В СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ СЕТЯХ КАЗАХСТАНА ПО ВОПРОСАМ ИЗНАСИЛОВАНИЯ И СЕКСУАЛЬНОГО НАСИЛИЯ

### *Аннотация*

В этой статье анализируются несколько аспектов, касающихся национальных проблем изнасилований и сексуальных домогательств в контексте Казахстана с помощью дискурс-анализа движений активистов в социальных сетях. В статье затрагиваются важнейшие движения в социальных сетях, такие как '#MeTooTalgo', 'NeMolchi.kz' или '#OrtashaEmes', которые возникли после инцидента 2016 года с делом об изнасиловании в поезде Talgo, что в конечном итоге привело к тенденции к росту информационные

кампании в социальных сетях по всей стране. Наряду с этим, документ также дает представление о дискуссии о влиянии контекстуального консервативного патриархального государства на женщин в обществе, факторах, заставляющих женщин становиться жертвами сексуального и физического насилия, а также о силе социальных сетей как инструмента и платформы для катализировать разъяренные голоса женщин во влиятельные инструменты социальных изменений. Кроме того, в этой статье также рассматривается, как движения активистов в социальных сетях повлияли на решения правительства и поправки к законам в стране, направленные на ужесточение законодательства. В заключение значение этой статьи состоит в том, что она пытается осветить и выявить одну из социальных проблем, с которыми сталкиваются женщины и девушки в Казахстане, и которую само общество еще не приняло как «социальную проблему». Таким образом, несмотря на консервативный режим с все еще развивающимся, но многообещающим гражданским обществом, социальные сети показали себя «свободным пространством борьбы» для тех, кто хочет озвучить свои проблемы, и для тех, кто хочет быть услышанным.

**Ключевые слова:** движения в социальных сетях; патриархальное государство; инцидент, связанный с изнасилованием в поезде Талго; #NeMolchi.kz; #OrtshaEmes; Казахстан; сексуальное и физическое насилие.

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## **ЗОРЛАУ ЖӘНЕ ЖЫНЫСТЫҚ ЗОРЛЫҚ-ЗОМБЫЛЫҚ МӘСЕЛЕЛЕРІ БОЙЫНША ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК МЕДИА БЕЛСЕНДІЛІГІ ҚОЗҒАЛЫСЫ**

*Аңдатпа*

Бұл мақалада әлеуметтік медиа белсенділері қозғалысының дискурстық талдау әдісі арқылы Қазақстан жағдайында зорлау және жыныстық қысым көрсетудің ұлттық мәселелеріне қатысты бірнеше аспектілер талданған. Мақалада '#MeTooTalgo', 'NeMolchi.kz' немесе '#OrtashaEmes' сияқты маңызды әлеуметтік медиа қозғалыстар туралы айтылады, олар 2016 жылы Talgo пойызында зорлау ісіне қатысты оқиғадан кейін пайда болды, және ақыр соңында өсу тенденциясын тудырды бүкіл ел бойынша әлеуметтік медиа компаниялары. Сонымен қатар, газет сонымен қатар контекстік консервативті патриархалдық мемлекеттің әйелдерге әлеуметтік әсері, әйелдердің жыныстық және физикалық зорлық-зомбылық құрбаны болуына себеп болатын факторлар туралы пікірталас, сондай-ақ әлеуметтік медианың құралы мен алаңы ретінде күші туралы түсінік береді. Әйелдердің ашуланған дауыстарын қоғамды өзгертудің ықпалды құралдарына айналдыру. Сонымен қатар, бұл мақалада әлеуметтік медиа белсенділігінің қозғалысы үкіметтің шешімдері мен заңдарды қатаңдатуға бағытталған елдегі заң түзетулеріне қалай әсер еткені туралы да қарастырылған. Қорытындылай келе, бұл жұмыстың маңыздылығы – бұл Қазақстандағы әйелдер мен қыздар кездесетін және қоғамның өзі «әлеуметтік проблема» ретінде қабылдамаған әлеуметтік мәселелердің бірін жарыққа шығаруға және алға шығаруға тырысуында. Демек, әлі де дамып келе жатқан, бірақ көп перспективалы азаматтық қоғамы бар консервативті режимге қарамастан, әлеуметтік медиа өз проблемаларын айтқысы келетіндер үшін және өзін тыңдағысы келетіндер үшін «еркін күрес кеңістігі» болды.

**Кілт сөздер:** әлеуметтік медиа қозғалыстары; патриархалдық мемлекет; талго пойызының зорлау оқиғасы; # NeMolchi.kz; #OrtshaEmes; Қазақстан; жыныстық және физикалық зорлық-зомбылық.

**Executive Summary.** Being a patriarchal state with a mix of soviet legacy, national as well as modern traditions, Kazakhstan has been reported to have relatively high rape and sexual harassment rates. The statistics show that the rape rate tended to increase throughout the years from 2006-2015 even though the majority of cases are not usually reported in a conservative society like Kazakhstan (Knoema.com, 2019). The Kazakhstani law does not consider rape and other forms of sexual violence and harassment as serious or severe crimes, which is

why there is in fact no compulsory indictment for those types of crimes in the country (Equality Now, 2019: para. 1). Victims of the crime tend to bear the strain of completing a crime report and prosecuting the offender by their own efforts (Equality Now, 2019: para. 1). In worse cases, victims are pressured to reconcile and ‘not ruin the life’ of the offender, leading to the closure of the report or the case itself (Equality Now, 2019: para. 1). Besides that, there are still considerable gaps in knowledge and information on the gender analysis aspect in Kazakhstan, especially when it comes down to the analysis from regions to regions (Dubok & Turakhanova, 2017: 9). Piled up cases that did not receive proper punishment and civic perturbation by the government’s disregard towards rape, violence, and other crimes against women have eventually led to the activist movement, which took inception approximately in September 2018, for tightening up the law on rape in the country. The pivotal catalytic point in the activist movement was made by the sensational case of rape on Talgo train, where a woman was violated by two men, of one of whom was a train conductor (Vaal, 2019: para. 4). The victim was not afraid of voicing her case and raising an awareness for such issues across the country (SputnikNews.kz, 2019: para. 10). Apart from that, the case attracted a lot of attention due to the dubiousness regarding the court verdict, as offenders were only sentenced for 2.6 year, which caused huge public discontent and public outcry (Vaal, 2019: para. 4) (SputnikNews.kz, 2019: para. 13). After this nationwide matter going public, there were several civic activist movements on social media such as ‘#MeTooTalگو’, #NeMolchiKZ or ‘#OrtashaEmes’, which all eventually affected the law on rape and lead for President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to take this matter at his own hand and request tougher but necessary law amendments in the country during the State of the Nation Address on September 02, 2019.

**Research Methodology.** This study is descriptive and takes its base on the indicators of empirical studies by other secondary sources and authors in order to understand the role of the social media activism movement in the fight against rape and sexual abuse in the context of Kazakhstan. For that, we will mostly use secondary sources of information. In terms of the structure of the paper, firstly the problem of rape and sexual abuse is introduced and how it became a widely discussed societal issue. Then, the paper will further analyze the crucial roles of the social media movement initiatives such as *NeMolchiKz* or *OrtashaEmes*. Lastly, the paper discusses the strengths and limitations of the social media movement in the country. The paper serves as an informational-analytical paper outlining the problem of rape and sexual abuse issues alongside the social media movement concerning this matter in Kazakhstan.

#### **Problem Statement and Discussion: The context of conservative Kazakhstan**

Possessing the features of a post-soviet state and a heritage of Turkic culture and Muslim religion, Kazakhstan appears to be a vivid pro-patriarchal state that discriminates and neglects women in manifold ways. The cases of rape and violence against women, therefore, were not exceptional to the patriarchal rule in the country. According to the Household Survey on Violence against Women in Kazakhstan, around 17% of women who had partners between the ages of 18- 75 have to some degree experienced some form of either physical or sexual violence (The Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan Statistics Committee, 2019: 14). However, it is not only domestic violence or violence coming from an intimate partner, but also violent and rape cases involving random outside people making use of fragile and helpless Kazakh women (The Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan Statistics Committee, 2019: 18). Besides that, the study also found out that around 40% of the respondents did not talk or consult with relatives such as stepmothers, fathers-in-law or other male and female family members (The Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan Statistics Committee, 2019: 19). Those who talked, approached mostly their own parents or partner’s parents followed by friends (The Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan Statistics Committee, 2019: 19). Women who were victims of rape or violence tend to hide their horrific experiences due to the huge societal stigmatized concept of “Uyat” [Shame] within the culture, along with the fear of being raped, beaten up, threatened, or blackmailed by the offender (Abdurasulov, 2018: para. 6). The aforementioned tendency to simply ‘stay in shadow and silence’, not revealing the occurrences of rape and other violent crimes against women, however, has begun to change as early as in 2016 thanks to civic activism on social media platforms. Since then, the issue of very frequent rape cases and unpunished rapists escalated. The ever-growing pressure coming from civic activists and their social media campaigns made a tremendous difference and impacted government’s decision-making, which was stated in the speech of President Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev on September 2, 2019 (Vaal, 2019: para. 1) (Akorda.kz, 2019: para. 11 on section “ensuring rights and security of citizens”).

#### **What is social media activism?**

In simple terms, social media activism or social media movements is the usage of media as an instrument of communication (Rani, 2019: 1). It is often referred to as a medium of social networking that connects people with other people all around the world. Such a media can include newspapers, audio broadcasts or campaigns (Rani,

2019: 1). The main goal of a social media movement or activism is to catalyze a ‘change’ in policies of governments, behaviors of people or activities of the society (Rani, 2019: 1). Such changes can either be driven intentionally or unintentionally and may come in different dimensions ranging from local to national and global scale. The literature highlights especially the existent research gap on how social media catalyzes and shapes social media movements and social media activism (Murthy, 2018: 1). Most studies concerning the social media aspect revolved around case studies of specific matters, such as the Arab Spring (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011) or Black Lives Matter (Cox, 2017). One of the most promising fields of research studies concern the question of how stakeholders can mobilize and utilize human and capital resources to initiate grassroots transnational social movements (Murthy, 2018: 1).

### **#NeMolchiKZ Movement**

In year 2018, according to the Bilim Public Foundation, out of 340,000 crimes committed, about a third were violent crimes against women; in 2016, the Prosecutor General’s Office reported that only in the first half of the year more than 300 women committed a suicide, taking into account the fact that the vast majority of cases might not have been reported (Teltayeva, 2016: para. 8 and 10). Taken aback and deeply hurt by these statistics, Dina Tansari (Smailova) initiated activist movement of voicing rape and violence, following the example of Ukrainian female journalists (Teltayeva, 2016: para. 6). Dina Tansari became one of the first women to ever share her terrible rape story on her Facebook page back in 2016 using hashtag #NeMolchi [in Russian “не молчи” - “do not stay silent”] (Abdurasulov, 2018: para. 14) (Teltayeva, 2016: para. 2). “... I was unconscious. They left me in front of my flat, rang the bell, and ran away. In the morning I couldn’t remember anything, except for my mum’s screams when she found me...” she described the memory of her rape experience that occurred about 20 years ago (Teltayeva, 2016: para. 3). This post alongside the aforementioned rape case of Talgo, came to serve as a real silence breaker, as many women were sharing their stories with Dina, approaching her, and getting united to help other victims just like themselves (Teltayeva, 2016) (Radio Azattyq, 2019). Having received a lot of support from the civil society, Dina turned her online movement into a public fund, gaining even international recognition and aid from UN Women (UN Women, 2017: para. 3). The public fund is functioning successfully even today and provides aid to hundreds of female victims, helping them with rehabilitation and starting their lives over after experiencing sexual or any other kind of violence via establishments of crisis centers, which was financed and led by UNDP Kazakhstan and Kazakhstani Ministry of Interior Affairs (Teltayeva, 2016: para. 12). *NeMolchiKZ* movement was one of the first life-changers and influencers within the social media catalyzing a societal change in a patriarchal state of Kazakhstan (UN Women, 2017: para. 3 and 4). Nevertheless, the efforts were not able to directly affect the Kazakhstani legislation but raise on the one hand the awareness for the issue itself at the local and national level even more, while on the other hand also to battle gender inequality issues (Teltayeva, 2016: para. 16).

### **Scandalous Rape Case on Talgo Train**

The shocking incident occurred in fall 2018. A woman passenger was not willing to disclose her information in the beginning, yet after a year of postponing court meetings and verdicts she had no choice (SputnikNews.kz, 2019: para. 8). While the woman was asleep in her Talgo train compartment, two train conductors raped her, and she could not defend herself nor call for help but was eventually able to file a report and sue her offenders (SputnikNews.kz, 2019: para. 8). During the summer 2019, the verdict for her offenders was announced, constituting only 2.6 years of sentence, generating enormous public resentment and discontent (SputnikNews.kz, 2019: para. 13) (Radio Azattyq, 2019: para. 5). The decision of the court was the defining point in the movement of civic activists to demand amendments (Vaal, 2019: para. 9) (Radio Azattyq, 2019: para. 5, 7, 9, 10, 11). However, with the support by the social activist movement leader Dina Tansari as well as with her #NeMolchi campaign bringing the problem even more to the public outcry, a second investigation was held that eventually led to the imprisonment of these two men for five years each, as it was qualified as gang rape and not simply rape (Equality Now, 2020: para. 2). However, the scandal did not end there and defamation charges followed against Dina Tansari as of mid-January 2020 (Equality Now, 2020: para. 3 and 4).

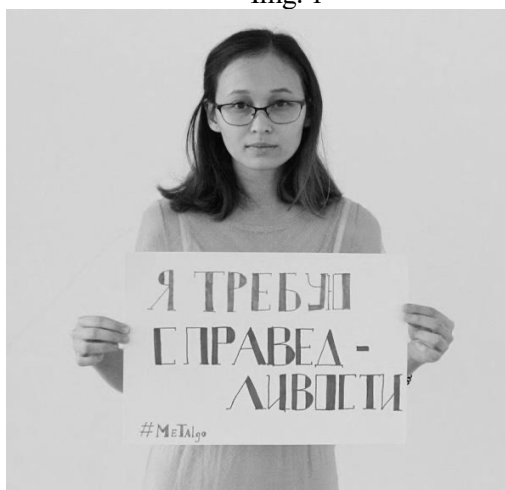
### **#OrtashaEmes #NeSredneiTyazhesti**

One of the renowned campaigns conducted via social media was called “Ortasha Emes/ Ne Srednei Tyazhesti” [“Not of an Intermediate Gravity”] (Instagram, 2019b) (Instagram, 2019c). Young activists created accounts on various platforms including Facebook, Instagram as well as in other social media outlets making posts of themselves with posters depicting anti-rape and anti-violence slogans (Instagram, 2019a) (Instagram, 2019b) (Instagram, 2019c). Initially, the movement took inception in the capital city of Nur-Sultan, on Instagram accounts of University students who initiated the campaign with the purpose to introduce amendments in the criminal code, specifically Article 120, which is related to the punishment for rape (The Village Kazakhstan,

2019: para. 30). Despite in the beginning the movement lacking sufficient promotion and attention, ever since the Talgo incident happened it gained more supporters and smoothly disseminated to other regions of Kazakhstan including Almaty, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Aktobe, and many other. Article 120 moved to the center of nationwide discussion, after *The Village Kazakhstan* supported the campaign created by students and posted an article sharing 6 rape cases, whose punishments were almost negligible (The Village Kazakhstan, 2019: para. 5). Activists Moldir Alban and Ospan Fariza submitted an application to the Almaty Akimat to hold a rally on August 18, 2019, for Sary-Arka (The Village Kazakhstan, 2019: para. 4). The theme of the rally was to return article 120 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan “rape” to the category of serious crimes,” reported the Village Kazakhstan before introducing six other cases with even more resonating than Talgo case itself, which clearly exhibited the necessity of altering the legislation (The Village Kazakhstan, 2019: para. 4).



Img. 1



Img. 2

Above are some illustrations of the pictures made for the online campaigns on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (Instagram, 2019d). Writing information, hashtags, and posts in three languages enabled in general the nationwide activists to reach broader audience not only in Kazakhstan, but also abroad, calling for the urgent need to toughen the law on rape, namely concerning Article 120 (Wood, 2019: para. 6 and 7). Followed by immense wave of ‘online-protests’ in Kazakhstan, the movement was heartily supported by the Kazakhs living abroad, as well as the international community. People began adding another hashtag #MeTooTalgo and reaching out global web (Instagram, 2019d) (Wood, 2019: para. 6 and 7). One of the great examples that could be elicited is Akmarzhan Kuserbayeva, a singer and a spokesperson of UNFPA Kazakhstan, who constantly voiced out her ideas concerning the societal issue of perception towards women as victims and the low-level of awareness initiatives towards matters like abortion, rape or constructive gender imbalance (Kalmurat, 2019: para. 1). Other locally famous women-bloggers such as Madina Zholdybekova (@madikendraws), illustrator and card maker; Alina Mustafina (@alinka\_mustafinka), ex-editor of Cosmo Magazine, public figure; and many others who had 3000 and more followers joined the campaign (Instagram, 2019a). Astoundingly, in only a couple of months a few hashtags on social media were able to affect the government and force it to introduce the amendment.

### **Government Decision and Law Amendment**

Owing to the public discontent and continuous demands mostly via social media but also through demonstrations, Kazakhstani government was highly pressured to follow the crowd's voice and listen to their will. Even though several government officials demonstrated agreement and even supported the campaigns by the civic activists, nothing had been done to resolve the actual problem. Dina Tansari, the leader of *NeMolchiKZ* movement, attempted to influence governmental decision multiple times and raised the topic on international arena, yet the efforts were ignored. Thanks to the civil movement on Instagram, Facebook, and other social media websites, the government has finally made a step towards its citizens. On September the 2nd, President Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev delivered a message to the Kazakh citizens (Akorda.kz, 2019). He stated, "It is urgent to tighten the punishment for sexual violence, pedophilia, drug trafficking, human trafficking and other serious crimes, especially against children" (Vaal, 2019; para. 1). Besides that, it was mentioned that the rape and sexual abuse and harassment rate have swollen enormously, and the issue needs to be resolved as soon as possible. The head of the state even made a reference to the Talgo case and the activists, who were trying to raise awareness throughout the country (Vaal, 2019: para. 7). "I instruct the government to take urgent measures to tighten the relevant legislation within two months," he said, referring to the toughening of Article 120 with which the general public was still discontent about (Vaal, 2019: para. 1). Such a loud announcement caused much doubtfulness from the civic society, as for the statements were made yet without any certain date or deadline to be set.

### **The strength and limitations of the Social Media Movement**

In the context of Kazakhstan, the social media movement has great potential to be pervasive in every aspect and life of people, society and the activities of the government. It is just the question of how to properly, effectively and timely transform social media activities into actual social activism movements. According to Gladwell (2010), slacktivism or the form of microblogging which includes forms of activism like posting images or texts without an active follow-up activist activity are very ineffective in bringing societal changes. Unless of course, slacktivism leads to a firmly established and highly dynamic national debates surrounding current domestic matters, such as that of Black Lives Matter movement (Carney, 2016: 180). In this regard, even if many people are actively engaged in the social media by posting or sharing matters on sexual violence or rape against women, without any further actions bringing such topics on different platforms other than social media, people will not notice the 'change' of policies and any social media movement will be left at the level of inactive commitment. This also means that the way how social media shapes social activism movements will not be measured in real terms, but only in terms of the activities surrounding the social media activities output. Here, examples of such outputs can include the number of likes or comments on a given societal issue in numbers of social media outlets. For a 'change' to happen it is not enough to just simply raise awareness via the social media platforms but go beyond that and be pervasive outside the ranges of the social media. Often a bolder step is needed to confront via different social platforms the matter at hand, and this might require totally different human or capital resources, mobilization as well as coordination efforts and even different types of people and strategies.

Another strength of the social media and social movement besides transforming a movement into an action like that of Black Lives Matter movement is the sheer accumulation of knowledge created, gained and recorded (Murthy, 2018: 2). In simple terms, nowadays the social media is a means for establishing knowledge aggregation and knowledge sharing. In other words, people from different regions of the world can help each other in understanding, improving and maintaining a sense of community of activist movements and organizations in order to motivate, lead or support it (Brzozowski, Sandholm & Hogg, 2009). However, once again, virtual community's strength with its social media supporters, contributors and leaders does not always translate into practical reality due to difficulties with implementation challenges or organizational matters, as the reality is far more complex and rather predictable in nature (Murthy, 2018: 2). Especially, in a country that is characterized by the legacies of a socialist economic and political structure infused with the combination of semi-democratic characteristics.

One of the main criticism towards the social media movement concerning rape and sexual abuse issues in Kazakhstan is that often the problem itself is overloaded with information and sometimes over-dramatized in the media and social media, leading to many question the importance and relevance of the problem as well as its real "behind the scene" ultimate goal. Some see the issue here of over-dramatized problem as a way to take an advantage of the message via the elitist movement under the pretext of democratic movement and turning it against the societally established traditional family principles in Kazakhstan. Of course, this argument might too far-fetched, but one needs to understand the motives and ultimate goal behind every social media movement. While the ultimate or ulterior goal might be not only to raise the awareness on a certain problem, but also to

change the law and even eventually unintentionally or intentionally destroying the traditional principles of family roles in a household. In this regard, a social media movement or a social movement needs to have clear and powerful message behind it, without hiding any other ulterior motives. However, no one can really guarantee that this principle is uphold throughout the entire social media activism movement.

**Conclusion.** In a nutshell, we can say that social media has become a ‘powerful tool’ in the hands of civil society movement in Kazakhstan. Despite the conservative traditional societal state with a still developing but much promising civic society, social media has shown to be ‘a free fighting space’ for those who want to voice their problems and for those who want to be heard. The cases of rape and sexual abuses against women have proven to be true and the message by civic activists were trying to deliver via social media was heard by the head of the state, Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, who made a public promise to make an amendment into the law on rape and toughen Article 120 concerning the punishment. However, understanding the strengths and limitations of the social media movement in Kazakhstan, especially what concerns the matter on sexual abuse and rape, here it is worth mentioning that the social media acts like a medium for catalyzing changes and turning a virtual reality into a practical reality, as exemplified with the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States of America. Besides that, the social media platform itself with its movement serves as a medium for people to aggregate, share and create knowledge and experiences. Despite these promising outlooks, the social media movement in Kazakhstan is still at its early stages of slacktivism movement, where it still faces difficult paths to transform the “virtual battle” into an actual “practical change”. Besides that, many people in Kazakhstan believe that the social media movements like that of the fight against sexual abuse and rape matters in Kazakhstan destroy the traditional family values and foundations that existed in the country since centuries. Hence, such social media movements are criticized for being elitist and driven to shake down the traditional foundations of a post-soviet state under the pretext of a democratic principle. All these arguments lead down to the conclusion that Kazakhstan has still a long way to go before it can truly accept and understand the social media movements not as a threat to the values and foundations of the society, but as a catalyst for positive and beneficial changes in the need to transform the country into a more mature and democratic state.

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