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## How Kazakhstan's Media Covered the Nuclear Power Plant Referendum Campaign: A Comparative Study

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### Abstract

In October 2024, Kazakhstan announced plans to construct a nuclear power plant following a referendum in which more than 71 percent of voters supported the project. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev described the decision as a choice that would shape the country's future. However, the debate over nuclear power in Kazakhstan extends beyond energy policy and raises broader questions about the formation of public opinion.

In this context, the media functions not only as a channel of information but also as a tool of influence. An examination of Kazakh media coverage of the nuclear power plant in the period leading up to the referendum demonstrates how public perceptions are constructed and which frames are used to set the public agenda. This study analyses how the project is portrayed in both official and independent media, and whether state narratives dominate or are challenged by critical perspectives. Such an analysis allows for an assessment of adherence to international journalism standards and reveals how language choices, narrative structure, and the absence of alternative viewpoints contribute to a constrained media environment.

**Keywords:** Kazakhstan, nuclear power plant, mass media, journalistic ethics, referendum, framing, agenda

### Introduction

The construction of a nuclear power plant (NPP) in Kazakhstan became the main topic of national controversy in politics and society when, in September 2023, the President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev announced plans to hold a referendum on the issue. The campaign before the vote officially opened on September 2, 2024 and ended on October 6, 2024. During this period, human rights defenders from Human Rights Watch, CIVICUS and the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights sounded the alarm due to pressure on freedom of speech and rallies. Dozens of opponents of the nuclear power plant were arrested, fined or intimidated, and in over a dozen cities, local authorities blocked all applications for protest actions.

Therefore, it is worth investigating how the Kazakh media broadcast the referendum on nuclear power plants. They not only inform, but also set the angle of view on power and events. A comparison of the materials from different channels will show how independent, objective and diverse the media in the country are.

The study focuses on the criticism of the coverage of the nuclear power plant proposal, one of the top political news. It attempts to explore following research questions:

1. Did the media coverage comply with the principles of journalism according to Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) standards?

2. What accents did the publications put on the topic of nuclear power plants during the election campaign?

The technique combines numbers and in-depth analysis. The statistics recorded how many times the IFJ/OSCE standards were followed and how the arguments for and against were balanced. The qualitative approach dug deeper: it revealed the main plots, persuasion tricks, and expert choices. This creates a complete picture of the media approach to the referendum.

It is based on the concept of Erving Goffman framing theory, which states that the media mold reality through ready, made templates of meaning. In a 1974 book, he examines how customs and expectations guide our reading of events. Moreover, the “agenda-setting” theory from McCombs and Shaw, which posits that the media is promoting is what worries the people, is also applied in this study. In the referendum, the focus on energy or money could turn the general mood around.

There is a rich body of work on the nuclear debate (Wang, Li, Li, 2014; Gackowski, 2022), but there is a research gap on Kazakhstan’s experience. This article seeks to contribute to this discussion by comparing state media and opposition media, checking them for honesty, facts and the range of opinions.

## Literature review

### *Theoretical background*

The research is based on the theory of framing, developed by sociologist Erving Hoffman. This concept explains how the media shape the perception of events by putting certain meanings into them through special “frames”.

In his book *Framework Analysis: An Outline of the Organization of Experience* (1974), Hoffman shows how people organize everyday experiences based on social norms and habitual patterns of thinking. He identifies several basic concepts for analyzing social situations:

- A framework is a context that helps you understand “what’s going on here.” They guide the behavior and interpretation of events.
- Primary frameworks give meaning to things that are meaningless in themselves. Human actions always take place in natural conditions. Even in a chess game, information is conveyed by words or writing. Often multiple frameworks are used at once: “We waited until the rain stopped to continue the game”. Here the natural framework (rain) is combined with the social one (game). This is how we distinguish random phenomena from conscious actions.
- Keying is the transformation of activity through a change of perspective. A serious event can become a game, and a joke can become a conflict.
- Fabrication is a deliberate distortion of the framework for deception for the sake of personal goals.
- The theatrical frame highlights how people play roles and manage impressions, creating the desired reality for others.

Framing theory provides powerful tools for analyzing the work of journalism. It helps to understand how the media builds stories, highlights key aspects, and guides the audience’s opinion.

Journalists form a framework by selecting facts and ignoring others. Keying turns raw data into a ready-made story, which changes the perception of topics. Hoffman’s analysis of fabrication raises questions of media ethics; even if he was talking about face-to-face communication, the principles apply to the news.

Framing is about selection and emphasis. The media choose aspects of reality, offer an interpretation of the problem, its causes, moral assessment and solutions. According to Gamson (1992), frameworks have three roles: diagnosis, evaluation, and recommendations. There is a single mechanism at all levels: selecting elements → constructing arguments about the problem, causes, consequences, and solutions.

The framework not only organizes information, but also narrows the space for other views,

shaping attitudes towards politics and public opinion.

### *The theory of setting the agenda*

Editors, journalists, and presenters determine political reality through their choice of topics and their presentation (McCombs, 1972). Readers will learn about the issues and their significance in terms of volume and place in the news. The promises of politicians, quotes, and comments in articles strongly influence voters. Most information reaches people through intermediaries.

Although the media rarely change beliefs, they provide basic information during campaigns (McCombs, 1972). The main function of media is to highlight priority topics (McCombs, 2005). Of the thousands of events, only a few are covered, the most important ones. Research confirms that the public is adopting this agenda.

The data shows a link between public opinion and media coverage. The third level of agenda-setting (McCombs) is the influence on the structure of the audience's thinking. People do not just rank topics and their features, but also link them together into a single picture.

### *Previous studies*

Media coverage of nuclear energy is relevant against the background of global challenges of energy, ecology and innovation. A study by Wang, Li, and Li (2014) examines materials on nuclear energy in the Chinese publications *People's Daily* and *Guangming Daily* for 2004-2013.

The authors identified three types of publications: those that support nuclear power plants, those that criticize them, and those that are neutral. Each group was divided into subtopics. The pro-nuclear materials emphasized ecology, safety, efficiency, and economics. The anti-nuclear texts focused on environmental threats, security risks, financial losses, and health. The news articles covered planning, licensing, supervision, commercial projects, plants under construction, and nuclear technology.

Although the method is called quantitative content analysis, the authors have identified the dominant narratives by category. These are elements of a qualitative approach.

Schultz's article (2022) "Soft Power and Media Management of the energy transition: an analysis of narratives about the construction of nuclear power plants in Poland" examines the coverage of the topic in the Polish media from 2016 to 2021. The quantitative analysis revealed four scenarios of Poland's energy policy until 2040. Despite the stated quantitative method, the author described the key frames, dividing them into six blocks: ecology and climate, energy security, science, economics, politics and psychosocial factors.

Unlike hard power with a clear center, soft power is dispersed. According to Gallaroti, this is a meta power, which is an influence through social connections that changes the outcome of interactions. It is not orders, but persuasion that shapes opinions. Whoever explains the events more simply will set the public tone.

Schultz's methodology was based on the main Polish media. The collected texts were searched by the keys: "nuclear power plants", "nuclear energy", "construction of nuclear power plants", "abandonment of nuclear energy". Audience reach, impact, and advertising potential were assessed. The maximum number of publications was found in daily newspapers. The influence was measured by segments: print, online portals, TV.

### *Ethical guidelines*

For an objective assessment of the media and answers to the questions: "To what extent does the coverage of the construction of nuclear power plants in the Kazakh media comply with the OSCE and IFJ standards on balanced presentation?" and "What framework did the media use for the topic of nuclear power plants during the referendum?", two key guidelines have been investigated.

The first is the "Election Coverage Guide" from the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ, 1984). The IFJ unites over 350,000 journalists from 84 countries and considers an independent press to

be the foundation of democracy. Citizens and voters are required to receive reliable, timely and complete information from different points of view (IFJ, 2003).

The IFJ principles on referendums and elections are the professional duty of journalists. Within the framework of national legislation, they must respect the rights of colleagues to work without interference from authorities or external forces.

Voters' ability to make an informed choice depends on media coverage that is objective, accurate, and impartial. This entails comprehensive reporting on the positions of both proponents and opponents, the evolution of the campaign, and all stages of the voting process – from campaigning to ballot counting and the announcement of official results (AXIS, 2012).

## Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods content analysis, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, to assess Kazakhstani media coverage of nuclear power plant construction during the 2024 referendum campaign. This approach allowed for both statistical evaluation and in-depth interpretation of media framing, tone, and compliance with journalistic standards.

Four Kazakhstani media outlets were selected for analysis based on language, ownership, and audience reach:

- State-owned: *Egemen Qazaqstan* (Kazakh) and *Kazpravda* (Russian)
- Independent: *Orda.kz* and *Vlast.kz* (both Russian)

Although *Vlast.kz* operates a Kazakh-language section, it mainly publishes translations of its Russian content. Therefore, *Vlast Qazaqsha* was excluded from the sample. This selection allowed for comparison across language (Kazakh vs. Russian) and ownership (state vs. independent) dimensions.

The study focused on the period from 2 September to 5 October 2024, corresponding to the official referendum campaign announced by the President Tokayev. During this time, the media were expected to provide balanced coverage of both “yes” and “no” campaigns, in accordance with international standards for election reporting.

In total, 47 analytical articles related to the NPP were collected from the four outlets. Brief news items that merely repeated official statements were excluded, as they lacked interpretive depth. The analysed materials included analytical pieces, opinion columns, and investigative reports discussing the environmental, economic, or political implications of NPP construction.

This work uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The theoretical basis is the works of Ole Holsti (1969) and Zhang and Weidemuth (2009), describing the specifics of both approaches. The main goal is to check to what extent the media coverage of the nuclear power plant corresponded to the principles of independent and responsible journalism during the referendum.

Holsti (1969) calls quantitative content analysis an objective method for systematically calculating the characteristics of texts with reliable conclusions. He measures by numbers: the frequency of topics, words, and characters. Codes and categories are preset for reliable results, ideal for large amounts of data. Zhang and Weidemuth (2009) see qualitative analysis as a deep interpretation of meanings behind the surface layer. The researcher analyses the context, motives, ideology. Hidden plots, frames, and values are revealed. Coding is flexible, that is you can change it on the go.

The materials were evaluated according to IFJ standards (election recommendations). The main criteria:

- Neutral presentation: without bias, aggression or manipulation.
- Balance: all parties are equal, pluralism is required.
- Justice: the accusations of one side require counterarguments from the opponents.
- Openness: only proven facts, without exaggeration.

- Accuracy: truth is the main duty of a journalist.

Serious violations under IFJ:

- plagiarism;
- deliberate falsification;
- slander, insults;
- bribes for publications or silence.

From the IFJ's long list, seven items relevant to the referendum were selected. The rest (such as "don't drive a car policy") are not applicable to text analysis.

OSCE and IFJ criteria

The analysis of publications was conducted on four Kazakhstani media outlets before the referendum. The quantitative approach measured compliance with standards and the scale of narratives. Qualitative approach analysed the categories of articles on the OSCE ("Media Monitoring in Elections", 2012): balance, objectivity, sources, views.

Key OSCE norms:

- Pluralism: internal rules of ethics or external control.
- Equal access: fair rotation of positions.
- Independence: without censorship and pressure.
- Features of state-owned enterprises: diversity, accountability, difference from private ones.

**Table 1.** *IFJ and OSCE norms and criteria*

IFJ and OSCE	Principal Brief description
Balance of viewpoints	Represents arguments from all sides, including both support for and opposition to the NPP
Impartiality of presentation	Ensures absence of agitation, emotionally charged, or manipulative language
Separation of facts and opinions	Clearly distinguishes between factual information, commentary, and interpretation.
Diversity of sources and viewpoints	Inclusion of official, expert, independent, and civic opinions;
Equal access and fair conditions	Guarantees that different positions have equal opportunity to be presented.
Language accuracy and neutrality	Uses precise, neutral vocabulary; avoids stigmatization, exaggeration, or contradictory presentation of information

*Note.* Compiled by authors

These standards are especially important for Kazakhstan, where most media outlets are state-owned or affiliated. Such publications usually broadcast the official position of the authorities, relying on a narrow range of sources and views. Therefore, trust in the press, transparency and impartiality in covering controversial topics remain the main challenges of the Kazakh media.

The content analysis showed which frames dominated ("energy security", "technology", "environmental threats", "health", "dependence on Russia") and how the public agenda was formed. A

qualitative analysis revealed the linguistic techniques and rhetoric of journalists: metaphors, labels, logic of disputes, presentation of conflicts and search for compromises. This explained how the media influenced the mood; through fear, optimism, doubt, or support for nuclear power plants. A quantitative analysis was carried out on the state media (*Egemen Qazaqstan*, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*) and independent media (Orda.kz, Vlast.kz). The volume of publications as well as tone, quality of sources, level of criticism, and availability of alternatives were analysed. This revealed differences in editorial policy.

## Results and Analysis

The section is devoted to the analysis of Kazakhstani publications about nuclear power plants. The sample consisted of 48 analytical articles: 27 in Kazakh and 21 in Russian, published during the period of campaigning for the referendum (September 2 - October 5, 2024). Each article was tested using below approaches:

- Quantitative analysis according to 9 IFJ criteria (“Guide to Election and Democracy Coverage”).
- Qualitative content analysis by Zhang and Weidemuth (2009).
- Additionally on the OSCE (“Media Monitoring in Elections”, 2012).
- The topics from the research of Wang et al. (2014) on China and Szulc (2022) on Poland are taken into account.

The OSCE leadership does not provide rigid metrics, but emphasizes the responsibility of the state media to society. Therefore, it was combined with clear IFJ regulations. The criteria were applied to four publications (*Egemen Qazaqstan*, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, Orda.kz, Vlast.kz) one month before the vote. This paper evaluated four variables below:

- A variety of positions (experts, scientists, activists, public utilities).
- Hidden or explicit agitation in the headlines and first paragraphs.
- The number and type of sources.
- The neutrality of the tone, the access of the opponents.

### *Quantitative content analysis*

**Table 2.** *Assessment of Compliance with IFJ and OSCE Ethical Standards in Selected Kazakhstani News Media, 2024.*

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Yes (100%)</b>	<b>No (100%)</b>
Represents arguments from all sides, including both support for and opposition to the NPP	9%	91%
Ensures absence of agitation, emotionally charged, or manipulative language	9%	91%
Clearly distinguishes between factual information, commentary, and interpretation	4%	96%
Inclusion of official, expert, independent, and civic opinions	11%	89%
Guarantees that different positions have equal opportunity to be presented	9%	91%
Uses precise, neutral vocabulary; avoids stigmatization, exaggeration, or contradictory presentation of information	11%	89%

*Note.* Compiled by authors

**Table 3.** *The number and percentage of press articles that complied with each specific criterion outlined in the IFJ and OSCE guidelines*

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Vlast.kz</b>	<b>Orda.kz (Russian)</b>	<b>Orda.kz (kazakh)</b>	<b>Kazpravda</b>	<b>Egemen Qazaqstan</b>
Represents arguments from all sides, including both support for and opposition to the NPP	50% (n=1)	25% (n=3)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)
Ensures absence of agitation, emotionally charged, or manipulative language	100% (n=2)	16.67% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)
Clearly distinguishes between factual information, commentary, and interpretation.	100% (n=2)	16.67% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)
Inclusion of official, expert, independent, and civic opinions;	50% (n=1)	8.33% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)
Guarantees that different positions have equal opportunity to be presented.	0% (n=0)	25% (n=3)	100% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)
Uses precise, neutral vocabulary; avoids stigmatization, exaggeration, or contradictory presentation of information	100% (n=2)	16.67% (n=2)	100% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)

*Note.* Compiled by authors

### *Theme & coding rule*

This part of the study examines the primary narratives in each article, classifying them into pro-nuclear, anti-nuclear, and neutral/other themes. These classifications are based on insights from prior studies, particularly the works of Wang, Li, & Li (2014) on China and Szulc (2022) on Poland.

Pro-nuclear articles include arguments that support nuclear power, using terms such as favor, benefits, advocate, and advantages.

- **Urgent need:** Highlights arguments suggesting that Kazakhstan will face significant challenges in the coming years without constructing an NPP.  
*Example:* “If Kazakhstan does not build a nuclear power plant, the country may face a number of real risks.” *Egemen Qazaqstan* (Bekzhanov, September 12, 2024)
- **Energy deficit:** Focuses on claims that the country’s energy shortage can be addressed by building an NPP.  
*Example:* “Since there is not enough power, we are forced to receive energy from neighboring states.” *Egemen Qazaqstan* (Qulekeev, October 3, 2024)
- **Economic benefits:** Highlights that NPP construction can attract investment, create jobs, develop technology, and contribute to overall economic growth.  
*Example:* “Entrepreneurs also need more affordable energy to introduce new production methods and technologies to be competitive. An increase in product quality is expected to lead to an expansion of sales markets.” *Kazpravda* (September 25, 2024)
- **Opportunity:** Emphasizes Kazakhstan’s natural advantages, such as uranium reserves and favorable geography, as opportunities for NPP development.

*Example:* “In this sense, the construction of a nuclear power plant will increase the country’s energy independence and allow for more efficient use of uranium reserves.” *Egemen Qazaqstan* (Zolshybayuly, October 4, 2024)

- Technology of the future: Argues that timely construction of NPPs is crucial for Kazakhstan’s technological progress.

*Example:* “It is quite obvious that without nuclear energy we will be lost. It’s a matter of basic progress.” *Orda.kz* (Masalsky, September 30, 2024)

- Ecological benefits: Focuses on the environmental advantages of NPPs, such as reduced CO<sub>2</sub> emissions compared to coal.

*Example:* “Although coal remains an important source of electricity, its negative impact on the environment causes the need to look for alternatives.” *Egemen Qazaqstan* (Zhumangalykyzy, September 30, 2024)

- Safety: Highlights that modern NPPs comply with international standards and minimize the risk of accidents affecting people or the environment.

*Example:* “Compliance with international standards guarantees a high degree of NPP safety, minimizing the risks of accidents and their consequences, ensuring the reliability and durability of the facility.” *Kazpravda* (October 2, 2024)

Anti-nuclear articles contain arguments opposing nuclear power, using terms such as risks, danger, and political interests.

- Political interests: Emphasizes that NPP construction serves foreign corporate interests.

*Example:* “According to Abay Yerekenov, Kazakhstani officials pushing the idea of building a nuclear power plant are acting in the interests of Rosatom, which seeks to become a leading leader in the global uranium market.” *Orda.kz* (Utupin, September 21, 2024)

- Economic risks: Focuses on the high costs and potential financial burdens associated with NPP construction.

*Example:* “...the economic weight will be greater, as all work will require \$12-15 billion. In general, construction can take a long time, and it is necessary to take money with an interest loan. After the completion of the nuclear power plant, another billion dollars will be required to dispose of nuclear waste and close the station.” *Orda.kz* (Zharylkassyn, September 20, 2024)

Neutral or other articles include arguments presenting both sides or articles without taking a clear position.

- Balanced: Incorporates elements from both pro- and anti-nuclear narratives.

*Example:* “The NPP construction itself will give a powerful boost to the economy, the multiplier effect is enormous – at the same time many other industries will be revived or created.” *Orda.kz* (Smolin, September 2, 2024)

*Example:* “The scenario of an energy accident at a yet-to-be-built NPP could also affect the region’s economy, but if an environmental disaster were to occur, Almaty, Karaganda and Zhambyl oblasts would become victims of radiation, not to mention Lake Balkhash.” *Orda.kz* (Smolin, September 2, 2024)

- Neutral: Articles that do not present either supporting or opposing viewpoints regarding NPP construction.

**Table 4.** *The number and percentage of articles in each newspaper that conveyed pro-nuclear themes*

Pro-nuclear arguments	Vlast.kz	Orda.kz (Russian)	Orda.kz (Kazakh)	Kazpravda	Egemen Qazaqstan
Urgent need	0%(n=0)	8.33% (n=1)	0%(n=0)	14.29% (n=1)	12.5% (n=3)
Energy deficit	0%(n=0)	8.33%	0%(n=0)	14.29%	33.33%



		(n=1)		(n=1)	(n=8)
Economic benefits	0%(n=0)	16.67% (n=2)	0%(n=0)	14.29% (n=1)	8.33% (n=2)
Opportunity	0%(n=0)	0%(n=0)	0%(n=0)	0% (n=0)	8.33% (n=2)
Future technology	0%(n=0)	8.33% (n=1)	0%(n=0)	14.29% (n=1)	12.5% (n=3)
Ecological benefits	0%(n=0)	8.33% (n=1)	0%(n=0)	0%(n=0)	8.33% (n=2)
Safety	0%(n=0)	16.67% (n=2)	0%(n=0)	42.86% (n=3)	16.67% (n=4)
<b>Total</b>	<b>0%(n=0)</b>	<b>66.67% (n=8)</b>	<b>0%(n=0)</b>	<b>100% (n=7)</b>	<b>100% (n=24)</b>

Note. Compiled by authors

**Table 5.** The number and percentage of articles in each newspaper that conveyed anti-nuclear themes

Anti-nuclear	Vlast.kz	Orda.kz (russian)	Orda.kz (kazakh)	Kazpravda	Egemen Qazaqstan
Political interest	0%(n=0)	8.33% (n=1)	0%(n=0)	0%(n=0)	0%(n=0)
Economic risks	0%(n=0)	0%(n=0)	100% (n=1)	0%(n=0)	0%(n=0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>0%(n=0)</b>	<b>8.33% (n=1)</b>	<b>100% (n=1)</b>	<b>0%(n=0)</b>	<b>0%(n=0)</b>

Note. Compiled by authors

**Table 6.** The number and percentage of articles in each newspaper that featured neutral or other perspectives

Neutral or another	Vlast.kz	Orda.kz (Russian)	Orda.kz (Kazakh)	Kazpravda	Egemen Qazaqstan
Balanced	0%(n=0)	8.33% (n=1)	0%(n=0)	0%(n=0)	0%(n=0)
Neutral	(n=2) 100%	8.33% (n=1)	0%(n=0)	0%(n=0)	0%(n=0)

<b>Total</b>	<b>(n=2) 100%</b>	<b>16.67% (n=2)</b>	<b>0%(n=0)</b>	<b>0%(n=0)</b>	<b>0%(n=0)</b>
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*Note.* Compiled by authors

### *Press study*

The overall analysis (Table 2) indicates that, on average, only 4-11% of the reviewed articles complied with the established ethical criteria, whereas 89-96% failed to meet them. The clearest issue was the distinction between facts, commentary, and interpretation, with merely 4% of materials adhering to this standard.

In addition, coverage of arguments from both sides was largely unbalanced, as 91% of articles favored one perspective. Similarly, despite the presence of multiple viewpoints, 89% of the content remained one-sided. Furthermore, 89% of the articles employed emotionally charged or manipulative language.

### *Egemen Qazaqstan*

OJSC *Egemen Qazaqstan*, the publisher of the *Egemen Qazaqstan* newspaper, is fully state-owned, as stipulated in an official decree of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan. According to the OSCE handbook, state-owned media bear a heightened responsibility to ensure neutrality in referendum coverage. This includes upholding principles of balance, fairness, and accuracy, serving the public interest, and providing a diverse and pluralistic range of perspectives.

*Egemen Qazaqstan* became the leader in the number of publications about nuclear power plants: 83 materials, 24 of them analytical and interviews. Even after filtering, the edition remained ahead. The newspaper completely ignored international standards (Table 3). All materials are 100% pro-nuclear, which indicates one-sidedness. The narrative of “energy deficit” dominated (33.33% of articles). Safety is in second place (16.67%). Only here uranium was emphasized as an advantage (8.33%). For instance, the article was published on the day of the referendum was titled “Sooner or later, Kazakhstan will have to follow the path of nuclear energy, as developed countries have done. The sooner the better” (Kabdershikhuli, 2024).

The publication persistently promoted the “necessity” of nuclear power plants. In the article “Nuclear power plants are needed like air,” it was argued that a shortage was inevitable. An expert, Beket Kenzhegulov of Atyrau University, was quoted in full, without giving a word to his opponents. He insisted that nuclear power plants are the only way out of the crisis (Mukaev, 2024).

Alternative opinions were mentioned in passing, without arguments. Only officials, the president, ministers, and representatives of Kazatomprom were quoted.

The first analysis from September 4 is “NPP: an objective need”. It was claimed that President Tokayev made the decision involuntarily, i.e. technology is growing, energy is needed more and more. Kazakhstan faces “future problems” (Kuanyshev, 2024).

The official announcement was accompanied by the slogans: “energy security”, “energy of the future”, “technologies of tomorrow”.

In an interview with Asvan Siybekov: the safety of nuclear power plants is of concern to the World, the head of Kazakhstan NPP LLP, an interested party, was interviewed without counterarguments. The interview began: “If Kazakhstanis choose correctly...” This implies that the opponents are wrong. The materials are not just unbalanced, they are unfair and do not meet any IFJ criteria.

The article titled “You need to know the advantages of nuclear power plants” listed the advantages and taught readers to “evaluate the value” of the plant. They claimed that Kazakhstan was “developing science,” and the NPP was a “studied technology” without links to research. They predicted a deficit in 6-7 years, according to experts. Compared to “all the countries on the plains” without evidence. All standards (balance, objectivity, sources, language, facts vs opinions) are violated

everywhere. A special narrative is the uranium wealth as an argument, which ignored gas reserves (Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024). “We have huge reserves of uranium, which is the basis for reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions” (Jumangalikyzy, 2024).

### *Kazpravda*

During the period *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* published 37 materials about nuclear power plants, mostly news. Seven analytical articles were selected for analysis. This study found that all violated international standards. Like *Egemen Qazaqstan*, the publication was exclusively pro-nuclear. The leading rubric is safety (42.86% of materials), while ecology was mentioned, but always in conjunction with safety guarantees.

In an interview with the head of Atameken, Zhakip Khairushev, security for Balkhash was discussed. The expert stated that “The NPP is 100% safe for the lake according to the expertise.” There are no documents. The material appears one-sided, convincing without counterarguments (Kazpravda, 2024). The facts were presented as proven, without references.

Unlike the Kazakh version of *Egemen Qazaqstan* (emphasis on scarcity), the focus here is on the fears of the population. The Russian-language newspaper reassures: “The NPP is safe.” Two articles praised the referendum for its “elective culture.” The authors were not indicated; a disadvantage to pluralism. Opponents were portrayed as ignorant: “Fears are either a political provocation against an economic breakthrough, or ignorance” (Kazpravda, 2024).

The October article titled “International standards for the construction of nuclear power plants in Kazakhstan: a guarantee of reliability” convinced of “high quality” under the control of global standards. They promised staff training. The journalist persistently instilled security, ignoring the fears of the residents.

All publications are manipulative: they demonize opponents and do not allow debates. Not a single article has delved into economics or risks. As a state media outlet, Kazpravda is obliged to serve society, not politicians (unlike private publications).

### *Vlast.kz*

The portal has published 25 materials about nuclear power plants, three of them analytical. One is dedicated not to the station, but to the 75th anniversary of nuclear tests in Kazakhstan, the project of the ORTA art group “The Great Atomic Bomb Repeller”.

Vlast.kz holds the most restrained position. Not a single article contains pro- or anti-nuclear arguments. Half of the materials have balance views with neutral language with a clear separation of facts and opinions.

The first analysis is “Without independent observers, the results will be distorted.” The piece dealt with the problems of accreditation: the referendum was announced a month in advance, there was not enough time to prepare.

“There is a week before the voting on the NPP. The exact date is known for only a month, which complicated the work of the observers. Someone is waiting for accreditation, someone is waiting for financing” (Ozbekbai, Kurmangazina, 2024).

Closer to the referendum, the article “Atomic Propaganda” was published, where *Egemen Qazaqstan* and Kazpravda were mentioned. They quoted Orda.kz, a political scientist Dosym Satpayev, and a journalist Asem Japisheva. The headlines read: “Nuclear energy has nothing to fear,” “Nuclear power plants are our development!”, “Nuclear power plants are being built even on the moon,” “The sun is also a reactor” (Kaysar, Kemelbai, 2024). Both materials did not agitate, but dealt with problems, i.e. the role of observers and the goals of propaganda. Unlike state media, they did not compare the advantages/disadvantages of nuclear power plants, but recorded the facts. This study found that the Vlast.kz fully complies with IFJ/OSCE standards.

*Orda.kz (Russian)*

The portal has released 62 materials about nuclear power plants, 12 analytical/interviews. The materials are mostly one-sided: 66.67% are pro-nuclear. The anti-nuclear arguments are weak - only one article about the influence of Rosatom. Even it ("If you develop mines, you won't need nuclear power plants") is more about election fraud than about the risks.

The only neutral material (September 2) is "The referendum on nuclear power plants: what do experts predict?". They interviewed specialists, but mostly government agencies. Only the veteran was independent, and he was also in favor. One expert is against it. There is a balance, but it is incomplete. The language is neutral.

Furthermore, "Coal fired thermal power plants are 100% more dangerous than nuclear power plants." The title sets the tone referring to Energyprom.kz there are few sources, manipulations: "Nuclear power plants are much safer," "rumors are exaggerated." Coal is harmful, but the decision is controversial.

In the "Referendum on Nuclear Power plants: democracy or budget spending?" the opponents were threatened: "Activists can disrupt the vote" (Drobný, 2024).

"Headquarters for the nuclear power plant: the people are ready to stand up to their opponents" is an interview with a pro-nuclear organization. The opponents were accused of seizing the headquarters.

"Who stands behind the supporters and opponents of nuclear power plants" seems balanced, but the pro-nuclear ones were interviewed, the anti-nuclear ones were only described. After the criticism, the Orda.kz investigated the pro-nuclear forces, calling the opponents extremists "Alga, Kazakhstan!" (Kaisar, Kemelbai, 2024). An article about China praises nuclear power plants as the "pride of the nation," the environment, and jobs. An expert from China is in favor and there are no counterarguments (Volkov, 2024). According to the state media, the emphasis is on security and the economy (16.67%).

*Orda.kz (Kazakh)*

In the Kazakh-language section, *Orda* published a limited number of materials; approximately 12 articles, including news reports, of which only one analytical piece was selected for analysis. This article was also the sole anti-nuclear publication in Kazakh and focused on the economic risks associated with NPP construction, including the costs of waste management. The article met only two of the six evaluation criteria, namely the provision of equal access and the use of neutral language.

In this piece, the journalist interviewed political scientist Dosym Satpayev, discussing not only the nuclear power plant project but also President Tokayev's broader political promises. The analysis centered on the political dimensions of the initiative. Unlike the Russian-language version, the Kazakh-language article explicitly addressed the risks of dependence on foreign contractors and the potential financial burden on the state.

However, a single article is not enough for a representative comparison of the portal versions. Nevertheless, the Kazakh-language content demonstrates a great willingness to discuss problematic aspects of the project.

## Discussion

The study revealed sharp differences in the approaches of the state media and independent publications. State channels systematically promoted the positive image of the NPP, completely excluding criticism and alternatives. Even independent media rarely allowed for diversity of views. The key problem was the shortage of neutral analysts, with only two articles. This contradicts the basic norms of OSCE journalism (2012) and IFJ (2003), which require equal reflection of all positions on controversial topics. State-owned enterprises broadcast the official line, focusing on the advantages of

nuclear power plants. Similar to the Chinese case (Wang et al., 2014), where there were at least two anti-nuclear materials. The conclusions coincide with Szulc (2022), that is the media as a tool of soft power form loyalty to nuclear energy.

The Vlast.kz basically refrained from evaluating the NPP, publishing informational notes (not included in the sample). The analysis concerned the transparency of the referendum and propaganda in the state media. The Orda.kz, despite its independence, showed one-sidedness: 66.67% of pro-nuclear materials, one weak criticism about the referendum.

The state media, *Egemen Qazaqstan* and *Kazpravda* completely ignored the standards, but they differed in their narratives: the Kazakh-speaking media convinced of the need, the Russian-speaking one sought to persuade of the safety.

The overall picture (Table 2): only 4-11% of materials meet the criteria, 89-96% do not. The separation of facts/opinions is the weakest (4%). 96% of articles mix objectivity with estimates. 91% ignores the balance. The state media quoted only officials, manipulating emotions: “energy independence”, “modernization”.

According to Goffmann (1974), this is fabrication, i.e. the choice of details for deception. State media (*Egemen Qazaqstan*, *Kazpravda*) modeled the nuclear power plant as an inevitable progress. According to Etman (1993), framing worked according to the scheme: problem (deficit) → reason (state resolution) → morality (opponents are irrational) → solution (NPP). The vocabulary (“the future of Kazakhstan”, “stability”) blocked the discussion.

It should be noted that the absence of scientists, NGOs, and civic voices has eliminated the agenda of alternatives. This deprived voters of an informed choice.

## Conclusions

This study examines media coverage of the planned construction of nuclear power plants in Kazakhstan in the period preceding the referendum held on October 6, 2024. The research employed both quantitative and qualitative content analysis, with the primary objective of assessing the level of objectivity in how Kazakh media addressed this socially and politically significant issue.

The findings indicate that the Kazakh media landscape was largely dominated by a one-sided, positive narrative surrounding nuclear power. In 91 percent of the analysed publications, nuclear energy was portrayed favorably. State-owned outlets, including *Kazpravda* and *Egemen Qazaqstan*, presented exclusively pro-nuclear coverage, with 100 percent of the examined materials supporting the construction of nuclear power plants. A similar pattern was observed in the private outlet *Orda.kz* (Russian-language edition), where 66.67 percent of articles endorsed the project. Across these publications, nuclear power plants were framed as strategically essential, safe, and economically advantageous for the country. As a result, the coverage in state media can be seen as falling short of key international journalistic standards articulated by the OSCE and the IFJ.

Critical perspectives on nuclear power were rare and unsystematic. *Orda.kz* was the only outlet to publish limited critical content, consisting of a single analytical article in both Kazakh and Russian that included arguments opposing the project. By contrast, the independent outlet *Vlast.kz* adopted a more cautious and balanced approach, maintaining a neutral tone and focusing on issues of transparency and public participation in all analysed materials (100 percent). Overall, the dominant narratives identified in the study closely aligned with Kazakhstan’s official state policy on nuclear energy.

Several conclusions can be drawn from these findings. First, state-owned media in Kazakhstan do not fully perform the role of independent public informers, instead consistently providing one-sided coverage. Second, independent media largely fail to offer a sufficient counterweight to the prevailing pro-nuclear discourse. Third, audiences relying on different media sources encounter systematic bias, which complicates the formation of informed and objective public opinion.

These results underscore the need for a more robust integration of international journalistic standards into both editorial policies and journalism education in Kazakhstan. Principles such as transparency, balance, diversity of sources, and critical inquiry should serve as the foundation of media

practice, particularly when reporting on issues related to national security, environmental risks, and the country's long-term development.

Despite the fact that this study provides an idea of the nature of the media coverage of the construction of nuclear power plants in Kazakhstan in the run-up to the 2024 referendum, it is necessary to take into account a number of limitations that may affect the depth and generalizability of the conclusions. One of the key limitations is the relatively small amount of media included in the analysis.

Four media outlets were reviewed in the study. Although their selection was deliberate and aimed at representing both state-owned and independent media, it does not cover the entire spectrum of the Kazakh media market. As a result, the conclusions may not fully reflect the diversity of editorial approaches that exist in other media, including regional or niche media.

An additional limitation was the number of relevant analytical publications within the selected time period. Hence, the Kazakh-language version of Orda.kz has published only one analytical article on the topic of nuclear power plants, which significantly limits the possibility of analyzing its editorial position. Similarly, Vlast.kz during the period under review, published only three analytical materials, of which only two were directly devoted to the construction of nuclear power plants.

The small sample size, especially in the independent media segment, limits the depth of both quantitative and qualitative content analysis and makes it difficult to formulate generalized conclusions about broader editorial trends and differences between public and private media.

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## Қазақстан ақпарат құралдары атом электр станциясын салу бойынша референдум науқанын қалай көрсетті: салыстырмалы зерттеу

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### Аңдатпа

2024 жылдың қазан айында атом электр станциясын (АЭС) салу жөніндегі референдум нәтижесінде Қазақстан АЭС салынатынын мәлімдеді. Бұл шешімді президент Қасым-Жомарт Тоқаев



«елдің болашағы үшін жасалған таңдау» деп бағалады. Бірақ бұл мәселенің талқысы тек энергетика саясатымен шектелмейді, ол тақырыпты зерттеу бұқаралық ақпарат құралдары қоғам пікірін қалыптастыруға қалай талпынғанын, қандай фрейминдер таратқанын талдауға мүмкіндік береді. Осы зерттеу референдум алдындағы үгіт науқаны кезінде Қазақстан ақпарат құралдары АЭС салу мәселесін қалай көрсеткенін талдайды және қоғамдық дискурста басым болған фреймдерді анықтауды мақсат етеді. Мақала мемлекеттік және тәуелсіз басылымдардағы материалдарды салыстыра отырып, АЭС салуға қатысты биліктің позициясын қолдайтын немесе сынайтын нарративтердің қайсысы басым болғанын болғанын қарастырады. Сонымен қатар, бұл зерттеу ақпарат құралдары АЭС салу кампаниясы кезінде материалдарды қаншалықты халықаралық журналистік стандарттарға сай бере алғанын талдайды. Зерттеу нәтижесі ақпарат құралдарындағы бұл тақырыптың репрезентациялануын түсінуге мүмкіндік береді.

**Кілт сөздер:** Қазақстан, атом электр станциясы, БАҚ-тағы фрейминг, журналистік этика, референдум, күн тәртібін қалыптастыру

МРНТИ: 19.45.91

## Как СМИ Казахстана освещали кампанию по референдуму о строительстве атомной электростанции: сравнительное исследование

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### Аннотация

В октябре 2024 года, после оглашения результатов референдума о строительстве атомной электростанции (АЭС), Казахстан объявил о намерении построить АЭС. Президент Касым-Жомарт Токаев охарактеризовал данное решение как «выбор в пользу будущего страны». Обсуждение данного проекта выходит за рамки энергетической политики и отражает более широкие вопросы о формировании общественного мнения через средства массовой информации. В настоящем исследовании анализируется освещение вопроса строительства АЭС в казахстанских СМИ в период, предшествующий референдуму, с целью изучения способов конструирования реальности и выявления доминирующих фреймов в общественном дискурсе. Проводится сравнительный анализ материалов государственных и независимых изданий, чтобы определить, преобладали ли нарративы поддержки государственной политики или критические позиции. Также исследование оценивает, насколько освещение данного вопроса соответствовало международным журналистским стандартам, и рассматривает, как язык, структура материалов и отсутствие альтернативных точек зрения способствовали ограничению медиапространства. Полученные результаты дают понимание механизмов формирования национальных политических дискуссий и их последствий для плюрализма, журналистской этики и общественного обсуждения в Казахстане.

**Ключевые слова:** Казахстан, атомная электростанция, фрейминг в СМИ, журналистская этика, референдум, установка повестки дня